

# *The Darkest Hour Is Just Before the Dawn. How to Transform Trumpism After Trump: On Post-Truth, Post-Democracy, and Post-Humanity.*



by Otto Scharmer

*The US election next week feels like a planetary watershed moment, with implications well beyond the United States. This moment has an exterior and an interior dimension. The exterior dimension is a referendum on the occupant of the White House. But a change there will not on its own change much. The interior dimension is a change in the heart — a change in the inner place that we operate from as we move forward in this critical decade.*



Figure 1: Three Conditions of Trumpism, Three Capacities for Transforming Them (by Kelvy Bird)

As the Trump administration [predictably](#) continues its path of denial and self-destruction, we are reminded of the observation, attributed to Abraham Lincoln, that

“you can fool all the people some of the time and some of the people all the time, but you cannot fool all the people all the time.”

*While no one knows for sure what’s going to result from the election process in the United States, or whether chaos might ensue thereafter, here is why I have had a good feeling about it: to me this final stretch feels like a microcosm of what we have already seen, a micro-version of the past three-plus years: the key institutions of US democracy — and by implication the resilience of our international system of solidarity and governance — is bending, bends more, but doesn’t break — and finally will bounce back better, bounce forward.*

*Yes, you can fool people; yes, you can be in denial — some of the time. But if you put yourself and your country on a profound collision course with reality — which is what the Trumpist response to COVID-19 amounts to — sooner or later that reality will bite back. And it looks as if that moment of reckoning is about to arrive.*

*Living in the United States and on this planet at this unprecedented historical moment, you can feel the tension in the air literally everywhere. I feel it here in Boston. And friends around the world tell me the same is true where they are.*

*“This election is going to be a monumental moment,” my colleague Frans S. from Jakarta said recently. “I am watching every minute of it,” says our Zambian colleague Martin Kalungu Banda, who lives in the UK. This is not just a referendum on US democracy; it feels like a referendum on our aspirations as human beings.*

*The year 2020 has felt very dark to many of us. But if it is true that the darkest hour occurs just before the dawn, this moment also holds a profound possibility. It was in*

*1941, arguably the darkest hour of the previous century, that the founders of the United Nations began to envision a new generation of multilateral institutions. And for the past 75 years the UN has co-shaped global collaboration and development worldwide. If today we are again living through such a dark hour, what does the emerging dawn of this century look like?*

*In asking this question I am not necessarily assuming a specific outcome next week. Given all the support that Trump has received from his enablers, such as the Koch brothers and other fossil fuel billionaires, from tech titans like Mark Zuckerberg, and through the large-scale GOP-facilitated voter suppression efforts, anything is possible. But I believe that the bouncing back and the dawn of a new day will begin with a landslide victory next week, because the mood in this country has changed profoundly over the past few months.*

*For one thing, people are hurting. Since May, 8 million Americans have slipped into poverty. One in seven households with children have not had enough food over the past seven days. More than [40%](#) of adults reported in June that they were struggling with mental health. Also, we have seen a profound shift in people's understanding of systemic racism. One indicator of that shift is that the percentage of Americans who agree that "there is a lot of discrimination against African Americans" has increased from 19% in 2013 to [50% in 2020](#). That feels like a tectonic shift.*

*Will it be enough? Or will the country sink into a period of chaos, violence, and civil war? In this moment, both possibilities are very real and very much up in the air, particularly because outdated institutions such as the Electoral College and winner-take-all principles put countries like America in a strange situation of minority rule.*

*With this column I invite you to take a deep breath, relax, and attend to the current moment from the viewpoint of the dawn — that is, from the viewpoint of an emerging future, the transformational change that this moment is calling for. If we truly want to build back better, if we want this moment to give rise to a future that is different from the past, what core capacities do we need to build and cultivate now?*

## *Three Current Conditions*

*First, even if Donald Trump is defeated, the structure that created him, Trumpism, is likely to remain — unless we transform the underlying structures and paradigms of thought. We always knew that Trump was just a symptom, a strange kind of “gift,” just like COVID, to make us more aware of what is broken and that we need to care for our planet and each other. But this means the real work, transforming the underlying structures, is only just beginning.*

*What gives rise to the global phenomenon of Trumpism can perhaps be attributed to three key enabling conditions:*

- *Post-truth Politics: spreading disinformation, doubt, and denial*
- *Architectures of Separation: generating polarization, tribalism, and hate*
- *Fueling of Fear: amplifying anxiety, depression, and fear*



*Figure 2: Three Conditions: Post-Truth, Post-Democracy, Post-Humanity (by Kelvy Bird)*

## *Post-Truth: Spreading Disinformation, Doubt, Denial*

*This is the essence of post-truth politics. Two examples are President Trump's own behavior and the climate denial industry. According to the fact-checker site of the Washington Post, President Trump crossed the milestone of [22,000 lies](#) and misleading statements while in office this past August. He began his presidency in January 2017 telling an average of six lies per day. But in August this year his average exceeded 50 lies per day.*

*By the time you are reading this Trump has likely crossed the milestone of 25,000 lies in office.*

*Did all of this lying hurt him? Not much for most of the time. Not in the eyes of his most ardent followers. Ignorance or denial of the truth is the defining feature of post-truth politics.*

*The second example, climate denial, is fueled by more than \$500 million from the Koch brothers and the fossil fuel industry. The strategic objective: sowing and amplifying doubt. Although they can't directly disprove scientific facts or deny the consensus of the global climate science community, with amplification through the media they own or influence, they are able to cast doubt on the science. This is exactly what they have done. The climate denial industry turned US public opinion away from pro-climate action (e.g., pro-carbon tax) in less than ten years. Their strategy worked.*

*Today's heightened state of confusion and collective denial are direct results of the post-truth condition. There is a collective sense that "no one can trust anything or anyone," which translates into "no one can know anything." In other words, it is a perfect environment for illiberal or antidemocratic forces to carry out policies that serve the few at the expense of the whole. Examples: the trillion-dollar Trump tax cuts mostly benefiting billionaires; the dismantling of the Environmental Protection Agency by appointing a coal lobbyist to lead it, the polarization created around COVID disinformation.*

*The public behavior that results from this condition is collective denial. Denial is what makes Trump claim that we are “turning the corner” on the pandemic in the same week that new infections hit multiple all-time records. Denial makes it impossible for the American public and the political class in Washington, DC, to simply connect the dots: to link the apocalyptic firestorms in the West and record number of hurricanes in the Southeast with the underlying condition of global warming. That’s what collective denial looks like in 2020. Are we waking up now?*

**If the catastrophic outcomes of the pandemic in the US and in Brazil can teach us anything, it’s this: denial is not a strategy.**

*The longer you stay in denial, the harder you will hit the ground. While Trump has so far managed to externalize most of the suffering to others (disproportionately people of color), it looks as if with this election the feedback loop will drive home Lincoln’s point that you can’t fool everyone all the time.*

### ***Post-Democracy: Amplifying Architectures of Separation***

*Architectures of separation amplify polarization, tribalism, and hate. Just like post-truth politics, these divisive architectures can be witnessed around the world. Many societies have already shattered into polarized, hostile subcommunities that no longer have the capacity to talk to each other.*

*Two specific examples of these separation structures are (1) the filter bubbles created through social media and (2) the issue of minority rule in the United States.*

*Filter bubbles arise from the algorithms that determine the content in our social medial feeds. For clear presentations of this, watch the Netflix documentaries “The Social Dilemma” and “The Great Hack.” These algorithms are designed to maximize user engagement (glue you to your screen) by activating the emotions of hate, anger, and fear.*

## The deeper issue at hand is what Harvard's Shoshana Zuboff calls "epistemological inequality."

*Users and their social media companies can be thought of as looking at each other through a one-way mirror: the social media company can see everything about its users, but the users see nothing of what the company is doing with their personal data. That's the reality of social media today.*

*Says Tristan Harris, former design ethicist for Google:*

**"[Imagine] walking into a control room with a hundred people hunched over a desk with little dials, and that that control room will shape the thoughts and feelings of a billion people. This might sound like science fiction, but this actually exists right now today. I know because I used to be in one of those control rooms. [This matters] because what we don't talk about is that a handful of people ... through their choices will steer what a billion people are thinking today."**

*The one-way mirror — that is, the massive asymmetry of power between the few inside the control room and the billions of us outside it — is the result of an illegitimate power grab by Big Tech and Big Data companies who took ownership of users' data and turned it into profit with the help of sophisticated data analytics. They can effectively manipulate users' behavior en masse — which is precisely the high-value service they sell.*

*While this business model is working well for trillion-dollar Big Tech companies such as Facebook and Google, it is not working well for the rest of us: society as a whole. Among the toxic side effects are the erosion of democracy, the disappearance of independent media, increases in hate crimes and violence against migrants, and shocking levels of mental health issues particularly among young people. The core problem at issue here is the mass production of othering.*

*So, is technology the problem? It's not. The problem is the intention and the awareness that we use to design, disseminate, and deploy technology.*

*The issue of minority rule is another factor playing into polarization and extremism.*

**President Trump lost the popular vote in 2016 by 2.5 million votes but has appointed three justices to the Supreme Court since then. Those three justices were confirmed by a Senate majority that ALSO LOST the popular vote in both 2016 and in 2018.**

*The result has been and will continue to be landmark decisions that ignore the views and feelings of the majority of the electorate. How is that possible? How can a party, like the GOP, rule the country without even having to try to appeal to the majority of American voters? That's the other part of the equation that feeds into polarization and tribalism.*

*You may think: Well, that's really just an American problem; my own country doesn't work that way. But I would challenge that notion. Minority rule can be observed in numerous countries today, including most of our democracies. The political process is regularly hijacked by the outsized influence of special interest groups, resulting in decisions that are often at odds with the views and interests of the vast majority of the electorate. America today is just a very visible example of a condition that exists in many other places too.*

## ***Post-Humanity: Fueling Fanaticism and Fear***

*When politics and business amplify people's fear, anger, and fanaticism, they tend to stop feeling other normal emotions. As my colleague Antoinette Klatzky puts it:*

*"When we stop allowing ourselves to feel, we lose compassion and a connection to both human suffering and freedom. When we tap into our uniquely human capacities to feel, we can tap into the world we know is possible. That is why Black*

*Lives Matter is so important — it's reminding us of the importance of human lives, particularly the ones that get shut out of our feeling antennae the earliest when we are shutting off our humanity."*

*The 2016 election of Donald Trump is a prominent example of a strategy that relied on fueling fear, anger, and fanaticism. Another example is the widespread issue of mental health challenges caused by uncertainty, stress, and anxiety.*

*As mentioned above, in June of this year, more than 40% of adults in America reported mental health concerns. And more than a quarter of young adults in the US said they have seriously contemplated suicide. More than a quarter of young adults!*

*What is the deeper phenomenon at issue here? What makes strategies based on amplifying anger and fear so successful? What does it mean that so many of us struggle with symptoms of depression and anxiety?*

*These complex questions should be explored in a lot more depth, of course, but there are at least two things that are becoming clear to me. The first is that, according to studies, fear, depression, and anxiety disorder grow in rough proportion to the use of social media. The more social media you consume, the more at risk you are, particularly as a young person.*

*The other is that, in order to address anxiety and fear at its source, you have to activate your own deeper levels of [action confidence](#), which I explore further below.*

*Figure 3 summarizes the above.*

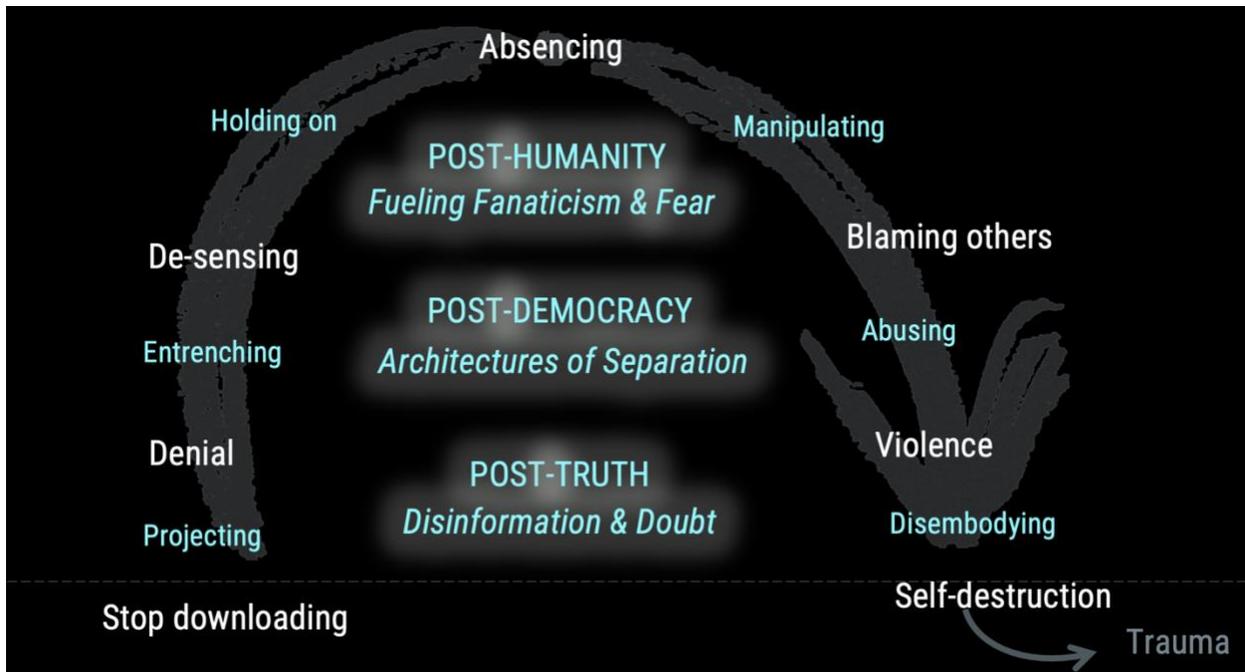


Figure 3: Three Conditions of Trumpism: Post-Truth, Post-Democracy, Post-Humanity

*The three conditions of our time — post-truth; post-democracy; and post-humanity — lead us to collectively enact the patterns of denial, de-sensing, and absencing and put us on a path toward eventual self-destruction.*

## *Three Core Capacities for Transforming Trumpism*

*The lower half of Figure 4 summarizes the main point of this column. In order to transform these current conditions, we need to activate and embody three core capacities:*

- *Listening with Humility: Let Reality Talk to Us*
- *Building Architectures of Connection: Co-sensing Social Fields*
- *Activating Action Confidence: Acting from the Field of the Future*

*These three capacities are key elements of the transformation literacy that is called for today. Transformation literacy is the capacity of a system to respond to challenges of disruption in ways that move beyond efforts to merely optimize the*

*status quo. It is the capacity of a system to co-sense and co-shape future opportunities as they emerge.*

*That capacity is grounded in deep listening, in sensing the social field, and in activating action confidence to catalyze collective action that flows from a shared understanding and awareness of the whole.*

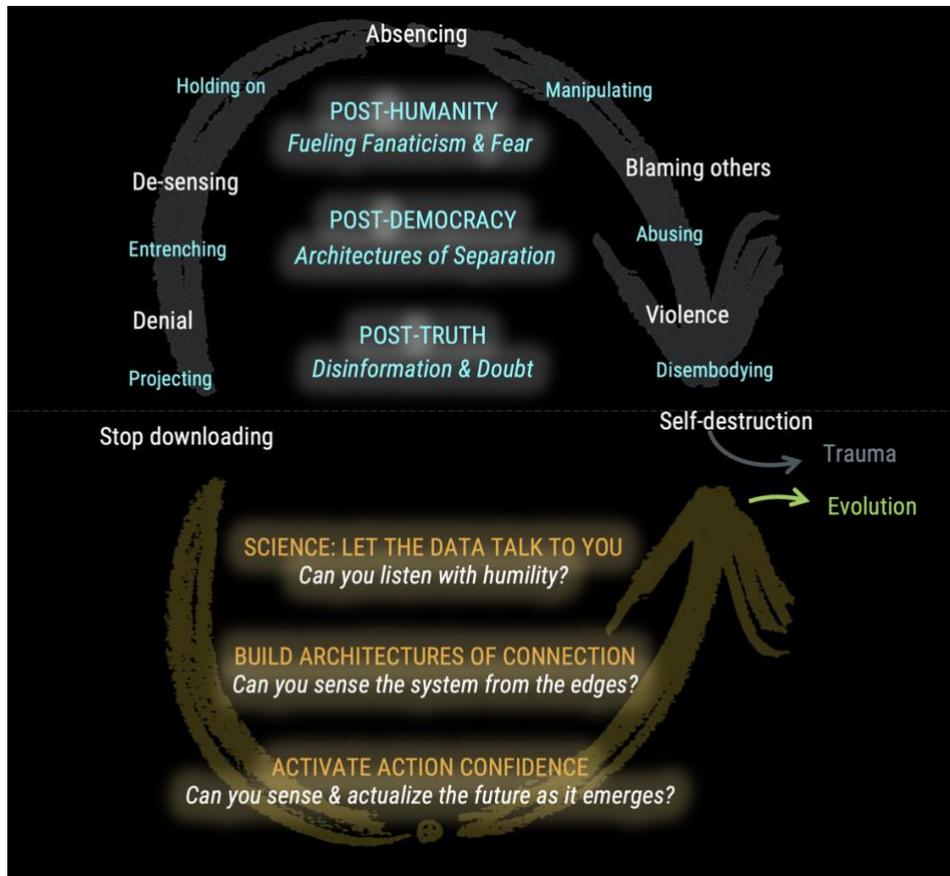


Figure 4: Three Capacities for Transforming Trumpism

## ***Listening with Humility: Let Reality Talk to Us***

*Transforming the post-truth condition requires us to deepen our listening in a spirit of humility, to suspend our habits of judgment in order to “let the data talk to us,” which is how my mentor Ed Schein summarized the essence of science. Or, as George Por suggested with reference to the work of Nora Bateson: “Let the [warm data](#) talk*

*to us.” The pandemic has been a powerful teacher of this epistemological humility. All of the countries led by men who ignore science and lack the humility to listen to what the virus is teaching us have wreaked havoc on the economies and citizens entrusted to them.*

*In the United States, the economic damage of the pandemic has recently been assessed at [\\$16 trillion](#). That’s the price tag of not cultivating this deeper human capacity.*

*Most epic leadership failures boil down to the same root cause: leaders losing connection with the changing environment they face — in other words, failing to listen.*

*The post-truth world requires us to do more than restore the virtues of active listening. It requires us to cultivate our listening on three levels. First, factual listening: noticing disconfirming data, noticing what’s surprising or new. Second, empathic listening: sensing a situation through the eyes of another, not only from our own angle or silo view, but from outside of our own bubble. And three, generative listening: listening from a place of stillness that allows our attention to function as a holding space for emerging future possibilities to land, to manifest.*

*Leaders and change makers who are operating in a post-truth world need to ask themselves this: Regardless of what reality puts in front of me, am I able to listen with deep humility, can I listen from outside my own bubble?*

## ***Build Architectures of Connection: Co-sensing Social Fields***

*Transforming the condition described as Architectures of Separation will require us to co-imagine, build, and cultivate new Architectures of Connection that hold the space for diverse actors to connect across the boundaries of institutions, interests, political views, and worldviews. Building these new civic infrastructures and deep capacities for democratic healing and renewal may well be one of the most important challenge and opportunity of our time.*

*Whatever job you may have in whatever type of organization, chances are that succeeding will require you to bring together diverse stakeholders who can work together. That's true for all the leaders in business, government, NGOs, and international organizations I have worked with over the past few years.*

*So what does this “network leadership challenge” boil down to? It boils down to a very simple fact: if you can't sense and see what reality looks like from the viewpoint of the partners and stakeholders you are working with, then it's like flying an airplane without navigation instruments. Meeting the challenge requires seeing and sensing the “social field” of the organization. A social field is a social system — your set of collaborators — sensed from all directions, not just from inside your bubble or silo.*

*We all operate in the context of social fields. Everyone does. The question we have to ask ourselves is: Are we able to truly sense our social field from the edges, from the viewpoints and experience of all the collaborators in our field, including the ones that are the most marginalized?*

*Over the past decade or two the term “food desert” has been used to describe areas without access to affordable and nutritious food, especially fruits and vegetables. Likewise, today we increasingly see areas that are “holding space deserts” — places where citizens and their institutions have no access to experience deeper levels of listening and of conversation. The loss of independent local media and the polarization of communities are just two symptoms of this widespread condition.*

*An important question most societies face is this: How can we build and rebuild civic infrastructures for creating deep ties and co-creative relationships around the environmental, social, and cultural commons? How can we build these deep relationships not around ideologies but around the real-world challenges we face?*

## ***Activate Action Confidence: Acting from the Future***

*Transforming the third current condition, post-humanity: fueling fanaticism and fear, requires us to activate a deeper level of what it means to be human — that is, our capacity to sense and actualize the future as it emerges. Human beings are the only species on earth who can anticipate the future and work to transform individual and collective patterns of behavior. If we put our collective attention to something, like we did in case of the pandemic this year, [we can bend the curve of our collective behavior](#). This capacity, that we refer to as action confidence, operates from the essence of our humanity.*

*Wherever you are in your 2020 journey, chances are you have experienced a sense of disruption: a sense that something is ending or dying and that something else wants to be born. What's ending and dying is often clearer than what wants to be born. But what's often most unclear is how to move from here to there, how to sense and actualize the emerging future. What will it take to move us beyond the current condition to actually reshaping the future as it emerges?*

*What it will take is a profound shift in mindset or consciousness: from the cycle of absencing amplified by the conditions of doubt and disinformation (closed mind), architectures of separation (closed heart), and the fueling of fear (closed will) to the cycle of presencing by cultivating the interior conditions of listening with humility (open mind), sensing the social field (open heart), and activating action confidence (open will).*

*Two questions that we need to ask ourselves:*

*As an individual, am I willing to let go of what is holding me back — that is, everything that isn't essential — and to let come what wants to emerge, to step into the unknown?*

*And, as a collective, are we willing to let go of the old ways of innovating, of merely optimizing the status quo, in order to open ourselves up to a more radical reimagining and reshaping of the architectures of connection? In asking this question, I imagine new forms of civic and cross-sector engagement that anyone can replicate in their own organization, city, village, or ecosystem.*

*What might these deep learning infrastructures for transforming and regenerating our economies, our democracies, and our educational and media systems look like?*

## ***Democratize Access to Transformation Literacy***

*I have spent the past 25 years of my professional life as an action researcher at MIT exploring these questions by doing — by running hands-on experiments with companies, governments, NGOs, and international organizations. During this time, my colleagues and I at the Presencing Institute have learned a thing or two about making change happen.*

*Most people who have immersed themselves in this work will agree on one thing: if you want to see transformational change in any system, you need a support structure that helps the key people in these efforts to both help each other and receive help. Profound change needs a supporting transformational learning infrastructure.*

*We have also learned that if you want to hold the space for profound innovation and change to happen, you need to offer “practice fields.” Practice fields are safe environments where people can explore the future by doing. We have found that methodologies based in the social arts, such as [social presencing theater](#), are a critical ingredient in these practice fields.*

*With the year 2020 in general, and with the election next week in particular, we are entering a critical decade for the planet. The success or failure of our transformation efforts will determine the fate of people and planet for the remainder of this century and beyond. We can choose to accept the challenge or accept the status quo.*

*The transformation ahead requires us to reimagine and reshape our civilization, that is, how we live and work together. No more, no less.*

*We must build transformation literacy at the scale that is called for today, in every city, every village, every organization, every community.*

*Figure 5 outline three types of infrastructure innovations that are critical in reimagining and reshaping our key institutions and societal subsystems. They address the root conditions of Trumpism discussed above.*

- *Reimagine institutions of education with whole-system and whole-person learning*
- *Advance democracies by building structures that make governance more distributed, dialogic, and direct*
- *Transform economies by shifting them from egosystem to ecosystem awareness*

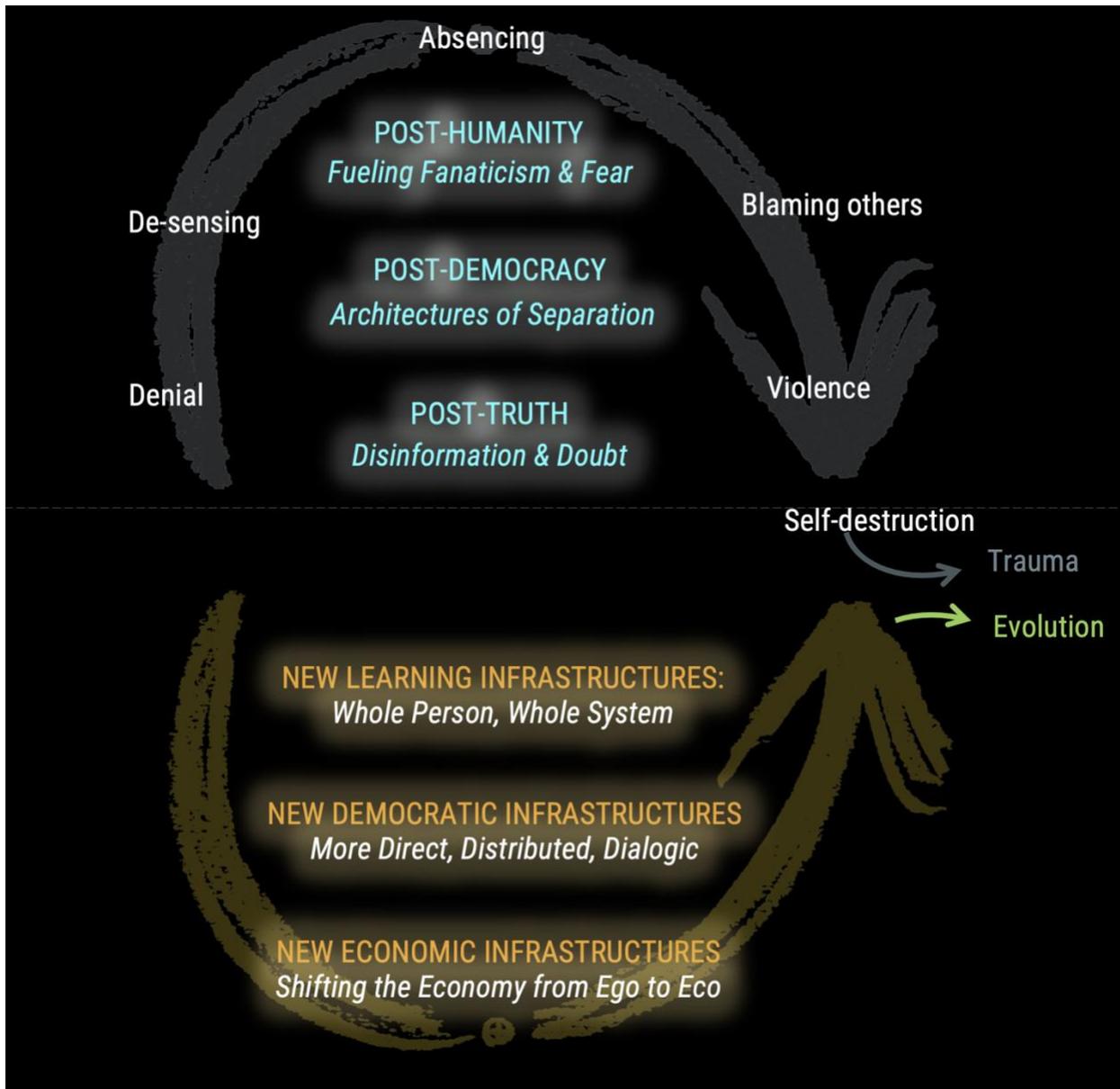


Figure 5: Innovations in Infrastructure

Any transformation requires a journey — an outer journey and an inner journey, both of which need an adequate support structure. My colleagues and I at the Presencing Institute and at MIT have been prototyping such a learning infrastructure in a variety of ways. For example, with the [MITx u.lab](#) we have created a platform and global ecosystem for societal innovation that has involved 180,000 participants to date. In the [GAIA journey](#), an impromptu learning infrastructure that we created in March 2020 in response to the COVID situation, we engaged 13,000 participants in a four-month process. In the SDG Leadership

*Labs, we help United Nations Country Teams to collaborate with key stakeholders across organizational boundaries toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.*

*We have learned that you can create transformational innovation and learning environments at scale, blending digital platforms and awareness-based social leadership technologies. But it takes a very intentional holding space, well-developed methods and tools, as well as an ecosystem-level orchestration.*

*Still, our efforts, with 200,000 change makers involved to date, are tiny in comparison with the scale of the challenges we face today. So, the question is, how can these learning environments go to scale?*

*The obvious places to start are in our existing institutions of learning. Schools and universities. As taxpayers and as societies we fund our educational institutions because we want them to function as places where people can learn, reflect, and make societies reflect on themselves. The problem is that our current education system is stuck in an old paradigm of learning.*

*The “blind spot” of our current institutions of learning is transformation literacy. That’s true for both universities and schools. Yet, when you talk to companies you learn that transformation literacy is an undersupplied skill that many organizations struggle to develop in their own workforce. So, the societal challenge is there. The organizational demand is there. But the supply side, our institutions of education, is running on empty.*

*This is precisely why we at the Presencing Institute are launching an initiative called the [School for Transformation](#). We will create modules, methods, and tools for building transformation literacy at scale, for easy replication in schools, universities, companies, public sector organizations, NGOs, and communities.*

*The School for Transformation will serve as an infrastructure to support the journey of civic and civilizational renewal. As such, the School will prototype, on a small scale, a possible new format for the university of the future.*



*Figure 6: Three Core Capacities for Transformation Literacy (by Kelvy Bird)*

## ***Transforming Science, Aesthetics, and Ethics***

*In this spirit allow me to close by looping back to an older terminology that describes in a more classic way the three capacities discussed above. We talked about listening, letting the data talk to you; about sensing the social field; and about activating action confidence. A more traditional way to refer to these capacities and virtues is truth, beauty, and goodness, or, if you want, science, aesthetics, and ethics, respectively.*

*The question that I have sought to explore in this column is, What does it take to transform the deeper conditions that brought Trump & Trumpism into being? And the answer to that question is not to simply restoring the traditional approaches to science, aesthetics, and ethics. No, I am seeking to convey something more radical. Which is that to address these root conditions*

*we need to advance the very concepts of science, of aesthetics, and of ethics that underlie our current civilizational forms, and integrate them into the heart of the new university.*

*Advancing science means to move from traditional science to a [science of awareness-based systems change](#) that integrates first-person, second-person, and third-person data and observation, i.e., a science that listens to both traditional data and warm data. An effective response to the post-truth condition requires new learning infrastructures that give everyone access to the methods and tools of deep listening and multi-modality sense making.*

*Advancing aesthetics means to return to the Greek origins of the word aesthetics, which means to perceive with all your senses, and to apply this understanding to sense social resonances in our everyday contexts. An effective response to the condition of post-democracy requires us to build new civic infrastructures that allow us to co-sense at the level of whole systems by activating all the senses of the distributed social field.*

*And advancing the concepts of ethics means to go beyond shattered ethical frameworks to create high-quality environments that allow people to reflect on their own deeper sources of creativity and self. My experience is that, when you offer these quality environments for inner development, people are amazed by what opens up for them. The source for ethical action already exists within every one of us. An effective response to the condition of post-humanity requires us to build new economic governance systems that relink human intentionality with economic activity at the scale of the whole system.*

*u.school For Transformation*



Figure 7: School for Transformation

*The bottom line is that we need new civic and new learning infrastructures that democratize the access to the core capacities of transformation literacy. This is the time to launch bold initiatives.*

*The US election next week is embedded in a global civic awakening that includes various green shoots we are seeing across regions, like the massive popular vote for new constitution in Chile, the democratic elections in Bolivia, as well as women rising up in Poland. It's time for all of us to rise to the occasion. The real work for this decade of transformation is beginning now.*

*If you feel drawn to any of these initiatives check out some of the links below and consider joining us for our the launch of our upcoming [GAIA journey](#) on Nov. 5.*

*u.school: an artistic view — [animated video clip](#)*

*u.school For Transformation: [some first components](#)*

*[Awareness-Based Action Research](#)*

*[Theory U](#)*

*[Turning Toward Our Blind Spot: Shadow As Source For Transformation](#)*

*[Presencing Institute](#)*

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