

# **SOCIAL POETRY**

## **- A SKETCH -**

*In Relation to Theory U*  
*With Reference to the Presencing Institute's Ecosystem Leadership Program, 2019*  
*As Requested by Participants*

*Draft*

*(For a longer, published journal article covering some similar themes, [click here](#))*

**John Stublely PhD**

## **INTRODUCTION**

A number of people have asked me to write something about social poetics, and to document some of the methods and tools that have been used in different social and systems change processes since 2007.

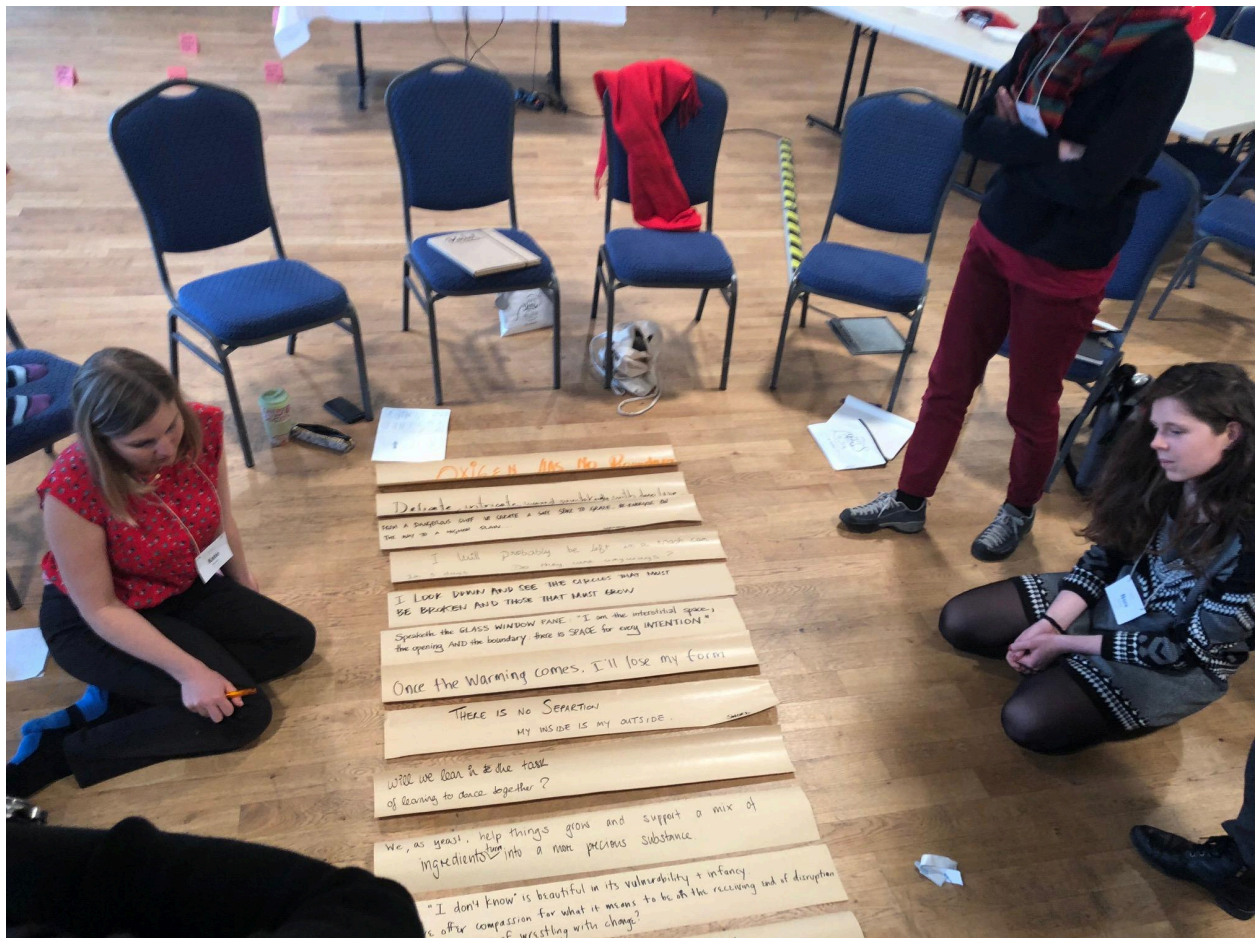
## WHAT IS SOCIAL POETICS

To the general question of what is social poetics we can say that, from one direction, it is the attempt at a phenomenological process whereby the imagination (individual or collective) is able to perceive an objective social reality and then express this through the word, be it in written or oral form.

Often this includes the use of images, pictures, metaphors. In working with images in this way, we can attain to an imaginative perception of current social reality, as well as to emerging social possibilities.

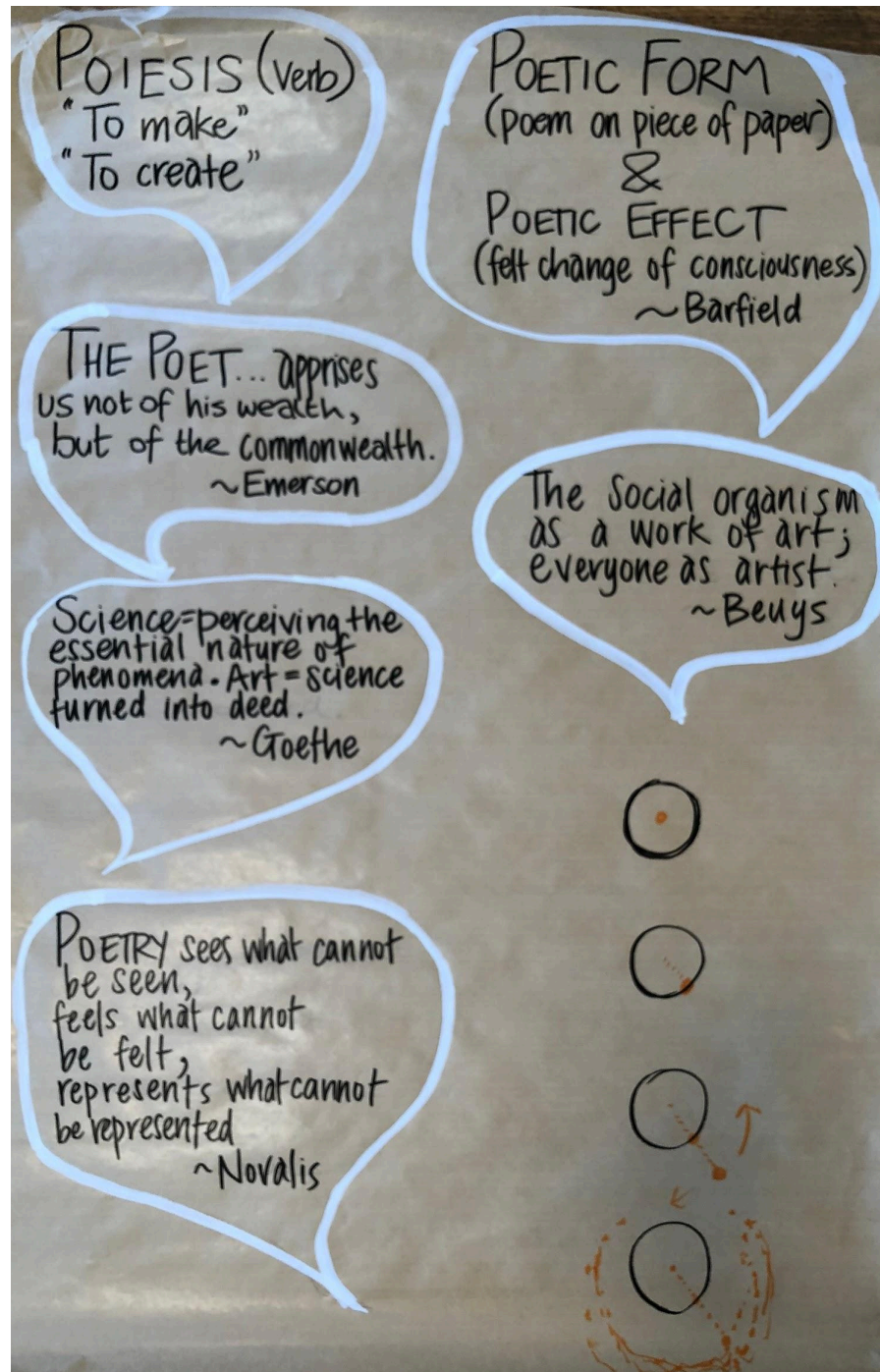
Whereas philosophy aims at the perception of new ideas and thoughts, poetics has to do with the perception of new images and metaphors. We can then express these images through the word. Social poetics has to do with this process in terms of individual imaginative perception but also collective imaginative perception. The imagination, in this way, is treated as an organ of perception.

By 'painting with words' the images we perceive and by trusting and staying with the images themselves, we are better able to perceive and express the current reality. The poetic images we create can contain a great deal of perceived data - 'an image contains a thousand words' is also true of poetic images. By then seeing where images wish to lead us - or how they wish to continue - we can also learn more about emerging reality.



## TRADITION

Social poetics has its roots in a phenomenological scientific approach that draws from the work of scientists, philosophers and artists such as Goethe, Schiller, Novalis, Rilke, Barfield, Beuys, Emerson, Thoreau, Whitman, Bortoft, Kuhlewind, Zajonc, Scharmer, Kornberger and others. As a path towards an understanding of the wholeness of phenomena, it is also able to make connections to ancient (including Indigenous) wisdom traditions and the stories contained therein.



## **THE PROCESS**

I will not go too far into this given that a number of others have already done so, including Otto Scharmer. Primarily, we have to do with the phenomenological process as applied to social reality, particularly applied by individuals within groups - i.e. in a social way. The process involves observing the necessary primary (social) data, be it quantitative or qualitative, with an open mind, then bringing attention to the open heart in order to see what that can perceive, then letting that go, and seeing if an image (or particular words and phrases) become perceptive to an open will.

Needless to say this process itself can be continued by treating the image that emerges as the primary data. In this case we move from imagination into the realm that might more aptly be called inspiration, which can then be worked with in a similar way towards the realm of intuition; there are relationships here, needless to say, to open mindedness, open heartedness, and an open will.

## **METHODS AND TOOLS**

My colleague Horst Kornberger has said that imaginations are real, and that everything real is an imagination. (We should perhaps use the capital 'I' for imagination to distinguish Imaginations of objective social realities from fantasies concocted by the subjective self in isolation.) On the one side, social poetics has to do with the perception and creation of metaphors and Imaginations out of social phenomena/data, and on the other hand it also gives attention to social phenomena/data in such a way that these realities can be seen as Imaginations. More on this below.

I will use some of the framing and language of Otto Scharmer given that the request for this particular document has come largely from *Theory U* practitioners.

## **Social Picturing**

This process has, essentially, to do with the observation of social phenomena in such a way that after observing these phenomena from multiple perspectives one is then able to reflect on these phenomena until a picture/image/metaphor emerges.

### **USEFULNESS IN RELATION TO THEORY U**

This process can be especially helpful in trying to see and understand what can be otherwise complex or 'distant' phenomena. It can help with the (co)initiating of social processes by helping people to articulate their intentions, motivations and perspectives. It can help with (co)sensemaking of data in that pictures can themselves become new data about social phenomena, as well as how it may wish to continue (more on this in the Shifting Pictures method below). It can thereby help in the process of the system being able to see and have an objective feeling for/'sense' (as Scharmer puts it) itself. Through this, it can also play a role in the process of (co)inspiring by giving people a condensed image to gather around for reflection upon; images can also emerge within the reflection process itself and thereby contribute to (co)inspirations for future work. This image-making process has proven helpful also in (co)creation by providing something more holistic yet concrete for new prototypes to ground themselves in as well as relate to other prototypes through. And such processes have proved useful in grounding themselves in, shifting and relating to the larger social (eco)systems and phenomena from which they originally emerged.

### **APPLICATION**

This process can be applied by individuals or by individuals within groups. When worked with in groups, we can then treat the multiple images as new phenomena to be observed. We can then pass from one to another image in our imagination and see what further insights these images might reveal including, possibly, new pictures or continuations of initial pictures (see Shifting Pictures method below), though the attempt here is not for abstract unification of images, but rather of perception of the unity in imagination.

The initial data for this process can be quantitative or qualitative; taken from conversations, interviews, learning journeys, news, figures, reports or even other forms of social art such as generative scribing or social presencing theatre.

### **EXAMPLES**

All of the examples for other methods below contain examples of Social Picturing because this is a foundational process for many social poetic methods.

## **Shifting Pictures**

A process whereby an imagination of a current social situation is created as per the process above for Social Picturing. This initial image is itself then reflected upon with an open mind, heart and will. In this way, one can get a sense for how the picture itself may wish to continue; if one is able to stay within the picture itself and not force upon it one's own will for how it *should* continue, the imagination itself can be the source from which next steps (or the emerging future) can appear.

## **USEFULNESS IN RELATION TO THEORY U**

This process is applicable at all stages of the U, as per the process of Social Pictures. Its principal function is to live into the reality of a social phenomenon to perceive how it may wish to continue. From this, a wealth of new data can appear.

## **APPLICATION**

Again, this process can be used by individuals or by individuals within groups. Initial imaginations of primary phenomena can be created by one individual and then shared with the group as per the process above. These initial imaginations can be continued by the same 'author' who created them, or they can be passed on to others in the group for others to continue. If different parts of the group are focusing on slightly different primary data, it can be useful for those continuing the initial picture to have been also working from the same primary data, but this is not a hard and fast rule; indeed, there are no rigid rules in this work, and one can be creative in its application, as long as there remains a clear eye to the point of doing the work and the archetypal methodology. From here, other possibilities open up, including continuing the second or emerging imagination even further.

## **EXAMPLES**

The following images are from the Presencing Institute's Ecosystem Leadership Program (ELP) Module 1, March, 2019. The primary data was from a social-presencing-theatre demonstration of the concepts of 'seeing', 'holding' and 'supporting', here combined with generative scribing following the same. The poems are the result of individual Social Picturing in groups then a collective Shifting Pictures process in which individuals created poetic images then continued those pictures created by others in their group. (A slightly different process was used for each group in this process. One group worked from an underlined phrase selected by the initial author, another group from a phrase selected by the initial author in consultation with another, and another group from an initial phrase selected by someone not the author; this was then worked with in different ways, including being passed around a circle and completing the poem in the moment, as well as adding other pre-selected lines; these further adaptations are mentioned here not to confuse the process but to show how the process can be adapted to suit the primary data under observation. The 'Supported' piece is the most archetypal Shifting Pictures example, the others also being closely aligned with the Group Poem.)



# SEEN

She makes me see inside myself,  
& connect to my strengths & resources,

Being seen in the nakedness  
of my nothingness & everythingness  
Feeling seen in the vulnerability  
of my existence.

I've been seen.

Finding your pain in someone else's  
eyes

The unexpected strength that  
you need

No details too trivial, no item profane  
So that I grow in reverence for my  
own being and becoming.

# HELD

Coming through the  
trees no longer lost,  
but drawn to the heart  
of the light.

I COULD BE.

A holding space of  
warm energy uplifts  
+ connects me to my  
real Self.

It is the heart that  
being held.

MMM, SH, SH, SH, MMM P. SH SH SH  
ARR, ZZZ, hnn, Ull  
MMM, SH SH SH, MMM P. SH SH SH

Create space for  
connection me with  
my self without fear

Never saying  
whether the way was  
back or forth

a glimpse of your  
gaze opened my heart,  
that bleeds missing  
the spark of unconditional

Love healing my soul

your heart, I will  
hold it for you -  
when you will heal  
you will call it home  
once again

I was all alone  
when Mother came,

With food for all,  
we became whole.

When known meets  
unknown

We say no words

but be still



# SUPPORTED

You gave a small roped bridge to me  
High up, you held me to  
the sky  
Where I could see myself  
through your eyes  
Your gaze made me know myself  
Made me take my first step  
And danced with me another  
You knew I would cross  
You knew I would cross well  
And so we did.

I will shade, nourish  
and nest.  
I will be the air under  
your wings.  
I am your tree. I am your breeze.  
Heaven is yours, I am here.  
I am here.

[supported]

~~#SUPPORTING~~  
Embraced. Loved. Uplifted.  
I am become me

Take flight, dear self,  
go fly

Around the sky without  
loosing sight of who you are  
For I am the ground and  
your fall will always be the softest.

[SUPPORTED]

## **Group Poem**

Individuals (or groups within the group focusing on separate primary data) may also wish to condense their imaginations into a single line or two, and then arrange their collective lines into a single piece/poem.

### USEFULNESS IN RELATION TO THEORY U

As per above; but it seems one of the primary advantages of the group poems created in this way or in this spirit is that it is data relatively easily reflected upon by the whole group, as well as shared with other groups, including larger systems. This is helpful in terms of the system being able to see and have an objective feeling for/sense itself.

### APPLICATION

This kind of group poem could be created from the initial imagination of current reality or from the secondary imagination of emerging reality, and could be continued by similar methods as outlined above. New lines can also be created in the moment.

### EXAMPLES

The following poem is from ELP module 1 in March, 2019 in which participants reflected upon the morning's input and created an individual poem each using the Social Picturing process outlined above. They then condensed each individual poem into a single line or else underlined the line they felt represented most their whole poem, and arranged these lines collectively as per the Group Poem method.

# OXYGEN HAS NO BOUNDARY

Delicate, intricate, woven painstakingly, with deep love

I will probably be left in a trash can  
in 3 days Do they care anyways?

I LOOK DOWN AND SEE THE CIRCLES THAT MUST  
BE BROKEN AND THOSE THAT MUST GROW

Speake the GLASS WINDOW PANE: "I am the interstitial space,  
the opening AND the boundary: there is SPACE for every INTENTION."

Once the Warming comes, I'll lose my form  
THERE IS NO SEPARATION

MY INSIDE IS MY OUTSIDE.

SECRET

Will we learn to do the task  
of learning to dance together?

We, as yeast, help things grow and support a mix of  
ingredients <sup>turn</sup> into a more precious substance

This "I don't know" is beautiful in its vulnerability + uncertainty  
Can we offer compassion for what it means to be at the receiving end of disruption  
and the agony of wrestling with change?

THE AIR IS THICK AND WAITING TO BE SEEN

SEEKERS, BE PATIENT AND INTENT YOU ARE READY TO SEE THROUGH.

FROM A DANGEROUS CLIFF WE CLIMB A STEEP SLOPE TO CLIMB RE-EMERGE ON  
THE WAY TO A HIGHER PLAIN....

WETTED

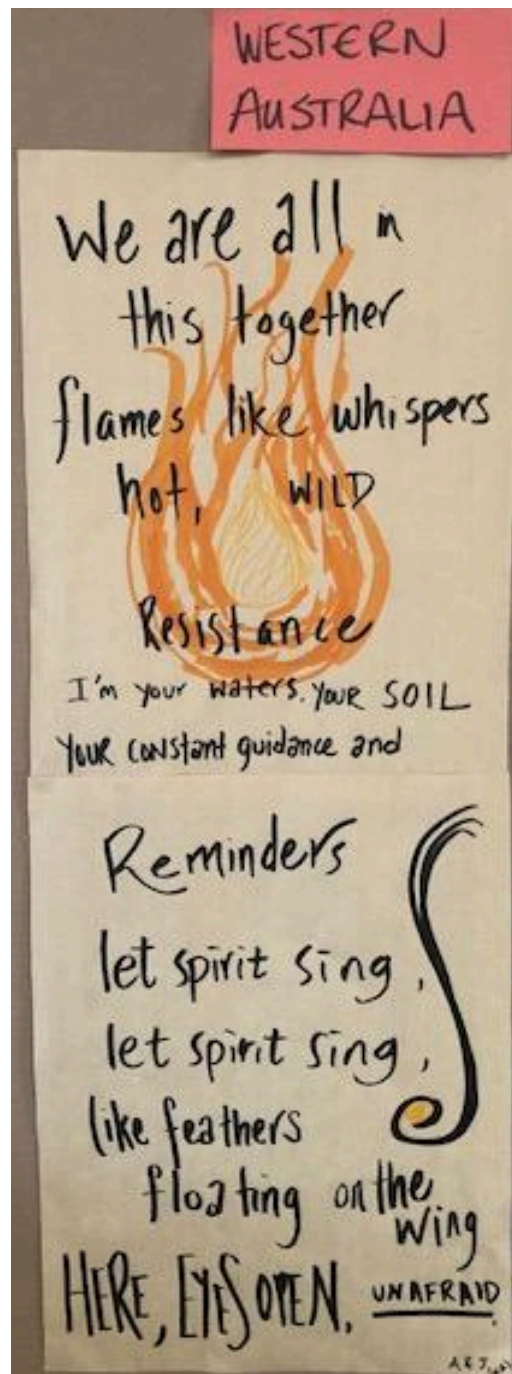
YET, WE STRIVE, WE MOVE FORWARD

PLANTING hearts LIKE POURING RAINS

## FURTHER EXAMPLES

The following images are from ELP module 1, March, 2019. The primary data was from an introduction and 4D sculpture of ecosystems in Western Australia, Indonesia, Switzerland and Puerto Rico.

Individuals created their own poem as per the Social Picturing process, then worked with others in their respective groups. They then underlined the most resonant lines from their individual poems and worked with these in their small groups to create a collective piece.





# PUERTO RICO

Frustration

Sadness

Compassion

A threat that is a support

Who said mother is sweet?

Who says she wants you to be  
comfortable

Your pain is my pain

The earth rises to meet me

She knows the way

Stay in my heart

I can not stray

~~Guide the way~~

~~And~~ We must remember we can hear her

Let's put our ears to the ground

Let <sup>her</sup> ~~their~~ guide the way

(PUERTO RICO)

# INDONESIA

## INDONESIA

Don't worry too much, loved one  
Sometimes there are no words that  
need to be said  
We are all  
Being pushed, being pulled  
We are all  
Hard, inflexible, positional  
~~We are all in A blessing~~  
~~The answer to which is~~  
We are all ~~in~~  
Asking silently  
Is this only a game?  
And <sup>later</sup> the music stopped.  
Like a laying of hands on someone's head.

Meanwhile, the man in the  
Small house  
Sells tickets to ~~child~~ grown-ups  
& Tells stories to children  
Like a prayer,  
A blessing  
The answer to which is  
YES  
We are all in this together.



# SWITZERLAND

CH CASE - collaboration

We're waiting, I don't move

I am here, can you see me

Welcome <sup>and</sup> the tension and the question

Who sees me, and me, them?

I would like to rest  
feeling the earth holding my back

I will settle for others to fly + lead  
the way.


I will feel seen when you, you let yourself  
arrive

The path meets the traveler

Is it me, or them?

every step that I take  
is another path I forsake

I must help others see the wider field...  
It is my heaven sent mission

Where to? the  leads the way!

I feel the fullness of the void  
in common roots, invisible ties,  
favorable winds

We're landing, I feel warmth  
in me

Can I be the messenger of something  
I cannot completely fathom... yet?

Yes, it's not about me but  
I am in it

CH CASE - collaboration

## Poetic Mirroring

This is a slightly different method from the ones mentioned above. In poetic mirroring we have to do with the capturing and reflecting back of language used by participants in a social process.

### USEFULNESS IN RELATION TO THEORY U

This method is useful at all stages of the U, as outlined above. In particular, it has a certain power when used at the end of a program (though it has also worked well at the end of one day within a multi-day process). This process speaks directly to awareness-based systems change's goal of allowing the system to see and sense/have an objective feeling for itself.

### APPLICATION

The process has to do with the capturing of 'resonant' words and phrases throughout a social process. Often, many of these words and phrases are, again, metaphoric or imaginative. We can draw here from different levels of listening; primarily we are listening within a level three framework but, of course, at all levels within this. Towards the end of the social process, time is taken to sit with all the words and phrases that have been noted down. The primary level of reading/listening at this point switches to level four listening in order to see if there is an organising 'principle' or unity within the words/phrases themselves that seeks to arrange them into a poem/piece. (Attention to the inner musicality of the language itself can give rise to interesting arrangements of rhyme, rhythm, alliteration, assonance and so on, but this need not be a primary goal.) Working chronologically in this way allows for a sharing experience later which can trigger a collective remembering (seeing and sensing/feeling) process in the group as a whole in the order at which these moments occurred. Experience has shown it is good for such a piece to contain not only the serious but also the playful moments of the social process - that it is representative of the initial data. Generally, few (if any) additional words or phrases are necessary than those spoken/written/shared by participants within the social process itself. The piece is then read back to the group as a whole. (It can also be useful in sharing more widely.)

This process can be practiced by single or multiple practitioners in a group.

### EXAMPLES

The first piece below is an example of Poetic Mirroring by John Stubleby from words and phrases spoken by participants throughout the ELP Module 2, Berlin, June 2019.

The second piece is by Nora Wilhelm (normal text) and John Stubleby (*italics text*) from words and phrases spoken by participants throughout the ELP Module 3, Berlin, November 2019, as well as words and phrases shared by participants during previous modules, and some additional original phrases by Nora. Both pieces were read back to participants on the final morning of the respective modules. (The second example is still in a draft written form.)

## **We Arrive With**

We arrive with  
out of office replies,  
relating in the time  
of most need.

A family reunion,  
an engagement-with-absencing party,  
with marriage into what?  
A vertical moment,  
a Nordic secret wisdom,  
Jena, folk, Highlander,  
an unfinished business.

I went through an initiation.  
- What kind?  
I went through an initiation.  
- What kind?  
I went through my own  
heart's limits -  
chak achaka.

On the middle path I'm  
vulnerable without a concept  
of counter forces.  
What I don't know.  
What I can't predict.  
Symptoms of success.

And so we plant oak tree seeds  
while people - we - want bean  
sprouts, just to eat.  
Everything is based on invitation  
on the long road to  
reassessing creativity -  
we are part of this -  
access your ignorance!

The grand will  
become soft,  
because comfort is  
way overrated  
as EU institutions

fall, and  
youth can't move far  
enough away.  
Leaders put sunshine in  
place beyond utopia,  
beyond dystopia.  
Protopia.

Opening = decentering  
where the invitation is  
just to rest.  
Step in as you,  
and something can happen -  
be watchful.

But...if things don't go the way  
they should, maybe they should  
go the way they go.  
The future is in need of you!  
Develop the vertical spine!

I feel the emergency and  
the clean shot, even  
as the courage to soften  
should not be underestimated.  
Confideo!  
Stay with - the space  
of space is in extinction.

In the presence of absencing  
do I dip my toes, go down  
slides, or dive straight in?...  
I just had the strangest  
experience of thinking that  
I was talking just then...

The ingredients are in the  
pot, the gas is going...  
now what?...

Dancing and wild nights.  
What did I miss?  
Or did I witness the

subtle story of  
caring beneath all this  
anger? I was afraid  
this would be too big:  
bridges and engaging shame -  
entry gates to which 'this'?

Feeling all those fish swimming,  
I trust the attention stream  
in unconditional confidence.  
Bring it!  
Go to the future I can't  
understand - from a club  
to a movement, more  
porous.

Can we be more explicit?  
What could come of this  
group to really create  
the big 'S'?

Did you see the  
storms on the horizon?  
Did you speak of  
ecosystem collapse?  
What can telescopes see  
from holding patterns  
between you and me?  
This is not the end.

If we dare to dance  
between;  
negative negativity.  
In the solstice light  
and dark what  
markers shall I use?  
At other times I  
crave the planetary  
bright.  
Photosynthesising  
three leaflets here  
opening onto being.

Lines and curves,  
light and dark; I would.  
Too much text  
crying to be understood.  
Waterfalls of words  
through conscious  
decisions to use black,  
to yellow flares  
of humanity.  
I see hope coming through.  
I love the oak!

In masterpieces of  
art the struggle is  
staying with  
the edges of  
beginning - the  
command for entering.  
Geologic.  
Cosmologic.  
Extraordinary symphony.  
A vision into the future.  
Fertility.  
Let's do it!

The pattern lies in hindsight.  
Collective seeing brings the  
artwork into being.  
It's part of our  
vocabulary.  
Social art and  
artefacts.  
Beyond words...  
the full silence after...

### **Poetic Mirroring ELP Module 3, Nov 19, 2019.**

Storms on the horizon  
Ecosystem collapse  
And so we meet  
And sit in circle  
Does it make any sense at all?  
What is it that we can do?  
We have come not to find answers  
But better questions  
We are drawing on a black paper  
Yellow flares of humanity  
And we are going to the margins  
To the edges of new beginnings  
Collective seeing brings the artwork to life  
Dancing waves of absencing and presencing  
Can I feel it moving within me?

Persist  
The work we are doing is not always grand accomplishments and milestones  
Often it is the quiet cultivation of the soil  
The diligent planting of seeds  
And sometimes  
It is the invisible pain  
And heartbreak  
Persist

You are not alone  
The world is a hall of mirrors  
Endless echo chambers  
Thank you for being my reflection

And the ground trembles  
At the sound of our amplified heartbeat  
And I see you, in me

If things don't go the way they should  
Maybe they should go the way they go  
The patterns lies in hindsight

My son  
I am so sorry  
My daughter

Whom I may never meet  
My child  
I trust you  
The past and present merge in this moment  
The ancestors and the yet to be born meet in ceremony  
And may our lives be a worthy celebration  
Of all there is

Why do we fear  
What we do not understand?  
We wonder  
As we call to the surface  
All that is always there  
We jump at the scream  
Remain frozen in place  
Yet deeply thankful  
For being allowed to witness  
We remain silent  
Entering the cave  
With reverence  
In darkness resides the great mystery  
And all things yet to come  
So it calls me  
What is it that you see?  
The shadow whispers  
“I am you”

In the presence of absencing  
Do I dip my toes or do I dive right in?  
Maybe the ELP is the slide we didn't know we needed  
To have fun while we go down

Pain is painful  
And a sacred teacher  
No detail too trivial  
No topic profane  
As we grow  
In sacred awareness  
Of our own being and becoming  
Will you hold me, as I come undone?

Ubuntu  
I am because you are



*There's nothing too big  
to hold -  
out of engaging with  
the dragon  
reality emerges.  
Step into the cave  
with reverence;  
fresh.  
Unconditional  
confidence.  
It's going to hurt.  
Individual  
collective  
journey.*

*I saw 'coming from'  
then 'coming through'.  
Salud!  
Resonance;  
seeing together  
the many  
Ronnies.  
Different versions.  
30 years since the fall  
of the Berlin wall.  
Hummus bildung!*

*Farm, food and  
land use.  
Denial, depression,  
confusion  
to  
action confidence!*

*Jesse Owens:  
"When I'm running  
I'm no longer  
the child of  
slaves - I'm free".  
The ecosystem out  
there,  
the ecosystem in  
here.  
Notice how you are*

*seated  
in the chair -  
find a comfortable  
position;  
leave your stuff  
behind.*

*You don't see me.  
Thank you mother  
earth for the  
opportunity.  
I wanted to hear  
the names of our  
children.  
If we give an image  
to the things we don't  
like, we can do something  
with them...  
a skate park where we  
drop in.  
Human doing.  
The journey of interior  
learning.*

*Six heart qualities to  
integrated arts.  
The excited puppy.  
The arc of the  
universe bends towards...  
a language that creates  
a reality.*

*I'm conscious of time.*

*Life and death in the  
same moment.  
I have lived my best  
life by  
vertical prototyping.  
Seeing, sensing, seeds, seedlings,  
stewards, sun, soil, source.  
Allow the ecosystem to prototype  
itself.  
You feel it in the voice.  
If we do it once, we*

*do it five times -  
I can only do it if I  
become it.  
Feminine creativity;  
feminine spirituality.  
16 years  
transforming whole country.  
Two seasons -  
wet and wetter;  
I had no idea.  
How do we bring these  
people together...?*

*I did cry,  
but I was facing the  
wall so it was  
okay.  
I was made for this moment  
of water wars  
and elementary  
schools;  
sensemaking mobile homes and  
human beings.  
The key to regeneration  
is in this room.  
Deeper contemplation.  
I see, we see,  
you.*

*It took forever;  
not much happened,  
yet a lot happened.*

*Seed something from  
the ecosystem!  
The U is the holding  
pattern.  
Inversion.  
Civilisation  
renewal.  
The movement I  
was born for.  
Intentional seed  
supported.*

*What could that  
seed grow into?*

What could that seed grow into?  
I can only do what I become  
I can only love what I know  
How well do I know myself?  
How well do I know the land?  
I can only protect what I love  
I can only love what I know  
So I will dig my fingers into the ground  
Stand in the cold river  
And howl at the moon

Shed your old skins to Tamazcal  
As we go back into the womb of Mother Earth  
And become who we are meant to be  
The winds welcome the newborns  
The rustling leaves of the mighty oak tree  
The voices of the ancestors whispering to me  
Trust the great Mother  
Pachamama knows the way  
Trust your bones  
And all the wisdom they contain

All the help I may ever need  
Is for you to see me  
“We see you” is the magic spell that opens the floodgates of potential  
And all it takes for us to step up and step in  
We see each other  
And ourselves  
So let your wings unfold  
Let your spirit sing  
Here, eyes open and unafraid.  
This is the moment that I was born for  
May all beings chant in unison

Is our container strong enough?  
It’s almost funny  
There is nothing that can’t be held in a group  
We said  
And the boundaries of your ecosystem are defined by your intention  
So what is our intention?

From seedlings grow trees  
From trees grow seedlings  
We are a global forest with local roots  
As we initiate a new cycle  
Life death new life - remember  
Nature does not compete  
A forest is a family  
In times of struggle  
The mother tree will share with you all the nutrients  
That you may need  
We are one  
Part of a being on a different timescale  
A movement for profound societal renewal  
Cells of a collective heart that contract and expand  
And there is but a brief pause between heartbeats  
Until we meet again  
And at the end remains silence  
Deeper silence than before  
All that we have lived through resides in the stillness of this moment  
Whilst our bodies remember the dance

We sit with the life-changing questions that we found  
As everything whispers  
Are you with me?  
Are you with me?

**FEEDBACK**

I'd appreciate all feedback, suggestions, additions, changes, collaboration etc. required for this document and for the general concept.

Please feel free to contact me using the details below. Thank you!

**John Stublely PhD**

johnstublely@yahoo.com