



## Theory U

### A Way to Change Services for People with Intellectual Disabilities

John O'Brien

The New Paths to Inclusion Network is a European project.

In this project partners from 13 European countries work together.

Their guiding question is:

**How can we change services for people with disabilities so that more people can live a good life?**



With the support of the  
Lifelong Learning Programme of  
the European Union

Find out more about the project at [www.personcentred-planning.eu](http://www.personcentred-planning.eu)

Theory U guides The New Paths to InclUision Network.

We use practices from Theory U:

- To look for good ideas
- To build up a network of people working for inclusion
- To make sense of what we are learning
- To figure out how to share what we have learned

People can use the tools and help others use them without studying Theory U itself.

This short introduction is for people who want to start learning about Theory U.

Theory U is not just about changing things for people with disabilities. It is a way to build a better world for everyone. There is far more to Theory U than a short introduction can cover.

There are videos to watch and more to read at [www.presencing.com](http://www.presencing.com).

Part of learning about a theory is learning words that are special to it. Theory U words are picked out *like this*.

I have tried to write this so it is easy to read. But theories are ideas that anyone has to think about, talk about and try out to understand. So be ready for some work.

I would be happy to hear ideas about how this booklet could be better.

Version 0.3

15 December 2014

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John O'Brien



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Otto Scharmer  
[www.presencing.com](http://www.presencing.com)

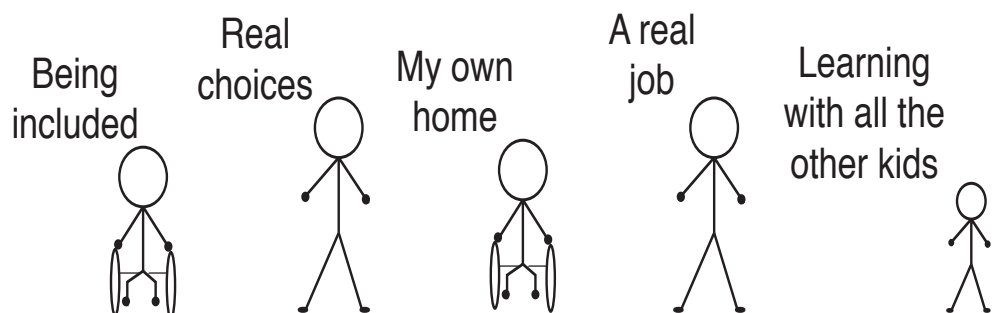


The Presencing Institute is not responsible for the way I have presented their ideas here.

Thanks to Oliver Koenig and Beth Mount for their help with writing this.

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## A Good Life



People with intellectual disabilities have found their voices.

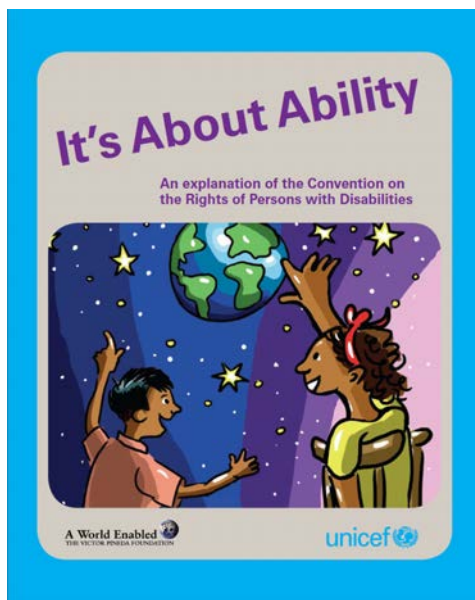
More and more people are not happy with the way things are.

They are beginning to say what they want in life.

They want to be **included** in community life.

They say, “A **good life** gives us **real choices**.”

- I want to **choose my own home**. I want to choose where I live, who I live with.
- I want **real job** with the support I need to be successful, use my abilities and earn money.
- I want to **learn** along with other students my age.
- I want to get support from people I choose.



The United Nations heard people's voices. Many countries have agreed that people have a right to choose these good things. These countries signed [The UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities](#).

My own  
home



**Group  
Home**

A real  
job



**Day  
Program**

Learning  
with all  
other kids



**Special  
School**

We have to do  
new things  
in new ways



In many places, the help that people need comes inside boxes. **People's choices do not fit in the boxes.**

This is what happens.

- People who want a home of their own get a bed in a group home or an institution.
- People who want a real job get a place in a day program.
- People who want to learn with other students get a special school or a special class.
- People have no say in who assists them.

Help in boxes **takes away choice and** makes it **harder to be included.**

There need to be big changes. If services just do more of the same people will not get the choices they have a right to.

The way people get the help they need has to change.

- We have to do **new things** that will help people get their own homes, real jobs and good chances to learn with others.

AND

- We have to **change things in new ways.**

**Theory U** shows us new ways to change things.

What is  
a theory?

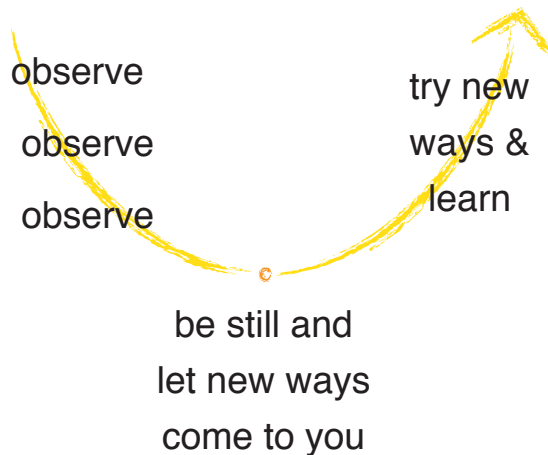
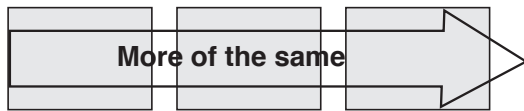


A **theory** is a way to think about something that is important to you.

- A theory points out what matters and gives you words to talk about it.
- A theory explains how things are connected and how they change.
- A theory supports you to understand things and guide action.

Theory U is one way to think about how to create new ways to live a good life.

What does  
the **U**  
mean?



The **U** in Theory U doesn't stand for a word. It is a picture of the way to discover how to do new things.



Services know how to make more boxes.  
More group homes. More day programs.  
More special schools or special classes.

Services do this by doing the same things,  
over and over in a straight line. They might be  
called something different or be in new build-  
ings but they are the same old boxes.

Services act like a computer. They **download**  
**what they already know** to make more boxes.

Theory U says:

- Stop downloading.
- Go to places and meet people who can help you learn. When you get there, observe, observe, and observe even more. Look around, talk to people, listen deeply [*sensing*].
- Find a place to be alone where it is quiet. Be still. Let go of old ways. Let new ways come to you [*presencing*].
- Quickly try a new way of doing what came to you. See what works and try again, better [*prototyping*].

Theory U says that doing new things in new ways is like growing good food.

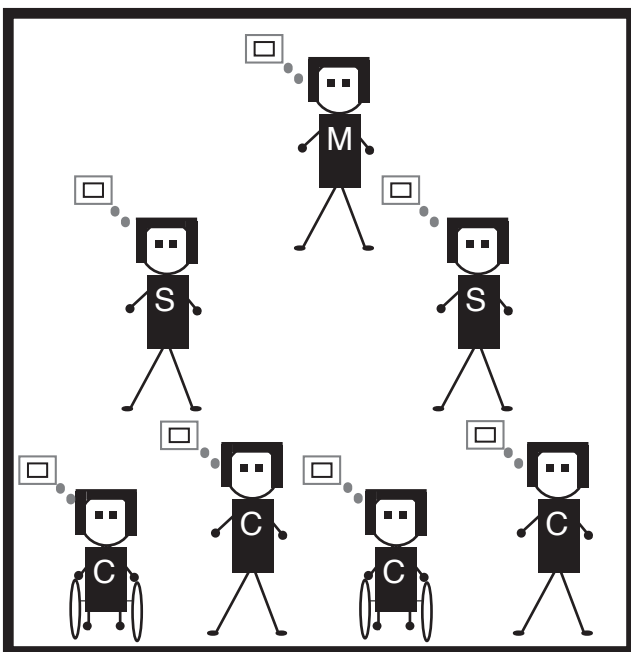
Good food grows in a field with good soil.  
New ways to live a good life grow in a good ***social field***.

A social field happens whenever people come together.

Social fields can be **closed up** around old ways. The new will not grow there.

- People are busy doing more of the same. They just pay attention to what they have to do to get through the day.

### Field For More of the Same



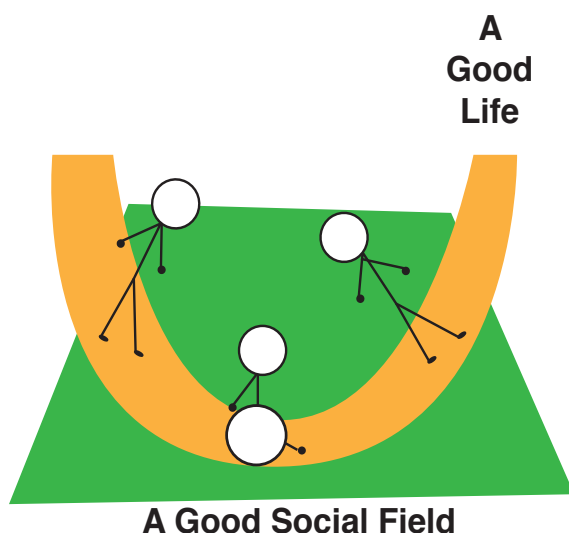
- People stay inside their own walls.
- People don't imagine that there are better ways (or if they do they don't talk to other people about it).
- People are divided up into different roles. They are clients and staff, managers and workers. They stay in their roles.
- Managers tell staff what to do. Staff tell clients what to do or do things for them.
- People guard their hearts.
- The idea of doing something new makes people afraid.

To grow good food farmers build the soil and prepare the field.

People can choose to build up a good social field where new ways to live a good life can grow. [*Emerge* is the Theory U word for this kind of growing.]

Theory U says:

- In every place, the new is there and wants to grow so that people can have better lives.
- Every person has a *higher self* that wants to grow. A good life strengthens every person's higher self.
- When people start to listen to each other and choose to support each other a good social field grows. It gets easier to connect to our own higher selves with the new that wants to be born. It gets easier to try new ways.



A good social field grows when people have the courage to go on a journey together to find new ways to live a good life. The journey happens in the outside world as people try new ways to do new things. The journey also happens inside each person. A good social field grows when people find the courage to bring their higher self to the change.



How we think and what we do now is right. Anything different is wrong or impossible or against the rules.

### Judgment

We can't change anything. We don't have the power or money. Other people won't help.

### Cynicism

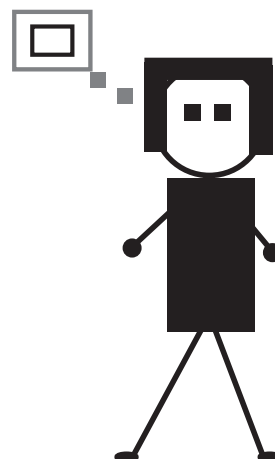
If we try anything new we will get hurt. We will lose too much.

### Fear

On the journey, we meet 3 enemies. Each enemy shows up as a voice that tries to stop the journey by shutting down a part of us. If we open up instead of shutting down we find new ways to a good life.

- The **voice of judgment** wants to close our minds. We don't pay attention to new information and keep doing more of the same.
- The **voice of cynicism** (the voice of can't) wants to close our hearts. It says we don't have the power to work with other people and grow new ways to live a good life. It is a voice of discouragement. It wants to keep us locked inside our walls and our habits.
- The **voice of fear** wants to freeze our will. It wants to scare us so we won't risk growing new ways to live a good life.

If we listen to these enemies, our minds, our hearts and our wills will be locked up and we will be stuck doing more of the same.

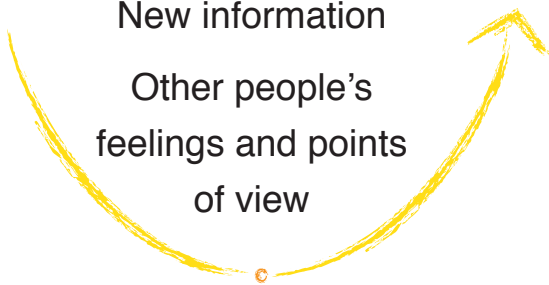


**Listen for**

New information

Other people's  
feelings and points  
of view

The voice of what  
wants to be born



We can get past the enemies and continue the journey by doing 3 things.

1. Notice the voice that wants to close us down.
2. Let go of what the voice is saying. Do this at least long enough to see what the voice is hiding and check whether the voice is right *[suspending]*.
3. Choose to continue the journey by listening more deeply. To listen more deeply we choose to open our whole selves.

{Judgment}



When we put aside the voice of judgment we choose an *open mind*. We can see with new eyes and gather new information. Some of that information will be different from what we have thought before. We will make room for the new information as we continue the journey down the U.

{Cynicism}

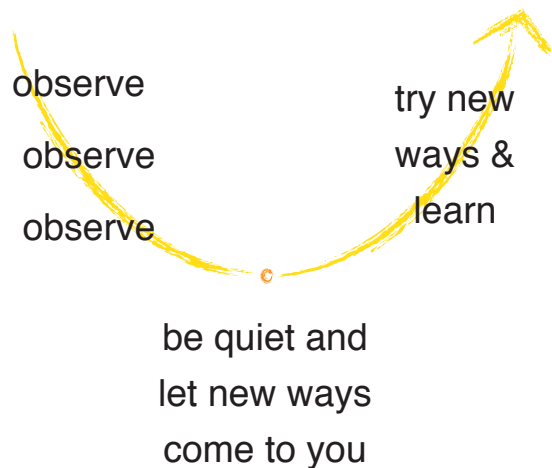


When we put aside the voice of cynicism we choose an *open heart*. We can put ourselves in other people's shoes and see new things from their points of view. We bring what we see when we look through other's eyes on the journey down the U.

{Fear}



When we put aside the voice of fear and choose an *open will*. We can be still at the bottom of the U and listen to the many voices that sing together. If we listen with care we can see what wants to be born in our world and how our work can support the birth.

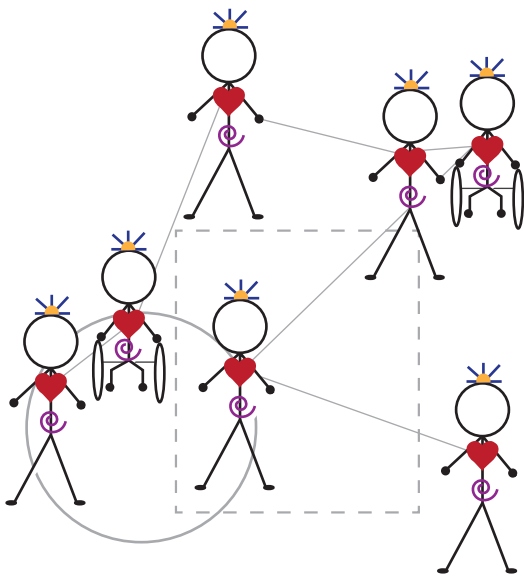


When people choose to take the journey to do new things they make a good social field by doing 6 things:

1. Listen deeply as they observe in places that show what is and what can be.
2. Take time with each other to share and make sense of their observations.
3. Join their open minds, open hearts, and open wills and support each person to answer 3 big questions:
  - What wants to be born in us so we will have new ways to live a good life?
  - What wants to be born in our community so that more people can live a good life?
  - What is my work in helping these new things be born?
4. Make a vision that shows what the new will be like when it is born [*crystalizing*].
5. Quickly try things that make the new real. See what works and build on it [*prototyping*].
6. Keep the new ways going and growing.

Find tools to put Theory U into practice at [www.presencing.com/presencing/tools](http://www.presencing.com/presencing/tools)

### Field That Welcomes The New

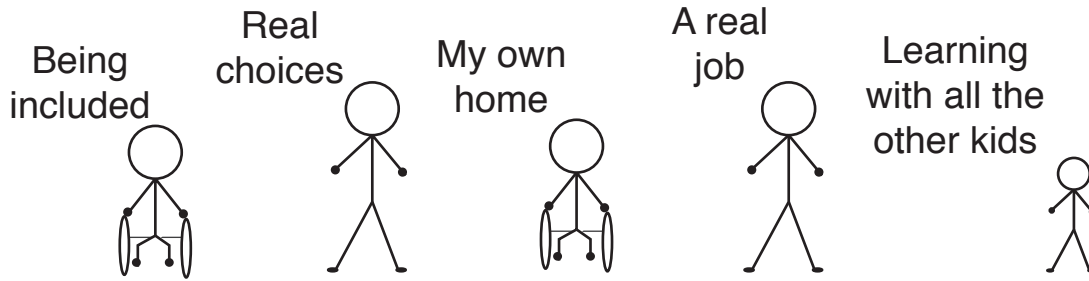


In a good social field, people support each other to connect their highest self to what wants to be born. This way everyone can find new ways to live good lives.

The new can grow in a good social field because people stay open: open minds, open hearts, open wills.

- People stop being busy doing more of the same and choose to stop and look with fresh eyes and listen in deeper ways to different voices.
- People notice and let go of the voices of judgment, cynicism and fear.
- People look outside their walls into the wider community and the bigger world.
- People let go of their roles and work together as equals with different contributions to make.
- People help each other do their work in helping the new be born.
- People have courage to do new things because they know how the change connects to their higher self.

## A Good Life



We cannot keep doing more of the same. To honor the voices of those people with intellectual disabilities who want better choices for inclusion we have to choose to make a journey to the new.

Theory U is one way to guide the journey.

To learn more: [www.presencing.com](http://www.presencing.com).