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Stories that reconnect: a practice of peace

Ilaria Olimpico*

Abstract

In this paper, I present Stories that Reconnect (StR), an emerging methodology designed to sustain cultures of peace in times of polycrisis. Taking an autobiographical approach, I offer a reflective account of the birth of StR during my work as facilitator and trainer. StR emerged from the need for connection, the call to be honoring pain, and the commitment of making hope – even amidst increasing violence and polarization. First, I situate StR within the current polycrisis through the lens of Theory U and frame peace as envisioned by Johan Galtung and Elise Boulding. I illustrate the three key frameworks – Focusing, the Work That Reconnects, and Theory U – that shape StR's approach, language, map, and matrix. StR unfolds within an aesthetic space, where social arts enable the co-sensing of present reality and its highest future potential. At the heart of the process lies a call to connection, compassion, and courage – enhancing the capacities for empathy, self-empathy, staying-with, imagination, and creativity; through practices such as grounding, storylistening (deep listening), and collective story creation. This paper lays the groundwork for peace education training, and reconciliation processes, acknowledging that this work – like a motion-blurred photograph – is fluid, ever-evolving, and deeply rooted in lived experience.

Key words: peace education, reconciliation, connection, compassion, courage, embodiment, story listening.

Abstract

In questo articolo presento Storie che Riconnettono (StR), una metodologia emergente progettata per sostenere culture di pace in tempi di policrisi. Adottando un approccio autobiografico, offro una riflessione sulla nascita di StR nel corso del mio lavoro come facilitatrice e formatrice. StR è emerso dal bisogno di connessione, dalla necessità di onorare il dolore e dall'impegno nel coltivare speranza – anche in un contesto di crescente violenza e polarizzazione. Innanzitutto, colloco StR all'interno dell'attuale policrisi attraverso la lente della Theory U e inquadro la pace secondo la visione di Johan Galtung ed Elise

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Boulding. Illustro i tre principali riferimenti teorici – Focusing, The Work That Reconnects e Theory U – che plasmano l'approccio, il linguaggio, la mappa e la matrice di StR. StR si sviluppa in uno spazio estetico, dove le arti sociali permettono di co-percepire la realtà presente e il suo massimo potenziale futuro. Al cuore del processo vi è una chiamata alla connessione, alla compassione e al coraggio – rafforzando le capacità di empatia, auto-empatia, staying-with, immaginazione e creatività attraverso pratiche come il radicamento (grounding), l'ascolto profondo e la creazione collettiva di narrazioni. Questo articolo pone le basi per programmi di educazione alla pace e percorsi di riconciliazione, riconoscendo che questo lavoro – come una fotografia mossa – è fluido, in continua evoluzione e profondamente radicato nell'esperienza vissuta.

Parole chiave: educazione alla pace, riconciliazione, connessione, compassione, coraggio, embodiment, storylistening.

Introduction

This paper is at the intersection of research aspiration and autobiographical style instinct. Writing is a dance in between theoretical frameworks and personal anecdotes, the authority of references and the wisdom of fresh insights, the practicality of systematizing practices and the paradox of attempting to capture or control a living process.

The nature of this paper and of *Stories that Reconnect* (StR) itself is close to Bayo Akomolafe's vision of research. He suggests that true inquiry requires stepping beyond rigid disciplinary boundaries, allowing for more intuitive, poetic, and embodied ways of knowing, embracing uncertainty and not-knowing. In this sense, academic research is not just a means of producing knowledge but a transformative journey that unsettles and reconfigures both the researcher and the researched (Akomolafe, 2021).

The question that has guided me over the past few years has been: what is the formula for holding a 'brave space' (Arao; Clemens 2013) where cultures of peace can be cultivated in times of polycrisis? In my experience, the essential ingredients for such space include the recognition of the heart's intelligence, the body's wisdom, and the power of the arts – not only as a means of expression, but also as pathways to awareness and collective transformation.

I had the opportunity to deliver workshops and sessions in various contexts and to gather feedback from participants. Additionally, I stayed in contact with my international network of practitioners, facilitators, and activists, which gave me the chance to reflect on my own work and receive further insights.

This paper does not aim to present a validated method, but rather to share an ongoing journey. The next step, ideally, would be to transform this personal, informal research into a formal PhD project.

In the paragraph 1 ‘Nourishing cultures of peace in times of polycrisis’, I give the context and the sense of urgency that led me to StR. I position my vision of peace, referring to Johan Galtung and Elise Boulding. I frame the current polycrisis through the lenses of Theory U. From that premise on the context, I introduce StR as a possible response to the need of nourishing and supporting cultures of peace in times of polycrisis.

In paragraph 2 ‘A map from three theoretical frameworks’, I provide a brief overview of the three main theoretical frameworks that inspired StR’s approach, language, map and matrix: Focusing, the Work That Reconnects (WTR), and Theory U.

These frameworks are applied within an aesthetic space where the arts serve as a medium for knowledge and insight. In paragraph 3 ‘An aesthetic space, arts as medium’, I refer to social arts as defined in Theory U, as a way to see, feel, and sense the current reality and the emerging future (Scharmer 2016). I refer to the practices of theatre and storytelling developed within TheAlbero (thealbero.imagination.org), the informal artistic collective I co-founded with Uri Noy Meir.

In paragraph 4 ‘Intention: connection, compassion, and courage’, I adopt an autobiographical approach, offering a reflective account of my personal experience – not only as a facilitator and trainer but as a human being committed to cultivating “presence” in contemporary times, as a capacity very related to peace.

If we are not peaceful, we cannot make peace. If we are not happy, we cannot bring happiness to others. We have to cultivate peace and happiness inside ourselves before we can share them with others. (Nhất Hạnh 1992)

I retrace the sources of my intention (Scharmer 2013). My intention is to acknowledge our (inter-)connection, expand our capacity of compassion, and make the future with courage. This means enhancing the capacities of empathy, self-empathy, staying-with, imagination, and creativity.

Finally, in paragraph 5 ‘A matrix’, I offer a matrix that illustrates how the map of StR can unfold through the practices of grounding, *storylistening* as an emerging protocol for deep listening, collective creation of stories, embodiment, and co-evolving circles.

This paper is an initial attempt to reflect on the experience so far and to explore its potential future directions. Its value lies in serving as a foundational framework for developing curricula and guiding transformative journeys in peace education and reconciliation processes. It is intended for both those who support cultures of peace – such as educators, mediators, activists, and trainers – and for communities, including

schools, local and newcomer groups, intergenerational groups, and those ready to engage with polarizing topics.

This paper might be like a motion-blurred photograph, due to motion, as in the case of a photograph taken while the subject is in motion, and maybe it will always be in motion, because it embraces the nuances, fluidity and messiness of lived reality.

1. Nourishing cultures of peace in times of polycrisis

StR has the intention to offer a transformative journey with a corpus of practices that can nourish and support cultures of peace in times of polycrisis.

StR is an emerging methodology from my work and informal action-research as facilitator, trainer, and consultant. It is informed by my knowledge and study of methodological and theoretical frameworks, by my learning by practicing in social arts.

Peace is a vast word with many resonances and dissonances according to the context (geographical, historical, cultural) in which it is used. It is vast because the meaning is constantly renegotiated and reconfigured, according to values, visions, narratives of past and future, and of course attitude to conflict.

In StR, peace refers mainly to Galtung's vision of peace as "the capacity to transform conflicts with empathy, without violence, and creatively – a never-ending process" (Galtung 2000). Cultures of peace are the ones described by Boulding (2000):

Peace cultures are societies that emphasize values, practices, and institutions centered on cooperation, empathy, and nonviolence. These cultures foster sustainable relationships, promote well-being, and prioritize conflict resolution, aiming to build harmonious and just communities.

According to Boulding, peace cultures are essential for long-term social transformation and peacebuilding. "Peace cultures thrive on and are nourished by visions of how things might be, in a world where sharing and caring are part of the accepted lifeways for everyone" (Boulding 2000).

Cultures of peace and peace itself in this moment of polycrisis require a systemic approach. The polycrisis shows us again and again how everything is interrelated. Otto Scharmer, co-founder of the Presencing Institute and MIT professor, uses the term polycrisis to describe the interconnected and compounding crises humanity faces today. This includes climate change, economic inequality, political polarization, social fragmentation, and technological disruption. He argues that these crises are not separate but rather different expressions of the same underlying disconnection – between self and self, self and others, and self and nature.

As Scharmer points out, we are trapped in patterns of “downloading” old ways of thinking, which prevent us from seeing the deeper interdependencies at play in the unfolding crises. By recognizing this interconnectedness, we can shift from reactive problem-solving to a more generative, systems-based approach that addresses root causes rather than symptoms. He frames today’s disruptive times through three deeply intertwined systemic divides: the ecological (separation from nature), social (separation from each other), and spiritual (separation from our highest potential Self).

StR responds to the need of supporting cultures of peace in times of polycrisis: claiming for connection, cultivating compassion, nourishing courage. The essential ingredients of StR include the recognition of the heart’s intelligence, the body’s wisdom, and the power of the arts – not only as a means of expression, but also as pathways to awareness and collective transformation.

In a poetic style, claiming for a future in its highest potential, the intention of StR is the following:

We live with compassion and connection, guided by meaning and purpose.
We reconnect with our ‘big self’, with others, and with Nature.
We open our minds to dialogue with genuine curiosity.
We open our hearts to practice wide compassion.
We open our will to let courageous imagination emerge.

These verses I wrote mirror and exemplify the essence and the practice of StR. The essence is about the values and the skills that StR wants to promote and enhance: connection, compassion, and courage. The practice is aimed at a triple and intertwined reconnection. The reconnection to the “big self” leads individuals to shift from ego-system awareness – focused on personal goals – to eco-system awareness – serving the well-being of all (Scharmer 2016). The reconnection with others comes from a place of genuine curiosity, empathy and compassion, going beyond judgmental habits and cynicism. The reconnection with nature, is intended also as reconnection to our body that is nature¹. This reconnection is key to healing ourselves and the planet simultaneously. “The web of life is not just what sustains us physically, but what nourishes us emotionally and spiritually” (Macy 2012).

2. A map from three theoretical frameworks

StR is informed by the essentials of Focusing, Work that Reconnects (WTR) and Theory U.

¹ Hector Aristizabal and his colleagues at Fundación Re-Conectando have been contributing to peace-building in Colombia from the perspective of Deep Ecology. Hector integrates deep ecology, theater, and ritual to help individuals reconnect with both their inner selves and the natural world. I refer here to his talks during private and public conversation.

StR can be considered as a spiral map of a journey that is inspired by the language of the three methods above and created by the overlapping of the Spiral of WTR and the U shaped journey of Theory U.

By examining the overlapping maps, I noticed that each phase corresponds to one of the elements: Earth, Water, Fire, and Air.

It begins with a connection to the Earth, with gratitude, and with an act of making space. Then there is a transition to Water, where there is the invitation to honor our pain for the world and our wounds, engaging in felt sensing and co-sensing. Then, with courage, there is a Fire threshold, where, symbolizing and co-creating, it is possible to see with new eyes. Finally there is Air, going forth, welcoming and co-evolving.



Figure 1 - Stories that Reconnect (map by Ilaria Olimpico)

I am going to briefly illustrate these methods, especially referring to their “maps” and the specific language that StR absorbed and adopted.

2.1. *Focusing*

Focusing is a self-listening and awareness technique developed by the philosopher

Eugene Gendlin, collaborator of humanistic psychologist Carl Rogers. Focusing is based on the idea that the body has an inner wisdom and knowledge implicit that you can access "carrying life forward": making decisions, facing difficult situations, being close to emotions but not "overwhelmed" by them, having clarity on a personal matter. Ann Weiser Cornell, Gendlin's student and then assistant, carried forward the theorization of the method with sensitive attention to a precise language (language of the Self In Presence) which allows one to establish a real relationship with whatever one feels, in an interior space of radical acceptance.

The practice of Focusing can be divided into 6 steps: 1 clear a space, 2 felt sense, 3 handle or symbol, 4 resonating, 5 asking, and 6 receiving. These steps are part of a non dogmatic method that acknowledges that "no formula fits every person. Anyway, one must find one's own path" (Gendlin 1978).

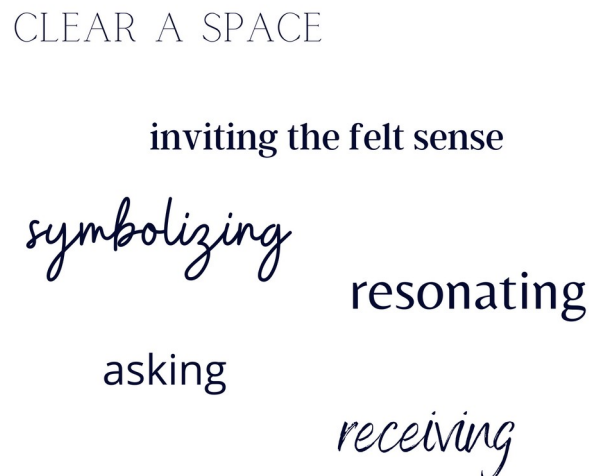


Figure 2 - Focusing in 6 steps (by Ilaria Olimpico)

2.2. *Work that Reconnects*

The Work that Reconnects (WTR) was developed by US activist Joanna Macy (Macy 1991; 2012; 2014). WTR focuses on reconnecting with nature and taking action to address environmental and social challenges through mindfulness practices, emotional exploration, and story sharing, and to find the courage to transform. The inner journey of the activist appears as a spiral of interconnection with four phases or movements that feed each other. These four stages are: 1 open up to gratitude, 2 honoring our pain for the world, 3 seeing with new eyes, and, 4 going forth.



Figure 3 - The Spiral of the WTR (by Dori Midnight)

2.3. Theory U

Theory U is a model of leadership for personal and organizational transformation developed by Otto Scharmer (Scharmer 2016), a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). This theory proposes an innovative approach to face complex challenges, moving from an ego-centric leadership to an ecocentric vision and awareness.

Theory U accompanies people and companies in building a shared vision and towards action to realize the “future that emerges”. Theory U follows a learning process in the shape of the letter U and includes 5 phases: 1 co-initiating, 2 co-sensing, 3 presencing (neologism created by Otto Scharmer from sensing+presence), 4 co-creating, 5 co-evolving.

Central to this process is the cultivation of three key inner capacities: open mind (curiosity and suspending judgment), open heart (compassion and seeing from the heart), and open will (courage to let go and embrace emergence). These capacities enable individuals and groups to move beyond habitual ways of thinking and acting, allowing for deeper connection and transformative change.

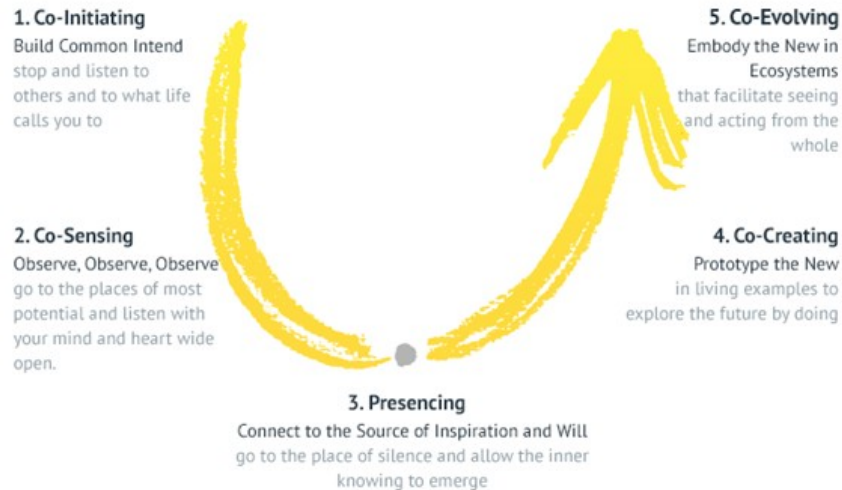


Figure 4 - Theory U diagram

3. An aesthetic space, arts as medium

StR sees the arts as symbolic languages, mediums of awareness and ways to make visible what is invisible.

The aesthetic space makes it possible to see and sense ourselves in the here and now and in our endless process of becoming. The aesthetic distance allows us to compassionately and courageously witness whatever is seen and felt inside and outside.

I refer in particular to Social Arts as framed by Theory U, the experience and practice of my mentor Hector Aristizabal, and my own experience and practice as facilitator and trainer.

3.1. Social Arts

Drawing on Otto Scharmer's Theory U, social arts emphasize co-sensing, and co-creating as pathways to profound systemic change. In Theory U, there are two main practices of Social Arts: Social Presencing Theatre developed by Arawana Hayashi and Scribing as modeled by Kelvy Bird. "Social Arts are in service of deepening and enriching the social field, building and cultivating a healthy ground for innovation and creativity" (Kelvy Bird, U.lab 2024²), and sensing how it is to step into an emerging future, a future in its highest potential.

² U.Lab is an innovative global platform and online course developed by Otto Scharmer and the team at the MIT Presencing Institute. It is designed to help individuals, groups, and organizations address complex challenges and lead transformative change by applying the principles of Theory U. The course, offered through platforms like edX, combines online learning modules, live sessions, and local "hub" gatherings for community engagement. The quotes are from the video learning modules in the U.Lab course 2024-2025.

Social arts can lighten the fixation around the way we usually do things, how we have to do things, how we have always done them, all these stuck behaviours... in order to just get some fresh air in the situation, new insights, and particularly heartfelt insights... We have been trained that insights and intelligence are mental... The body has something to say. This quality of embodied knowledge opens up new avenues of knowing (Arawana Hayashi, U.lab 2024).

SPT combines elements of mindfulness, embodiment practices, and group dynamics to facilitate deeper understanding and insight into social systems and patterns. We can say SPT is a practice that allows individuals and groups to “embody and enact social patterns” through movement and mindfulness, offering a way to “see, feel, and sense” the underlying social fields.

3.2. *Theatre and storytelling*

StR was born within the womb of TheAlbero collective, where me and Uri Noy Meir could explore the intersection of arts, social engagement, community building, and in the last years awareness-based practice.

TheAlbero was following in particular Augusto Boal’s “Aesthetic of the Oppressed” invitation to use all the artistic languages as tools of freedom and liberation. “All human beings are artists. The art of life is the art of transforming the world” (Boal 2006). Boal extends his Theatre of the Oppressed framework to aesthetics, emphasizing that creativity and artistic practice can empower communities to challenge oppression and envision new realities. He builds on Paulo Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed (Freire 1970) and the concept of critical consciousness (*conscientização*), emphasizing that artistic practices – especially theater – can help people move from being spectators to active participants in shaping their realities. Boal writes, “Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society” (Boal 1992). TheAlbero inherits Boal’s philosophy and ethic. It emphasizes the democratization of the arts, breaking down barriers between “artists” and “audiences”, “professional artists” and “common people”.

In the last five years, TheAlbero was developing “Theatre and Stories that Reconnect”, integrating different methodologies, the knowledge coming from exchange in international networks, and the experiences of the last decade in participative social arts (Pulé et al, 2025).

The whole and long experience of TheAlbero informs StR in its use of synesthesia and synergy between different channels of knowing and expressing, and as a learning experience on how to decentralize the power: the role of the “facilitator” is to enable, rather than direct, ensuring that participants are the true authors of their processes.

The artistic act, far from being a performative act for a public, becomes a transformative act for a collective ritual. TheAlbero has been in contact with Hector Aristizabal since 2012 and I consider him as my mentor. The rituals play an essential role in the work of Aristizabal (Aristizabal 2010). In his unique approach, he blends participatory theater, WTR, and rituals as healing practices rooted in Earth connection. These rituals create safer spaces where participants can confront shared experiences of violence, displacement, and marginalization, allowing them to process their trauma and collectively reimagine their futures.

Arts are often valued primarily for their expressive power, but in my experience as a social arts facilitator, I have repeatedly witnessed their ability to access other forms of knowledge. We have forgotten how to truly see, truly hear, and truly feel. We need to reclaim our synesthetic perception and awaken diverse forms of language to tap into these deeper ways of knowing.

In StR, the arts serve as a medium for embodied knowledge, fresh awareness, and collective transformation.

4. Intention: connection, compassion, and courage

I can notice that my work, my life, and the world I live in, are intertwined, and every evolutionary step of this process emerges from within my own process of connecting with my deep intention.

According to Scharmer, intention is not merely a mental goal or desire but a deeper, more conscious alignment with future potential. He argues that the quality of our attention and intention shapes the outcomes we create – “the success of an intervention depends on the interior condition of the intervener.” In this view, authentic leadership and systemic change require individuals and organizations to connect with their highest future possibilities, not just react to the past. By “presencing” – a blend of presence and sensing – leaders can access a deeper source of knowing and act from a place of purpose and clarity, allowing intention to serve as a bridge between the emerging future and present action.

This process has been meant hearing my needs-dreams of connection, of honoring the pain of the world, of cultivating compassion through deep listening, of having the courage to stay-with the tough reality and at the same time to “make” hope, to sense and imagine the highest future possibility, even during escalating violence and in the midst of increasing polarization.

The most meaningful way for me to tell about StR heart process is to go over again my memories and make sense of the experiences that along these last five years were giving shape and substance to StR.

4.1. *The Pandemic: listening to the need of connection*

“Let’s tell stories, let’s tell stories, otherwise we are lost” (paraphrasing: “Dance, dance, otherwise we are lost”³).

2019: The world entered into the pandemic COVID-19, the lockdown in Italy was one of the most severe globally, because it started very early, lasted for months, it was nationwide and affected over 60 million people (Marziano et al. 2021). I started to work entering the still unknown zoom space with doubts and suspicion. I badly needed to reconnect to the world. So I launched several invitations for “Stories that Reconnect” sessions online in pandemic times. The sessions were based on my previous work blending facilitation and social arts. It thrived during the pandemic time (at least three years!) with a transgenerational circle of women, a group of asylum seekers and Italians; groups of international students, practitioners and activists.

We were humans, diverse for privileges, cultures, languages, paths of life, coming together to share our wounds and blessings, to meet in our brokenness and sources of joy.

As one of the women said: “through the co-created stories, I was telling my own story”. Just recently, one of the women participating wrote to me: “What a precious experience it was. I believe it saved our lives”.

The practice of StR in these last five years is confirming that in order to experience deep connection, we need to embrace vulnerability (Brown 2012). Meeting the other in the vulnerability, sharing the pain and the wounds, creates a space of deep connection. In my previous work with mixed groups of Italians and “newcomers” (asylum seekers and refugees), I could witness the power of meeting the “otherized” others in the brokenness. The people were in the process of sharing their stories of wound and pain to each other, getting rid of any kind of mask or label, the one of the only victim or the one of the “subhuman” (Olimpico 2021).

A sentence that synthesized the experience was: “where I can not see, please bring me there through your eyes!”. The core of reconnection with the other, the “otherized” other, is an art of accepting our blindness in codes that we do not know and a dance to explore possibilities of togetherness.

“Connection is why we're here; it is what gives purpose and meaning to our lives” (Brown, 2010). The need to connect was the need that led me to offer the first series of sessions of StR online. Connection stays as a main purpose of StR as the name

³ The quote “Dance, dance, otherwise we are lost” is famously attributed to Pina Bausch, the German choreographer and pioneer of *Tanztheater* (dance theater). It appears in connection with her life and philosophy of dance but is most prominently linked to her 2009 film “Pina” directed by Wim Wenders, which pays tribute to her work and legacy.

reminds. Connection is not only referred to a connection with others, but within ourselves and what we feel. The need to connect to our pain for the pain of the world was the need that led me to the next series of sessions of StR.

4.2. *The wars: listening to need of honoring the pain, expanding compassion*

Connecting to the emotions and the inner self, honoring the pain, is a delicate process. The connection with our feelings and emotions in StR is sustained by the wisdom of Work That Reconnects invitation of honoring the pain of the world (Macy 1991), by the radical welcoming approach of Focusing in the inner relationship (Cornell 2005), by the scientific research in interpersonal neurobiology (Siegel 2010).

As in the Spiral of the Work That Reconnects, before going forth, we need to pass through honoring our pain. This means to pause and be listening to “the too vast sadness for our hearts” and “the too wild anger for our throats”⁴. Staying-with is an ability more than ever needed in this current time. Often we numb ourselves to protect ourselves, and our hearts in order to remain unbroken, it becomes frozen. When we follow the exhortation of Macy “Walk through life with an open, broken heart” (Macy 1991), we allow ourselves to go out from numbness and go towards awareness, so to be fully in the senses and emotions and woven in the very fabric of Life.

The personal experiences of "discomfort" are seen as potential for a healthier way of being. It has to do with a disposition of trust in the process of life (Gendlin 1978). According to the Focusing process, there is the paradox: the more you can feel it, the more it can transform. In Focusing, we exercise the capacity to be a compassionate witness of our feelings, we see them, name them, stay with them, welcome them, and so they can transform and eventually they give us a message (Cornell 1996, 2005).

The power of naming the feeling is recognized by Siegel. He has even identified one technique he calls “name it to tame it” (“give it a name and you tame it”). In simple words, meaning that just identifying and then naming an intense emotion can reduce anxiety. Through narration, Siegel emphasizes, we cultivate a deeper understanding of ourselves and others, unlocking the potential for connection and mental well-being (Siegel 2010).

Since the war in Ukraine, and later in Gaza, I have been practicing this kind of attitude – tuning into myself, doing Focusing sessions, naming my emotions, and sensing my ‘felt sense’. As a facilitator, I have also been offering this process to others, inviting them to honor the pain of the world through silence, movement, and poetry writing.

9th March 2022: The war Russia-Ukraine had just started. I was pregnant, feeling a profound and dejected sadness almost in my uterus. I sent the invitation to women

⁴ Retrieved from the poem “Bestiary” <https://workthatreconnects.org/resources/the-bestiary/>.

worldwide to join a shared space holding the intention of Peace, through simple, generative, creative acts: silent presence, movement, poetry; for 9 minutes for 9 days starting from 9th March 2022.

In that autumn, I was invited along with Hector Aristizabal and Uri Noy Meir to hold a space for 'Honoring the pain for the world' during the Gaian Gathering organized by the Work that Reconnects Network, starting from a collective creative video inspired by the poem "The Bestiary" (<https://imaginaction.org/bestiary-gaian-gathering-2023/>). This is the testimony of Elena Boukouvala, Drama and Movement therapist (MA), Psychologist and Performance Activist:

Having watched the video "Bestiary" with people around the world through the event and witnessing the responses through poetry, I was part of something bigger, connecting with deep grief and a glimmer of hope that somehow needed this bigger group to be felt. The grief was overwhelming and also with it the sense of being present together with others, uncensored, raw. When Ilaria acknowledged our pain without trying to change it or make it better, when she gave space to it without doing something about it, it was healing. I felt seen or more precisely without the need to hide.

October 2024: As I saw the image published by the Italian newspaper "Il Manifesto" of the crater in Beirut, Lebanon, on 1st October, I wrote this text:

We are sinking in the hole of violence, Yes, we are sinking in the hole of violence, A deep and dark hole, Endless as it seems. And still, And still, We can make room for the vast and overwhelming sadness in the valley of our hearts, Abused by bulldozers and drones, and bombs, and missiles, And set a time to mourn and cry. We can allow ourselves to feel the wild anger in our choked throats and crushed stomachs, And give voice to this, for so long, muted scream, throwing up frustration and blood, disgust and bile. We can feel our hearts so broken that they could almost be flattened as the quarters in Gaza and Beirut. We can feel our chest like under 80 tons of explosives, 80 tons on our Mother Earth. And still, And still, We can find our hope, shy and tired, marginalized and disappointed, That with a whisper, so humble and so strong, so faint and so assertive, Is urging us to Navigate through all these tears And step into the world that wants to be born anew.

At this moment, I knew that I was not the only one to feel that way. I felt to hold a space for honoring the pain of the world and eventually making hope together. "Honoring the pain of the world" comes from Joanna Macy (Macy 2012; 2014). The expression "making hope" comes from a quote of Maoz Inon, Israeli, in conversation with Aziz Abu Sarah Palestinian, both are entrepreneurs and peace activists. "Hope is not something that you find or lose but something you must actively make... Like love, you cannot make it by yourself, you're doing it with others..." (Abu Sarah, Maon 2024).

This is the testimony of Amie Slate, a participant in the sessions I offered:

From listening with attention together with others – even for just a few minutes – can come such tiny, potent shifts. ... So small and yet so big. Perhaps we have to feel this immense process of becoming in such tiny sips so we don't die altogether, so we can hold onto a thread, a shred of Self-ness – which is after all, the Point.

Deep listening and compassion do not leave us in discomfort and paralysis. When we hold them in a collective and safer space, we can see the pain as love, anger as hunger for justice, uncertainty as possibility, fear as courage. This is what happens in the practice of the Truth Mandala (Macy, Brown 2014) as I experienced with Hector Aristizabal several times.

4.3 Acting from courage

The etymology of the word 'courage' comes from the Latin word 'cor, cordis', meaning 'heart'. Its meaning is connected to the ability to act from a sense of rightness that resides in every heart.

Courage is the third element in the core intention of StR, is intertwined with hope and linked to imagination and creativity.

“The very ability to imagine something different and better than what currently exists is critical for the possibility of social change” (Boulding 2000). Going beyond the current reality takes creativity, hope, and courage.

StR sees creativity as intuition, as something that can be born in the personal and collective “distress” or in the “contradiction of the conflict”, transforming it and bringing towards something that is not yet there but is emerging. Hope isn't about passive optimism or expecting the best; it's about choosing to be active in response to the challenges we face (Macy 2012). Hope is not a feeling but more an attitude or a skill that we can develop (Brown 2010).

Courage is the ticket for the action domain, and is part of the action confidence. Action confidence is the courage and capacity to step into something new and bring it into being, or, in the words of the late cognitive scientist Francisco Varela, “to lay down a path in walking”, creating reality as we step into it (Scharmer & Pomeroy 2019).

The courage of the creative and transformative action in the current reality gives an answer to the challenge that StR work shares with the challenge of Focusing (Gendlin 2019):

The problem is that focusing brings you very deep and it opens up a lot of things and that is so precious that you are content with that and in the action space you do not change and... That's the limit of the whole story... and when you are into all

these big things that come through focusing, the action territory seems trivial and externalised and not very interesting, and yet, without that, life does not expand.

Retracing the personal path, I can recognize the courage and the step into the realm of action, especially in hearing the call to amplify the voices of joint Israeli and Palestinians movements against occupation and for reconciliation.

October, November 2023: The war in Gaza was at the beginning, and I was back in Italy from Galilee. I was in an infinite sadness and a sense of hopelessness. Allowing myself to listen to these uncomfortable emotions, it was possible to hear the need to nourish my hope and the need to contribute with courage for a world beyond polarization.

I was in conversation, through email, with Chen Alon, one of the co-founders of Combatants for Peace CfP⁵.

It emerged the opportunity to run an [interview with him and Sulaiman Khatib](#), another co-funder, and later on with the two co-directors of CfP Rana Salman and Eszter Korany. These interviews led to the first Italian book about CfP (Bezzi 2024) and many occasions of encounters in Italy about “daring peace”.

CfP challenge and treasure is to have ‘one leg in reality and one leg in the dream’, as Sulaiman Khatib was saying during my interview. It means: they are fighting against occupation and apartheid and at the same time they are already working for reconciliation.

As CfP practices, StR acknowledges the enormous role of the polarizing narratives in the two sides, dehumanizing the ‘other’ or the ‘enemy’. It acknowledges the sharing of personal stories as a crucial part for a re-humanizing process, even in the midst of bloodshed and injustice, passing from the single monolithic narration to the plurality of complex, sometimes messy, stories. It acknowledges the power of imagination to open the door to unthinkable actions and possibilities. Chen Alon states in my interview: “One of the first manifestations of oppression is that people cannot imagine another reality”. Sulaiman Khatib said that the Joint Memorial Ceremony, in which Israelis and Palestinians mourn together, calling for an end to the violence, is somehow “unimaginable”.

⁵ It is a bi-national, grassroots organization founded on the principles of nonviolence. In 2006, Israeli and Palestinian former combatants, people who had taken an active role in the conflict, laid down their weapons and established Combatants for Peace. Along with the process of rehumanization, empathy training, and promotion of dialogue, there is the joint, non-violent, and creative struggle against the Israeli military occupation and the oppressive system of apartheid.

5. A matrix

The following matrix that serves as a powerful structuring tool for the integration of multiple theoretical frameworks into a coherent and actionable model. It is important to me to underline that it is useful as long as the underrated and intangible capacities of deep listening and presence are not underestimated. Despite the tools, methodologies, and theoretical frameworks, it is essential for the facilitator to embody the inner work that underpins the process: cultivating both personal and panoramic awareness, recognizing the presence of judgment, cynicism, and fear, and continuously practicing deep listening.

In my work as a trainer and facilitator, I employ StR as a matrix to design peace education curricula, and I would explore it to guide reconciliation journeys.

The matrix originates from the intersection of Theory U (Scharmer 2016), WTR (Macy 2012), and Focusing (Gendlin 1978), mapping out distinct phases of transformation – Earth, Water, Fire, and Air – each associated with specific practices and capacities that nourish cultures of peace. The matrix is meant to structure the phases of learning experience as fractals that replicate at different levels, from individual sessions to long-term peacebuilding processes.

	Map theoretical framework	Practices	Capacities and attitudes of cultures of peace
Earth	Co-initiate and open mind (Theory U) Gratitude (WTR) Clear a space (Focusing)	GAP (Rome, 2014) Combined with music, movement, and embodiment	- Connection with the Earth and the body - Connection with the self
Water	Co-sensing and open heart (Theory U) Honoring the pain (WTR) Felt sense (Focusing)	Storylistening (deep listening combining Focusing and Theory U)	- Connection with the others - Compassion for the self and others
Fire	Presencing and co-creating, open will (Theory U) Seeing with new eyes (WTR) Felt sense and resonance (Focusing)	Stories co-creation (through movement, images, words, writing)	- Courage of Staying-with, letting emerge and imagining new reality, creatively and nonviolently - Connection with the self, the others, Life/nature
Air	Co-evolving (Theory U) Going forth (WTR) Receiving (Focusing)	Co-evolving circle (How it was what 's next)	- Capacity of co-learning with connection, compassion, courage

Figure 5 - Matrix of StR (by Ilaria Olimpico)

5.1. *GAP, grounding*

One of the practices for co-initiating can be the GAP practice combined by elements coming from the realm of theatre. GAP is the acronym for Grounded, Aware, Present (Rome 2014). This practice combined the connection with the Earth, as an unconditional support, the call to be present in the now and here, and the attitude of awareness. The GAP emphasizes the practice of being fully present in the moment, which helps individuals shift from their automatic or reactive thinking into a more grounded, embodied state.

In StR, people are invited to move in the space, in silence or with music, and time by time are invited to pay attention to the words: grounded, aware, present. They are not forced to be “grounded, aware and present”, but, following the Focusing approach about resonance, they are invited to check inside themselves how it resonates each word, one at a time. They are invited to embody the resonance and make a sculpture of it with their body. They can be invited to find a fluid sculpture, a movement that they can remember. After the experience, people are invited in a circle to share how they felt and if they want to show the sculpture or the fluid sculpture.

This activity can become a routine for the group. It creates an opportunity to connect with the Earth, with the self through the body.

5.2. *Storylistening*

In order to make cultures of peace thrive, StR wants to cultivate empathy and compassion.

Empathy is the ability to feel and understand someone else’s emotions, often creating a shared emotional experience. Compassion involves an active engagement to support the other person’s healing, growth, and well-being. It is characterized by caring, and non-judgmental understanding, combined with the ability to not lose oneself in the other's experience (Cornell 2002).

Deep listening is the first act of compassion. Deep listening as an act of compassionate presence, where the listener offers an open, non-judgmental space for the other person’s experience without trying to fix or change it (Cornell 2002).

StR is exploring the integration of the principles at the core of the practice of Focusing exchange/partnership (Cornell 1996), the 4 levels of Listening from Theory U (Scharmer 2016), the power of social arts in making visible the invisible (see the paragraph ‘A matrix’).

Deep listening becomes a deep listening to the wisdom of the body, and to the intelligence of the heart. Deep listening happens in deep dialogue with artistic languages. The ripples of it can rest in the analogical and symbolic dimension, not yet marked by rationality, logical thinking and willingness of fast-solving.

The ongoing shift from storytelling to *storylistening* in StR can be described with one of my stories:

This storyteller I met was not what I expected. I imagined her to be old, with deep wrinkles and a hoarse voice. Instead, she was a middle-aged woman, with slight wrinkles just visible at the corners of her mouth and a voice that modulated in an infinite variety of tones and colors. Then she said to me, "There are steps to take. The first step, you glimpse it, is this threshold toward the forest. You pause. It is the pause. It's the emptiness." Perhaps, observing closely the emotions that were etched into my facial expressions, she added, "Do not fear the emptiness. Emptiness is the vessel to welcome emerging possibilities." And then I felt a deep sigh come over me and new air enter my lungs. She continued, "So, then we have the second step. This naturally follows and coexists with the pause. It's the silence." Again, the storyteller felt the need to add something to answer the questions I dared not voice, but that crowded my mind and evidently furrowed my brow. "Do not fear the silence. Let go of the urgency to say, to do, to fill. Stay a little while, in the pause, in the silence. And so you arrive at the third step. You perceive that space expands. The background is clear. The horizon is open. Now you can understand the paradox: emptiness is full of possibilities." A lovely smile spread across her amber face. And so she concluded, "So here it is: pause, silence, space. Now LISTENING can reign." I had traveled long and far to learn her renowned art of storytelling, and what I was about to receive was the art of *storylistening*. Listening that calls forth infinite stories, from within and outside.

The practice of deep listening of StR is evolving as "*storylistening*", and emerging from the experience of sessions in small groups or session one-to-one. It is almost arriving to a protocol of deep listening for the activity in pairs.

Fascinated by the power of Focusing exchange/partnership, I brought it in a context of "not focusers". I kept the essential and widened the transpersonal dimension. I brought the analogical, embodied, poetic, artistic resonances⁶. I combined it with the four levels of Listening of Theory U.

In Theory U, Scharmer outlines four levels of listening (Scharmer 2016): Downloading is the first level, where listeners hear only what they already know, reinforcing their preconceptions and biases. Factual listening involves a more open approach, where

⁶ Janet Klein, Psy.D., developed Interactive Focusing, a therapeutic approach that integrates Focusing with interpersonal dynamics, allowing individuals to engage in a Focusing modality while providing resonances through various artistic and aesthetic channels, such as movement and poetry. This method enables two people to connect deeply, facilitating mutual understanding and emotional resonance (Klein, 1998).

individuals engage with the information presented, seeking to understand facts and details without judgment (opening mind). Empathic listening is the third level, characterized by a deeper emotional connection, allowing listeners to resonate with others' feelings and perspectives (opening heart). Generative listening is the highest level, where listeners create a shared space for co-creation, letting go of fear and letting come courage (opening will).

The invitation for the *storylistener* is to listen with an open mind, open heart, open will. That means to listen to non-judgment, with compassion, and courage. The invitation for the storyteller is to enhance self-awareness and self-empathy. The storyteller is invited to pay attention to the body's meaningful sensations (the "felt sense") meanwhile telling, allowing silence and pause to check in the body the resonance between the words and the effect they do internally. The storyteller is responsible of his-her-their process.

At the end of the *storylistening* experience, there is an invitation to write a short poem, usually giving these three prompts, inspired by Theory U: What did you see? What did you feel? What wants to emerge?

*Just got back from windy Edinburgh to sunny Istanbul
Stories in my pocket, ideas in my mind
Tired but happy
Pensive but hopeful*

*...Maybe our heartaches will connect us,
as sweet warm pains of the body that affirm and remind
the living of the living.
Let us walk into the intimacy of hugs and tears
witnessed by another,
heard and loved and dusted.⁷*

5.3. Stories co-creation

In StR there is a space where stories are told and shared through movement, images, words and writing.

In this step, there is a perspective of temporal trajectories. Past, present, and future are looked at within the framework of "deep time" (Macy 2014). In StR, the intention is to make visible the patterns of the present, staying-with the wounds and the pain of

⁷ Excerpts from two participants' poems, written during the workshop "Stories that Reconnect (StR) – Nurturing Connection and Hope Amid Conflict, Violence, and Insecurity", at the University of Edinburgh, June 2025.

violence and separation cultures, and step into future-making (Appadurai 2013) with courage and active hope (Macy 2022) through creative practices as participative storytelling through images.

The future is not just something that "happens" but is actively made through social actions, narratives, and cultural frameworks (Appadurai 2013).

Aligned with the specific topics and objectives of the different StR workshops, collective narration – integrated with visual language and embodied practice – can be stimulated through generative questions. These questions typically encompass two key elements: one grounded in current reality, navigating challenges, wounds, and pain, and the other oriented toward the future, exploring the realm of highest possibilities, dreams, and active hope.

The collective stories told in StR practices are in between the territory of what is/was experienced and the territory of what wants to emerge, in between the coming into knowledge and coming into the transformation.

Social arts come in as channels to symbolize, amplify and make visible what is happening and what wants to emerge. People can be invited to use body sculptures and movement as forms of echoing or amplification of the personal felt sense or as forms of playback and resonance of what it was listened to. They can be invited to write short poems as a creative way to reflect on and deepen the experience.

Symbolization is the process of giving form (words, images, gestures, or sounds) to the felt sense. The felt sense is initially vague and preverbal, so symbolization is the act of translating this unclear, bodily knowing into something tangible and shareable. The symbols are a bridge between the felt sense (non-verbal, bodily experience) and conscious awareness.

Stories can be created inspired by images and collective collages. This is a practice developed within TheAlbero, first referred to as "Images and Stories" (Olimpico 2019). The technique emphasizes the use of visual and participatory tools to facilitate storytelling in between reality and imagination. The process prioritizes the reconfiguration of narratives, encouraging participants to engage with past, present, and future, challenges and dreams, in a way that cultivates imagination, collective sense-making, creativity and courage.

Such techniques are rooted in an understanding of storytelling as participative and plural, where there is not only one storyteller but many voices and perspectives that find creative ways to weave a tapestry of stories told in a horizon of learning and possibilities. This focus brings post-colonial narrative questioning (Said 1978; Fanon 1952; Adichie 2009), an interdisciplinary healing narrative perspective (Siegel 1999), and an ancient/fresh practice of listening and sharing.

... Collective narration is a powerful therapy of beauty and regeneration. Stories have the ability to heal and can be shared as a means of growth. ... This experimentation has helped us navigate and live through this difficult period in a better way. (R.P.)

... Capable of stimulating the senses, bringing forth new ideas and visions, and inspiring connections. (A. B.)

Having multiple channels of expression in each meeting allowed me to experience different ways of understanding myself and others. I really enjoyed not knowing where the stories would take us – it almost felt like magic to see them take shape. (C.R.)⁸

The aesthetic space creates an aesthetic distance that is similar to the “right distance” that in Focusing allows one to find the equilibrium in between feeling the emotions but not be overwhelmed by them. In the territory of arts and aesthetics, as in Social Presencing Theater, individuals and communities can witness themselves, see and sense themselves, in the current reality and the emerging future.

Through this practice, people can enhance their capacity to connect to themselves, to each other, and to Life. They can cultivate the capacity to stay-with the complexity and the challenges, exploring them individually and collectively in the space of art and aesthetic. This is at the same time a space that is safe and brave. It is safe because the setting of the experience is a container that holds the process and the group. It is brave, because it is the opportunity to challenge the status quo, imagining another possible world or, better in plural, other possible worlds. “We can’t work for what we can’t imagine. So we have to be able to imagine, play, daydream about that peace culture” (Boulding 2000).

This practice is about nourishing the courage to stay-with, letting emerge the future in its highest potential (Scharmer 2016), cultivating the capacity to aspire (Appadurai 2013), and to imagine new reality, creatively and nonviolently.

5.3. *Co-evolving*

As facilitator and trainer, I am aware of the enormous importance of reflection about the experience after the experience, in a setting of connection, compassion and courage.

When people share “how it was” and “what next”, there is a space of co-learning and co-evolving. It is possible to become aware that eventually, we could “see with new eyes” as in the Spiral of WTR.

⁸ Testimonies from the participants of the workshop series “StR - circle of women”, during the pandemic.

Seeing with new eyes means understanding where one is, accepting it, and daring to go beyond. It is a slow and unpredictable process that I believe was stimulated in our workshop through the use of the body, active listening, and the individual creativity that became interconnected (A.T.)⁹.

"Co-evolution is the process of discovering the future as it emerges, where we are moving from doing to being, from reacting to actively co-creating" (Scharmer 2016).

Conclusion

The conclusion is mostly, in this case, an opening, looking at the challenges and the potentialities of StR.

The main challenge of StR is to link personal and community transformation to structural transformation. The emphasis on individual transformation and healing is inseparable from addressing systemic or structural issues that perpetuate violence, inequality, and injustice. It is crucial for me to remember the social and political ripples that may – and need to be – originated by this kind of work. The other intertwined challenge that I am aware of, having worked with people from different backgrounds, cultures, and languages, is to ensure that the methodology itself has anti-oppressive and decolonial lenses (Berry 2017).

Coming back to the personal anecdotes, I can surely say that the special connection with CfP influenced my work and StR roots and potential branches. Following the work of CfP and the work of my mentor Hector Aristizabal in Colombia, I see the potentiality of StR not only as a journey of peace education but also as a journey of reconciliation, accompanying grass movements and communities working for reconciliation.

I love how in a few words grounded in the lived experience a participant described the process of StR:

... it all began by feeling rooted in this space, and then we had the opportunity to be aware, having the time to talk, connecting with our thoughts without interruptions, ... enjoying our own silences... we became aware of each other's thoughts, holding back our curiosities and respecting the other person's silences, and then observing how their thoughts resumed the flow or didn't... and then we had the chance to be present, but together, united, and to see the group's ability to create stories and enrich them by adding a different perspective, different sounds... I feel that what happened was very powerful... thank you!¹⁰

⁹ Testimony by a participant to the workshop "StR, see with new eyes" during the pandemic.

¹⁰ Feedback from the workshop "Stories that Reconnect: a practice of Peace", February, 2025, Florence.

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