

PART I

Bumping into Our Blind Spot

We all recognize social acts when we see them: people talking, laughing, crying, clashing, playing, dancing, praying. But where do our actions come from? From what place deep within (or around) us do our actions originate? To answer this question, it is helpful to look at the creative work of an artist in three ways. First, we can look at the result of her work, the *thing*, the finished painting. Or we can observe her while she is painting: we can watch the *process* of her colorful brushstrokes creating the work of art. Or we can observe her standing *in front of the empty canvas*. It is this third perspective that creates the guiding questions of this book: What happens in front of the completely white canvas? What prompts the artist to make that first stroke?

THIS BOOK IS written for leaders, the individuals or groups who initiate innovation or change—The “artists.” All leaders and innovators, whether in business, communities, government, or nonprofit organizations, do what artists do: they create something new and bring it into the world. The open question is: Where do their actions come from? We can observe *what* leaders do. We also can observe *how* they do it, what strategies and processes they deploy. But we can’t see the inner place, the *source* from which people act when, for example, they operate at their highest possible level or, alternatively, when they act without engagement or commitment.

That brings us to the territory of what I call our “blind spot.” The blind spot concerns that part of our seeing that we usually don’t see. It’s the inner place or source from which a person or a social system operates. That blind spot is present every day in all systems. But it is hidden. It is our task, as leaders, and as creators, to notice how the blind spot shows up. For instance, Francisco J. Varela, a professor of cognitive science and epistemology in Paris, told me that “the blind spot of contemporary science is experience.” This blind spot shows up in many different ways. We will learn about them as we continue this “field walk,” this “learning journey,” together.

The following seven chapters offer seven perspectives from which we can explore the different ways the blind spot shows up in society, in science, and in systems thinking as a defining feature of our time. Blind spots appear in individuals, groups, institutions, societies, and systems, and they reveal themselves in our theories and concepts in the form of deep epistemological and ontological assumptions.

I invite you to explore, with me, several different areas of the blind spot. We start from the view of the self and move through the team, the organization, society, the social sciences, and, finally, philosophy.

Facing the Fire

When I left my German farmhouse that morning for school, I had no idea it was the last time I would see my home, a large 350-year-old farmhouse thirty miles north of Hamburg. It was just another ordinary day at school until about one o'clock, when the teacher called me out of class. "You should go home now, Otto." I noticed that her eyes were slightly red. She did not tell me why I needed to hurry home, but I was concerned enough to try to call home from the train station. There was no ring. The line was obviously dead. I had no idea what might have happened, but by then I knew it probably wasn't good. After the usual one-hour train ride I ran to the entrance of the station and jumped into a cab. Something told me I didn't have time to wait for my usual bus. Long before we arrived, I saw huge gray and black clouds of smoke billowing up into the air. My heart was pounding as the cab approached our long driveway. I recognized hundreds of our neighbors, area firefighters and policemen along with people I'd never seen before. I jumped from the cab and ran down

through the crowd, the last half mile of our chestnut-lined driveway. When I reached the courtyard, I could not believe my eyes. The world I had lived in all my life was gone. Vanished. All up in smoke.

There was nothing—absolutely nothing—left except the raging flames. As the reality of the fire in front of my eyes began to sink in, I felt as if somebody had ripped away the ground from under my feet. The place of my birth, childhood, and youth was gone. I just stood there, taking in the heat of the fire and feeling time slowing down. As my gaze sank deeper and deeper into the flames, the flames also seemed to sink into me. Suddenly I realized how attached I had been to all the things destroyed by the fire. Everything I thought I was had dissolved into nothing. Everything? No, perhaps not everything, for I felt that a tiny element of my self still existed. Somebody was still there, watching all this. Who?

At that moment I realized there was a whole other dimension of my self that I hadn't previously been aware of, a dimension that related not to my past—the world that had just dissolved in front of my eyes—but to my future, a world that *I* could bring into reality with my life. At that moment time slowed down to stillness and I felt drawn in a direction above my physical body and began watching the scene from that unknown place. I felt my mind quieting and expanding in a moment of unparalleled clarity of awareness. I realized that I was not the person I had thought I was. My real self was not attached to all the material possessions smoldering inside the ruins. I suddenly knew that *I*, my true Self, was still alive! It was this “I” that was the *seer*. And this seer was more alive, more awake, more acutely present than the “I” I had known before. I was no longer weighted down by all the material possessions the fire had just consumed. With everything gone, I was lighter and free, released to encounter the other part of my self, the part that drew me into the future—into *my* future—into a world waiting for me, that I might bring into reality with my forward journey.

The next day my eighty-seven-year old grandfather arrived for what would be his last visit to the farm. He had lived in that house all his life, beginning in 1890. Because of medical treatments, he had been away the week before the fire, and when he arrived at the courtyard the day after the fire, he sum-

moned his last energy, got out of the car, and went straight to where my father was working on the cleanup. He did not even once turn his head to the smoking ruins. Without seeming to notice the small fires still burning around the property, he went up to my father, took his hand, and said, “*Kopf hoch, mein Junge, blick nach vorn!*” “Keep your head up, my boy, look forward!” Then he turned, walked directly back to the waiting car, and left. A few days later he died quietly.

Only years later did I realize that my experience in front of the fire was the beginning of a journey. My journey began with the recognition that I am not just one self but two selves. One self is connected to the past, and the second self connects to who I could become in the future. In front of the fire I experienced how these two selves started to connect to each other. Today, twenty-years later and several thousand miles away in Boston, Massachusetts, the question “Who is my true self?” still lingers. I still ask, how does this self relate to that *other stream of time*—the one that seemed to draw me from the future that is wanting to emerge—rather than extending and reenacting the patterns of my past? And how does this self that connects to the future connect to my work? I believe these questions eventually prompted me to leave Germany for the United States in 1994 to continue my research at what was then the MIT Organizational Learning Center. And these same questions motivated the writing of the following chapters of this book.