

THE POSSIBILITIES CAFÉ – CULTIVATING THE COCREATIVE CAPACITY OF HOLDING SPACE, TAKING PAUSE, AND DWELLING IN THE IN-BETWEEN

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Abstract

During this time of so much divisiveness and heartbreak, the world needs spaces where people cultivate trust to connect across differences, to listen for what's at the *heart of the matter* in the group, and to attune to a mutual, caring field.

This paper summarizes core insights discussed at the experiential session of the 70th Meeting of the International Society for the Systems Sciences, titled The Possibilities Café. The author presents an overview of her approach to holding space in her role as an instructor in higher education in both face-to-face, hybrid, and asynchronous distance education formats. Special emphasis is placed on holding space as a process of deepening the felt perception of a group as a living system (*living systems awareness*). To this end, the author elaborates on the application of membrane functionality in educational systems design. The term *membrane awareness*—a metaphoric concept for building and holding the group container—is explored in depth. In addition, the benefits of nurturing affective intelligence in groups and of allowing for rest and integration spaces are addressed as essential aspects of holding space in groups as living systems.

While this paper focuses on academic contexts (such as courses and conferences), the framework presented here applies to any setting that seeks to build bridges across divides. The qualities of holding space presented here support environments that welcome reverent listening and emergent insight arising in a group space. This approach is designed to aid change makers for a healthier world in discovering new systemic possibilities together—possibilities that no single participant could have dreamed of on their own. Welcome to the Possibilities Café!

Keywords

Collective wisdom; educational systems design; living systems; affective intelligence; multiple ways of knowing

1 | Introduction

Out beyond ideas of wrongdoing and rightdoing,
there is a field. I'll meet you there.
When the soul lies down in that grass,
the world is too full to talk about.
Ideas, language, even the phrase *each other*
doesn't make any sense.

—Rumi

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During the 70th Annual Meeting of the International Society of the Systems Sciences (ISSS), a group of participants gathered in an experiential session exploring qualities of holding space and potential applications in their communities of practice. Questions discussed in small and large group settings included:

- What does holding space mean in our communities of practice?
- How can holding space support bridge-building, self-organizing, and co-creative capacities that nourish collective wisdom?
- What's your *special sauce* in holding space?

To support the reader in this inquiry, I will first contextualize the term *holding space* as a framework for designing learning environments as living systems. I will then discuss several synergistic qualities of holding space, particularly as they relate to perceiving learning experiences as self-organizing living systems. I suggest that the concepts presented here hold powerful possibilities for bridge-building, healing, and co-creating systemic solutions, not only in academic settings but also in any context where entrenched divisions have stifled collaboration, mutual understanding, and co-creative visioning.

As the above quote by Rumi expresses so beautifully, holding space harbors powerful capacities for peacemaking beyond wrongdoing and right-doing. I propose that holding space offers an opportunity for connection where cognitive-rational dialog alone has fallen short, and where, as Rumi put it, even ideas, language, and the phrase *each other* don't make any sense (Rumi, 2004). Holding space opens additional dimensions for nurturing new possibilities together, including nonverbally sensed dimensions that are underutilized in academic settings. It is in this vein that I invite the readers to reflect with me how holding space could help create conditions for deep witnessing, understanding, and healing in their specific communities of practice.

1.1 | Perceiving Learning Experiences as Living Systems: Cultivating Living Systems Awareness

At the heart of my inquiry to holding space lies the assumption that each learning experience—such as a course or a conference—can be perceived and experienced as a living system, not unlike a learning forest or learning ecosystem. I refer to this process as *living systems awareness*. The importance of sensing this dynamic relationality to create healing spaces in today's divided world has been emphasized by living systems scholars McIntyre-Mills (2026), Macy (1989), as well as in indigenous and spiritual traditions (Ngara, 2026).

As I elaborate on in my earlier work (Widhalm, 2011 a, b, 2016, 2025), groups can cultivate the capacity to intentionally co-create their learning environment as a living system in ways that group members experience a palpable sense of aliveness and vibrancy within the learning experience. This deliberate co-creation can, in turn, facilitate collective wisdom arising in the group. My inquiry into nuances of holding space has allowed me to articulate more deeply how that inwardly felt quality of living systems awareness can be nurtured.

1.2 | Definition of Holding Space

The term holding space is used in a variety of settings, including meeting facilitation (Plett, 2020), the healing and therapeutic arts (Orloff, 2024), ritual design (Somé, 1999), and systemic group processes (Center for Systems Awareness, n.d.).

I refer to *space* in the context of a living system that has a boundary (physical or virtual, as well as temporal), where system components can self-organize, sheltered by that semi-permeable boundary (Widhalm, 2025). Below I will further expand on the significance of cultivating this boundary when I introduce the metaphor of *cultivating membrane awareness*.

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My definition of *space* is very similar to the three conditions for *autopoiesis* (self-bounded, self-generating/renewing, and cross-fertilization with the environment) in a living system, as described by Capra (1996) and originally coined by Maturana and Varela (1991). These three conditions give rise to developments where the system takes on new qualities that were not there before and that may be more adaptive to new circumstances. Key to autopoietic processes is a healthy membrane, a concept used metaphorically here.

As a group facilitator and college professor, I seek to create an environment where learners can feel safe, curious, and open to discover new insights that arise in the group space. I am particularly interested in the lived and felt experience of such group experiences and the conditions that nurture these, as well as the conditions that thwart authentic collective wisdom. As a teacher, I pay close attention to moments when a group experiences new *aha* moments, ideas, or shifts that could be considered emergent properties or autopoietic developments in systems terms. My deepest hope when I facilitate group spaces is that they contribute to the development of new capacities, insights, and possibilities for my students' life journeys and vocational goals, and for the healing of the world.

According to the Center for Holding Space, holding space is what we do when we walk alongside a person or group on a journey through liminal space. We do this without making them feel inadequate, without trying to fix them, and without trying to impact the outcome. We open our hearts, offer unconditional support, and let go of judgment and control (Plett, 2020, p.18).

My personal definition of holding space integrates the sense of deep presence described above but also pays specific attention to group space as a bounded, living system. I offer my definition here in poetic form:

Holding space feels like gently wrapping my energetic arms around a living system, be it group of people, a conference, my family members, a flower, a dying bird, a garden, or myself. With care, participants form a membrane together, not too tight, not too loose—a membrane that breathes, that protects, that filters, that nourishes, that listens, that lovingly witnesses what is shifting, transforming, and unfolding.

I use the term *membrane* metaphorically to describe a certain quality of feeling held, protected, and encouraged to self-organize as a group. I elaborate on *cultivating membrane awareness* as one of the qualities of holding space below.

2 | Qualities of Holding Space

Below I introduce several qualities of holding space as a living system. I utilize metaphors to describe these qualities. Metaphors can offer powerful doorways to directly felt experiences, both at an individual and collective level. They can help translate these experiences into something that can be perceived, felt, as well as rationally understood across contexts. Before discussing these qualities, I will first briefly explain why metaphors and other expressive ways of knowing are so relevant to my inquiry.

2.1 | The Vital Role of Expressive Ways of Knowing in Holding Space

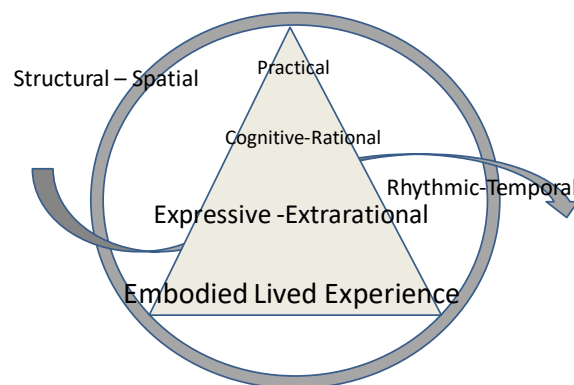
In transformative learning theory, metaphors belong to what transformative learning scholars Yorks and Kasl (2006) refer to as presentational ways of knowing, originally inspired by Heron and Reason (1997). Heron, Reason, Yorks, and Kasl envisioned their framework of ways of knowing in the form of a pyramid. At the bottom of the pyramid lies what they named experiential ways of knowing—that directly felt source-knowing that is difficult to capture in words but that underlies and nourishes all other ways of knowing. It is perhaps akin to what Rumi referred to as the field where the soul is allowed to lie down in the grass and “the world is too full to talk about (Rumi, 2004, p. 36).”

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Presentational ways of knowing include creative ways of knowing, such as visual art, allegory, theatre, dance, poetry, and metaphors. These extra-rational ways of knowing help a learner tap into the directly felt experience referred to as experiential ways of knowing (Yorks & Kasl, 2006) at the bottom of the pyramid. They make that experiential source-knowing more available for cognitive-rational and practical applications. It is as if these presentational ways of knowing help draw up the experiential life energy to be utilized by the mind and in practical action. Presentational ways of knowing can also support learners to cultivate trusting bonds with one another, connecting heart-to-heart. They offer a valuable toolbox for harvesting collective wisdom arising in a group that has bonded with each other (see the Heart Space section further below). It is for this reason that I prioritize presentational ways of knowing in all aspects of learning experience design. I consider this way of knowing so vital in my approach to holding space in environments where there may be a wide variety of perspectives, as well as seemingly unbridgeable divides.

Below I present a visual (Exhibit 1) of Heron and Reason's, and Yorks and Kasl's pyramid as I adapted it in my own dissertation research (Widhalm, 2011a) where I developed a framework for learning experience design as a living system. I slightly modified the original descriptors and added several more categories. Experiential ways of knowing are referred to as *embodied lived experience* in Exhibit 1. I have named presentational ways of knowing as the *extra-rational ways of knowing* category. *Cognitive-rational knowing* corresponds to the category of propositional ways of knowing by Heron & Reason (1997) and Yorks & Kasl (2006). In addition, I added two categories in my original framework: the *rhythmic-temporal category* (paying attention to flow and pacing), and the *structural-spatial category*, paying attention to physical and virtual learning experience design. Details of my original framework are described elsewhere (Widhalm, 2011 a, b). This framework laid the groundwork for my reflections of holding space discussed in this paper.

Exhibit 1: Dimensions of Learning Experience Design.



(Figure created by author, originally posted in Widhalm, 2011a)

In systems studies, Rajagopalan (2020) refers to Heron and Reason's pyramid of multiple ways of knowing (Heron & Reason, 1997) as a pathway to deepening immersive systemic knowing. He states that, among systemic intervenors, "the awareness of experiential and presentational knowing is frequently missing and unacknowledged (Rajagopalan, 2020, p.120). As a scholar of transformative learning theory (Widhalm, 2011a,b), it is my hope that my experience utilizing experiential and presentational ways of knowing in educational systems design may serve the systems community at large.

In the 2025 ISSS proceedings (Widhalm, 2025), I elaborated on fourteen metaphoric qualities of holding space. Below, I revisit and expand on several of these qualities as they

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specifically relate to holding space as a living systems design practice for learning experiences: the learning forest/garden space—distinguishing the mechanistic and living systems paradigms, the ritual space—cultivating membrane awareness, the heart space—cultivating affective intelligence, the rest an integration space—tending to the group nervous systems, and the womb space—cultivating trust amidst not knowing.

2.1 | Learning Forest/Garden Space: Distinguishing the Mechanistic and Living Systems Paradigm in Academic Settings

When I refer to holding space, I consider a learning space a living system not unlike a learning forest or garden. At the same time, academic institutions have for centuries been heavily influenced by the mechanistic paradigm (Robinson, 2010) that metaphorically likens educational institutions to machines. Below I list examples of how distinctly these two paradigms can influence the structure and content of learning experience design. The right column supports structures and processes that nurture what I referred to as living systems awareness above.

Exhibit 2: Comparing Expressions of the Mechanistic and Living Systems Paradigm in Educational Settings.

Education as a Machine	Education as a Living System (Learning Forest/Garden/Ecosystem)
Workforce, student pipeline: “producing” workers	Courses, programs as ecosystems, learning forests, living entities
Focus on productivity, measurable outcomes	Focus on the process unfolding; cultivating learners’ unique capacities; nurturing their dreams
Disciplines as silos	Inter – and transdisciplinary (metaphorically, communication and learning across species and ecosystems)
Teaching to the test	Creating conditions for individual and collective growth and the emergence of shared insight, collective wisdom
Focus on cognitive-rational knowing alone	Multiple ways of knowing
Analysis, reductionist, breaking things apart, assembling building blocks	Multi-sensory reflection, recognizing patterns, living webs of interconnections
Linear	Nonlinear, celebrating complexity, surprises, ecological/social diversity, emergent outcomes
Focus on individual	Focus on personal and community learning (individual, small group, larger group, living edges, cross-fertilization, awareness of a larger whole, classroom as microcosm of a much larger order)

Both of these paradigms have a role in education and in practical life. I created this table to draw attention to how the living systems paradigm has been underrepresented in academic settings. My goal in this paper and earlier work (Widhalm, 2011 a, b, 2016, 2025) is to show that there are many nuanced strategies for helping academic and non-academic environments embody a living system in learning structure, process, and content.

2.2 | Ritual Space: Cultivating Membrane Awareness

Here I am referring to practices that help frame a learning experience within a distinct time and space and that invite a felt sense of intentionality and reverence for the duration of that experience. I have named this function *cultivating ritual space* and tending to *membrane awareness* (Widhalm, 2011 a, b, 2025).

I use the metaphor *ritual space* because I discovered in earlier research (Widhalm, 2011 a, b) that core components of designing healing rituals as described by African Dagara scholar Somé (1999) corresponded closely to my framework of living systems design and cultivating membrane awareness. I noticed that ritual design as outlined by Somé paid meticulous attention to the opening and closing of spaces and to tending to a sacred group container. This container enables Spirit's healing work and the self-organizing transformative process of the group. Somé, in essence, described what I came to name as tending to *membrane awareness*. When I facilitate spaces, I, too, hold the group in reverence not unlike tending to a healing ritual. The practice of holding learning spaces as ritual spaces has been addressed by other transformative learning scholars, as well (Bache, 2008, Lange, 2009, 2023).

I utilize the term *membrane awareness* to describe the capacity of facilitators and other group participants to sense the presence of their group as a living system and to carefully tend to their common systems boundary (*membrane*) together. A membrane is a semi-permeable boundary that gives a living system a distinct place to be and evolve. It controls what kind of energy and nutrients migrate across the boundary. Cell biologist Lipton (2008) considers the membrane a critical aspect of genetic development and evolution, more significant than DNA.

From a living systems perspective, boundaries, such as a membrane, fulfill important functions for autopoietic developments (Capra, 1996, Laouris, 2026a). According to Laouris, membranes, "create a stable environment for reactions, allowing internal molecular processes to self-organize (Laouris, 2026a, p. 15)."

Laouris (2026a, b) maintains that membranes may have contributed significantly to the unfolding of life on earth as enablers of life-supporting processes. He states that "rather than serving as a passive structure, membranes were the primary architects of life's emergence, creating the conditions necessary for genetic evolution to take hold" (Laouris, 2026a, p. 7).

Metaphorically speaking, it is this stable environment for self-organizing learning developments in groups that I seek to facilitate as an educator. As an architect of educational systems design (see also my 2011 article "Educators as Architects of Living Systems," Widhalm 2011b), I consider Laouris' framing of membranes as "primary architects of life's emergence" (Laouris, 2026a, p. 7) very useful.

Laouris highlights the following core functions of a membrane, utilizing terminology from the systems sciences:

- Boundary: distinguishes inside from outside
- Constraint: limits random dispersal
- Gradient: stores organized difference
- Feedback: stabilizes or amplifies patterns
- Emergence: New system properties appear.
- Hierarchy: Vesicles become substrates for higher organization.

(Laouris, 2026b, 27:40-29:10)

Each of the biological functions outlined above holds metaphoric significance in educational systems design for cultivating membrane awareness. Metaphorically speaking, in social systems, a membrane creates a sense of safety, identity, and belonging to a whole distinct from, yet interconnected with, other wholes. In my experience, creating and tending to membrane awareness greatly supports the transformative learning journey of a group.

Below I utilize Laouris' (2026b) categories in italics to highlight the metaphoric significance of membrane-like applications in social systems:

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In social systems, membranes function as gate-keeping boundaries that offer a container or safe space where developments can unfold (*constraint: limits random dispersal*). They allow a group to be fully present and focused. This boundary function creates the conditions for internal interaction between system components, where the system can grow into its own sense of identity and belonging (*feedback: stabilizes and amplifies patterns*). It is this sense of safety, belonging, focus, and internal dialog while remaining open to the world outside the systems boundary that nurtures new self-organizing developments (*emergence: new system properties appear*).

As in biological systems, membranes in social systems also need to be semi-permeable so that they can discern what information, energy, and people to let in and out (*gradient: stores organized difference*). The semi-permeable boundary also allows system participants to cross-fertilize insights and ideas with other systems, which further gives rise to autopoietic potential within the system, for neighboring systems, and at larger system scales (*hierarchy: vesicles become substrates for higher organization*).

Here are some examples of processes that have helped me cultivate membrane awareness in educational settings (Widhalm, 2025).

- Special attention to openings and closings, intention-setting, check-ins, and check-outs; Openings and closing can mimic a systems boundary effectively if they involve every single person, e.g. with a one-word or one-sentence check-in and checkout (*boundary: distinguishes inside from outside; gradient: stores organized difference*). Creative ways of knowing can also be a beautiful way to open and close a group space, such as a poem or song that helps participants feel present and heart-centered within the whole of the system of which they are part (see the section on Heart Space below). Further, setting intentions at the beginning of a session and then closing the session with a group *harvest* of takeaways can nurture the physical and virtual boundary. These openings and closings stimulate a felt perception among participants of their shared learning experience as a living system sheltered within a group *membrane* (*boundary: distinguishes inside from outside; gradient: stores organized difference*).
- Energetically invoking a sacred presence in the group field to create a potent environment of collective focus (e.g. calling in the four directions, ancestors, loved ones) (*constraint: limits random dispersal*)
- Invitations to leave things behind or set them aside so participants can be more fully present. Icebreakers to help participants *land* in the learning space (*constraint: limits random dispersal; boundary: distinguishes inside from outside; gradient: stores organized difference*)
- Symbolic and aesthetically pleasing objects in the center of a circle or in a dedicated area (e.g. flowers, scarves, candles, a bowl, or a group altar participants can contribute to) to draw attention to the energetic center of the group space (*constraint: limits random dispersal*)
- Physical setup of the space in a circle, as well as smaller circles for breakout groups so that participants can more easily perceive their space as a living system enclosed by a protective, yet semi-permeable boundary (*boundary: distinguishes inside from outside; gradient: stores organized difference*)
- Specific processes with structured rules that honor the circle as a reverent space and that allow for system participants to inspire each other and learn from each other, e.g. *circulos de cultura* (Calvacante et al., 2017), ISSS roundtables (Gabriele, 2011), World Café (Brown, 2005), Warm Data Labs (n.d.) (*boundary: distinguishes inside from outside; gradient: stores organized difference; feedback: stabilizes or amplifies patterns*)
- Opportunities for cross-fertilization across the systems boundary (e.g. story-sharing of lived experiences of group participants; intention setting for next steps after the conference or

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course; selectively bringing in resources and people from outside the systems boundary, such as guest speakers, case studies, etc. (*boundary: distinguishes inside from outside; feedback: stabilizes or amplifies patterns; emergence: new system properties appear; hierarchy: vesicles become substrates for higher organization*)

- Creating focused time for rest and integration (see the section Rest and Integration Space below). Systems processes unfold not only within a bounded space but also when given time within that boundary. Allowing for rest and integration space supports each of the membrane functions identified by Laouris (2026 a,b).

Cultivating membrane awareness, then, is a function of cultivating living systems awareness. My experience has shown that attention to a group membrane (metaphorically speaking) supports a group's capacity for self-organizing developments where group members become motivated to actively co-create their learning experience and caringly tend to their learning space together. They also feel inspiration and develop new capacities as change-makers for a healthier world (*emergence: new system properties appear; hierarchy: vesicles become substrates for higher organization*). I describe two case studies illuminating this in the ISSS 2025 proceedings (Widhalm, 2025). One case study reviews the experience of a cohort in a Master of Leadership Studies program. The other case study summarizes the experience of an asynchronous distance-education Humanities course at the community college level. Additional case studies are presented in my dissertation (Widhalm, 2011a and subsequent reflections (Widhalm, 2016).

2.3 | Heart Space: Cultivating Affective Intelligence

Here I am referring to the capacity to nurture a caring, warm, and welcoming atmosphere (Widhalm, 2025). Research shows that the heart's electromagnetic waves go further than the brain's (Heart Math Institute, n.d.). I suggest that creating spaces for heart connections is a technology and skillset that can be cultivated in any setting, including academic courses and conferences. I refer to the term technology here in its original meaning: *Technology* comes from the Greek root *tekhnē*, which signifies "art, skill, craft in work; method, system, an art, a system or method of making or doing" (Online Etymology Dictionary, n.d.).

In biocentric education (Calvacante, et al., 2017), there is a rich body of theory and practices under the umbrella term *affective intelligence*, including many actionable guidelines and step-by-step approaches for fostering a caring environment. I elaborate on these in last year's proceedings (Widhalm, 2025). They include

- tending to the energetic space through heart-based practices (such as meditation, bringing in heart-centered music, art, and poetry)
- tending to the physical space in ways that allows for eye contact and heart-based connection (e.g. circle practices)
- cultivating a caring language and culture of conversation (e.g. via I-statements, appreciative language, and open-ended questions that evoke curiosity). This includes encouraging learners to utilize certain opening phrases that invite affective intelligence, which is helpful in setting the tone for a heart-centered conversation. These phrases include:
 - I appreciate
 - I am curious
 - I admire
 - I wonder
 - I invite you to
 - Would you be willing to clarify, expand
 - I am noticing
 - I love

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- I like
 - I am not sure I understand
 - It sounds like
 - I am intrigued by
 - What resonates with me, is...
 - Thank you for...
- nurturing values of care in learning content (Widhalm, 2025), for example by including inspiring case studies of change-makers and communities that contributed to the world with their caring nature or by inviting learners to bring in case studies of individuals who exemplify heartfelt contribution for them
 - Creating conditions for heart-centered spaces also includes discouraging judgmental and polarizing language, behaviors, and structures. In biocentric education, these are described as *negative ecofactors* (Calvacante et al., 2017). The Center for Holding space refers to these discouraging factors as *hijackers of safe spaces* (Plett, 2020). Here are some ways to ensure that negative ecofactors or hijackers of safe spaces do not compromise living systems awareness in educational settings:
 - limiting conditions that reinforce polarization, othering and mechanistic thinking (e.g. debates that pit students against each other)
 - discouraging unsolicited advice, fixing, judging, shaming, dismissing, interrupting, and controlling
 - implementing strategies to alleviate performance anxiety, grading pressure and competitiveness. For example, in California Community Colleges, there is a growing interest in exploring alternative grading options to more carefully support and empower students with multiple barriers to learning (ASCCC, 2022).

Cultivating heart space, thus, nurtures capacities to engage with the world more wholeheartedly, from a deeply inwardly felt motivation to contribute to the wellbeing of life. As I mentioned in my poetic definition of holding space above, it's a way of metaphorically wrapping my arms around a course or other academic setting as a living system. As spiritual teacher Tara Brach puts it,

If our hearts are ready for anything, we will spontaneously reach out when others are hurting. Living in an ethical way can attune us to the pain and needs of others, but when our hearts are open and awake, we care instinctively...If our hearts are ready for anything, we are touched by the beauty and poetry and mystery that fill our world (Brach, 2013, para. 8 – para. 10).

My experience of holding space for learners (Widhalm, 2016, 2025) has shown that groups that practice cultivating heart space together develop capacities of spontaneously reaching out toward each other, not unlike Brach (2013) describes this in her quote. It is from this tender space of care for self, care for each other, and care for the world that new, autopoietic developments can unfold. Thus, cultivating heart space is an integral aspect of cultivating membrane and living systems awareness.

2.4 | Rest and Integration Space: Tending to the Group Nervous System

Here I am referring to time periods and spaces that allow for gelling, percolating, and integrating. Nature has cycles and seasons for a reason so that processes can unfold organically. From a systems perspective, pauses are so important for information to settle, for connections to develop (inward and outward), and for tense or busy energies to shift.

Calvacante et al. (2017) coined the term *ecological patience* to describe the practice of providing ample space and slowing down. Similarly, I utilize the metaphor of a group nervous

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system. In carefully held space, group members help each other co-regulate their nervous systems. This is also why it is essential to limit negative ecofactors (Calvacante et al. 2017) and space hijackers (Plett 2020), as these can bring individuals or the group as a whole into a nervous system stress response of fight, flight, freeze, or fawn. In contrast, a cultivated sense of nervous system safety prepares the group to express their co-creative potential and access capacities that may not be available if group members feel guarded, defended, or on high alert.

Metaphorically speaking, I consider cultivating times of rest and integration—while tending to heart space and limiting negative ecofactors and group hijacking behaviors—a way to ease the whole group into a parasympathetic state. As in physical healing, it is in this parasympathetic mode where deep integration, healing, and regeneration for the group can take place (Cleveland Clinic, n.d.).

In academic environments, allowing for rest and integration spaces may feel counterintuitive when there are learning outcomes to fulfill, quotas to reach, and standards to meet. Yet it is in this spaciousness where self-organizing, emergent developments can organically unfold.

2.5 | Womb Space: Cultivating Trust Amidst Not-Knowing

Here I am referring to a capacity to hold loving space without needing to know the outcome and learning to trust the natural unfolding of the group gestation, not unlike a mother tending to her fetus without being able to see their developmental process.

As a guardian of space, I surround a course, conference, or other event with loving energy without needing to know what is going on in every niche and corner of the event. Similarly, in an online classroom, I can offer invitations for discussion spaces without needing to follow up on every comment made. This gives the group more freedom to self-organize without performance pressure and to let new connections unfold (see Rest and Integration Space above). By first creating a container of trust and then offering the group some autonomy, participants can feel empowered to cultivate their own self-facilitation and leadership capacities and to pay attention to emergent insights and autopoietic developments arising in the group. Thus, I consider facilitating womb space an essential aspect of cultivating living systems awareness.

3 | What New Potentials Could a Heightened Membrane Awareness Activate?

I long to hold the whole world in these arms.

—*Jennifer Berezan*

The world longs to be held with care. My role as a participant and facilitator in a variety of group spaces has led me to believe that in a local, regional, and global context of heartbreak, dissonance, and despair, heart-felt holding can make a world of difference. The quote above—"I long to hold the whole world in these arms"—is part of a prayer song of practicing loving kindness (Berezan & Young, 2010, 4:01–4:11). Artists from many cultural backgrounds, nationalities, and languages came together to perform this piece, offering a beautiful exemplar for building bridges across borders, in a field beyond wrongdoing and right-doing.

This holding can take many forms. It can be both gentle and fierce in its protection of space. It can be experienced in a family, a classroom, a staff meeting, conference, and beyond. Holding space can be practiced in face-to-face, as well as virtual or hybrid environments. As this paper demonstrated, membrane awareness offers concrete and versatile strategies for holding space in many contexts. Facilitators bring their own unique skillsets, life experiences, and

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capacities for holding space. Each facilitator's *special sauce* for holding space is needed right now.

Ecopsychologist Fisher (2002) maintained that awakening *unactivated interactional patterns* is an essential recollective practice needed for the healing of people and the planet. I suggest that holding space as described in this paper helps activate the unactivated or under-activated interactional pattern of membrane awareness—a pattern much needed to give rise to truly systemic solutions to address today's meta-crises.

Laouris (2026a) states that “membranes are the universal feature of life, whether on Earth or beyond (p. 20).” I propose that this universal feature in its metaphorical application be integrated widely into social systems design of any kind.

What new capacities for peacebuilding and healing might unfold if more spaces were held in ways described here? What new systemic approaches might be developed? What autopoietic developments might arise in ways that we may not even imagine? How might social systems access a wellspring of new regenerative ideas while feeling deeply held in this way? What might happen in spaces when the group soul—metaphorically speaking—is being given permission to lie down in the grass for a while (recalling Rumi's quote above) and to just rest in a space much deeper and wider than any mentally fueled dissonance— in a space that transcends ideas and language and the phrase *each other* (Rumi, 2004), carried in pure living systems and membrane awareness?

In this paper, I explored how the potential of “holding the whole world in these arms” (Berezan & Young, 2010, 4:01–4:11) is beyond what we can imagine with our rational minds alone. It is an unactivated interactional pattern (Fisher, 2002) pregnant with untold possibilities. It is a caring energy emanating from the heart, and it is a naturally loving expression of Life's self-organizing and healing presence. I look forward to this continued learning journey with members of the systems community and beyond, sharing emergent insights at face-to-face or virtual Possibilities Cafés!

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