



*I am*

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**In partnership**



January 9, 2017

## An introduction

The election has shaken the ground beneath our feet. Racial injustice, inequality, a man elected to govern us who does not reflect our deeply held values. Many of us feel we have been oscillating between frustration, anger and grief since the election in November.

This tension is termed 'Cognitive dissonance', the word psychologists use for holding two paradoxical ideas in your head at the same time. We might feel overwhelming grief for the loss of progress on gay rights for example, but at the same time still love our parents who voted for Trump.

It was against this backdrop, that we convened our friends and family around the following question:



*“How might we cultivate the courage to make our highest contribution at this moment in history?”*

We invited the curious from the Broadway, social innovation and mindfulness communities across New York to a safe space where they could talk about some the tension they were feeling post-election. The event was warm, exploratory and fun and gave people an opportunity to connect and keep questioning at a moment when it would be easy to fall into anger or cynicism.

# About the convenors

## Tanya Birl-Torres

Tanya has a thriving Broadway career that spans from tap dancing with Daniel Radcliffe to being 8 months pregnant onstage with Scarlett Johansson. Tanya has joined with organizations such as The Dream Unfinished and the Center for Constitutional Rights and has spoken to add a creative voice and to collaborate on issues such as racial inequality and solitary confinement. Tanya is officially launching SOHumanity at this event.

## Rachel Sinha

Rachel is a British award-winning social innovator based in New York, named by the Guardian newspaper as one of 50 Radicals “changing the face of the UK for the better”. She was one of co-founders of The Finance Innovation Lab, designed to empower positive disruptors in the financial system. It brought together people post financial crisis to organize a movement for change. She Founded The Systems Studio in New York in 2016 to support people who want to address systemic challenges, but don’t know how.



# Our Solution

*“I don’t believe a play should give you answers. It should lead you to more questions and energize you to find your own answers.”*

Rachel Sinha (co-convenor of the event) shared her experience of building a movement for positive change in the UK after the 2008 financial crisis. She talked about Theory U, a useful framework for understanding the steps of leadership involved in creating change. Starting by developing a mindset of curiosity at the advent of this tension, moving down to compassion (where we tune into our intuition and what life is calling on us to do) and finally moving to courage to act (prototyping new solutions).



To Tanya (co-convenor), Theory U was very aligned with the musical theatre adage “when emotion is so great that acting doesn’t convey, you break into song. When singing isn’t enough you dance” and described how this was about a journey of trying to express yourself more clearly through embodiment. She also compared the Theory to three stages in the path of yoga and enlightenment (Seva, Sadhana, Satsang) which speaks to a gradual allowing of the true self to emerge.

Tanya explained that as a dancer, tension always provided useful information. If she felt tension in her leg for example after landing from a jump, it sparked tension and in turn curiosity. It was important



‘from On the Making of Trump–The Blind Spot That Created Him, Otto Scharmer Co-founder u.lab, Senior Lecturer, MIT. Nov 28, 2016.’



at this point not to jump immediately to ‘solve the problem’ (Courage in Theory U), but rather to slow down, tune into what was really happening and to ‘soften’ into that enquiry (develop Compassion). The ability to pay attention to the tension and get creative about how to execute differently and with more awareness enables the dancer to not only get up and dance again, but with a deeper understanding how to make wiser choices without repeating the injury.

## Music as a means to reflect

Music played a crucial role in the evening. As Tanya said during her welcome, in musical theatre, song is often used when words are no longer enough. Sometimes the depth of what we want to express is impossible to share simply by talking. Music gave us a chance to sink into our feelings before trying to articulate them. It also set the scene for a deeper level of conversation.

The event was opened by performer and spoken word poet Daniel P Watts (of Hamilton fame and Vinyl on HBO) who shared a new poem entitled 'Bear the Torches'. "If you're reading this then you're alive. A piece of you may have died over the last year, but you are still among the living" He said. He spoke to a backdrop of Wilson Torres on percussion. This punchy introduction served as a wake up to guests who were jolted out of the state of mind they arrived in and placed them very much in the room, ready to talk about big issues.

We closed the event with cellist Amanda Gookin, who performed a piece by the only woman to win a Pulitzer prize for composition. The lights were dim and candles set the scene for personal reflection. She played a deeply moving piece that allowed guests time to sink into what they had learnt during the evening, before we created our 'collective consciousness' wall at the end of the event.





## An opportunity to talk

Presence was an important part of the gathering. We wanted people to enter into authentic conversation and so we began the discussion part of the evening with a short meditation.

Guests were then invited to split up into small clusters. At each group of chairs they found the name of a 'tension' identified by Tanya and Rachel and an accompanying series of quotes that summed up two different positions within that tension.

These included.

# Our provocations

## Being Vs Action

**"Don't explain your philosophy. Embody it" Epictetus**

**Vs**

**"You don't think your way into a different way of acting, you act your way into a different way of thinking" Judy Vaughn**

## Compassion VS Activism

**"If we want there to be peace in the world, we have to be brave enough to soften what is rigid in our hearts, to find the soft spot and stay with it. We have to have that kind of courage and take that kind of responsibility. That's the true practice of peace." Pema Chodron, Practicing Peace in times of war**

**Vs**

**"While it's fine to try to "understand" those who voted for Donald Trump, your compassion is incomplete. Compassion and understanding for Trump supporters without an equally urgent call for the protection of those who are profoundly threatened by this administration is misplaced." - Pablo Das**

## Fighting for progress Vs Acceptance

**"Now is the time to counter lies with facts, repeatedly and unflaggingly, while also proclaiming the greater truths: of our equal humanity, of decency, of compassion. Every precious ideal must be reiterated, every obvious argument made, because an ugly idea left unchallenged begins to turn the color of normal. It does not have to be like this."  
~Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie**

**Vs**

**"We cannot change anything until we accept it. Condemnation does not liberate, it oppresses." ~Carl Jung**

**Who am I to act?**

**“Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.” Marianne Williamson**

**Vs**

**“If you bring forth what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you don’t bring forth what is within you, what you don’t bring forth will destroy you” - Gospel of Thomas**

## **Racial injustice and Being white**

**Looking back Vs Pushing forward**

**“The Great Force of History comes from the fact that we carry it with us, are unconsciously controlled by it... History is literally present in all that we do” - James Baldwin Vs “Energy follows attention” means that we need to shift our attention from what we are trying to avoid to what we want to bring into reality.” - Otto Scharmer**

## **The role of the creative**

**After twenty minutes the groups were asked to get up and find a new tension to discuss and explore. We repeated this process three times.**

**“The most visible creators I know are those artists whose medium is life itself. The ones who express the inexpressible--without brush, hammer, clay or guitar, they neither paint nor sculpt--their medium is being. Whatever their presence touches has increased life, they see and don’t have to draw. They are the artists of being alive.” ~Frederick Franck**





# Summing up

Guests were given time to reflect while our cellist played. They were then invited to write down their thoughts and questions and to post their ideas on the wall clustering them by similarity to show the 'collective consciousness of the room'.

# Impact



## **Some reflections from our guests**

**The things I do and say matter / The beauty of being here  
is that everyone is present / Vulnerable / We don't feel safe  
to disagree at times even with our own 'side' / Nervous to  
be wrong. But what is wrong? / I acknowledge my white  
privilege / Questions are powerful / It's good to talk / Seeing  
disparities can nourish each other / Just be (for a little while)  
/ Breathe, it is inspiration / This time presents an opportunity  
/ Compassion is not a submissive state / Conversation  
creates inspiration / I feel hopeful / Feeling open-hearted,  
seen, connected / I found my tribe / I see clearly now / I feel  
compelled to take action/  
I want to be a butterfly / I Love NYC**

# What's next

We plan to build on what we've created and to take this project to a wider audience. We are open to forming new partnerships. Please do get in touch to find out latest developments.

# Thank you

Tanya and Rachel would like to thank the following people for making the event possible:

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**Daniel Watts - Spoken word poet**

**JD Moran - photographer**

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