

generative scribing

A SOCIAL ART
of the 21st CENTURY

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For larger, digital versions of the images in the appendix, visit: www.kevybird.com.

Kelvy Bird



Cambridge, Massachusetts

Making your unknown known is the important thing—and keeping the unknown always beyond you—catching—crystallizing your simpler clearer vision of life—only to see it turn stale compared to what you vaguely feel ahead—that you must always keep working to grasp...

– Georgia O’Keeffe



draw

To draw is to practice, to manifest.

This is the domain in which we make things happen. This is where we take all that we have cultivated in our interior realm and do something with it. This is where we make things visible for ourselves and others. This is the tip of the iceberg, the seen.

We draw through the hand, yes, and we draw informed by the interior spectrum of activity—our core being—how we have joined, how we perceive, and how we have come to know.

What is seen, what is witnessed in form by ourselves and others, is a pure expression of the complete processing of information across the inner and outer range. We visually reflect conditions of the moment based on our ability to contain, to hold, the suite of complexities we witness.

Drawing is a synthesis, an orchestration, a weaving together of inputs from the entire range below the iceberg’s water line: the social field, mindsets, structural dynamics, and behaviors.

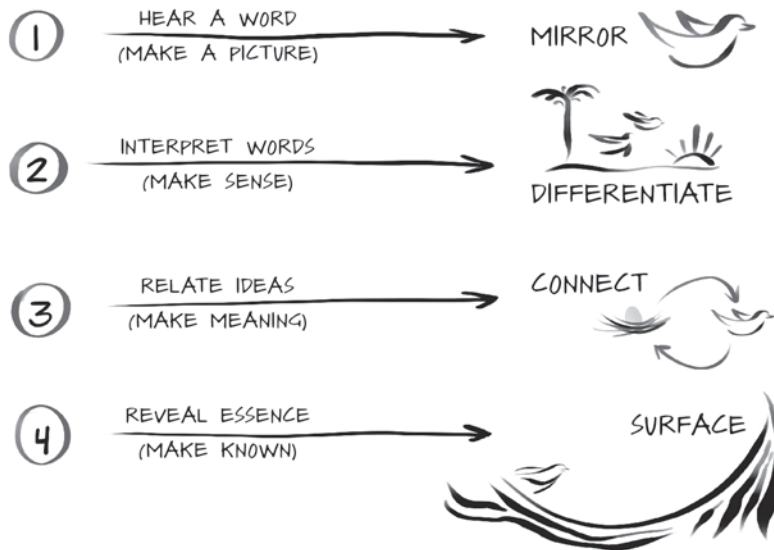
And through our drawing we meet the potential to reveal a current state of events and also future possibilities. Thus, through our drawing we have a power—and therefore a true responsibility—to represent the possible and help initiate it into the present moment.

Scribing is, in a way, like midwifing; it helps the unborn to birth, bringing to life a new reality.

levels of scribing

There exist depths, or phases, of scribing that directly correlate with attention.

Different “levels” of listening can help us participate in a shift of awareness and possibility. Otto Scharmer has described four levels of listening: (1) downloading; (2) factual listening; (3) empathic listening; and (4) generative listening.³⁸ I apply each level of listening to the visual practice of scribing, as depicted here.



Level one scribing: Mirror.
We hear a word and make a picture.

We use level one listening, “downloading,” to reconfirm and reflect what we already know.

Our drawing is literal; someone says “bird” and we draw a bird. I also refer to this as “object-oriented” scribing, where a focus on individual, named parts is the primary approach. We track largely at a data level, naming the literal words, and draw in areas on a page in a somewhat isolated manner.

Level two scribing: Differentiate.
We interpret words and make sense.

We use level two listening, “factual listening,” to notice differences and data that disconfirm what we think we already know.

In scribing, we interpret what is being spoken from a broader vantage point. We still draw what we hear, but our lens expands to make sense of what is being said in a factual context, which we can diagram. The bird is flying; then it reaches the coast and joins a flock. At this level we enter the domain of storytelling. We might draw the literal scene, or mind map to organize data into information.

Level three scribing: Connect.
We relate ideas and make meaning.

We use level three listening, “empathic listening,” to see a situation through the eyes of another, to make an emotional connection. We get out of our own skin, step back, and get added perspective that helps us direct our attention to the entirety of a person or situation.

³⁸ C. Otto Scharmer, *Theory U: Leading from the Future as It Emerges* (San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler, 2009), Introduction.

This is where containers are activated, where our own heart comes online, where we feel. We start to care, genuinely care, and our stance shifts. Our drawing shifts (how can it not?!) as it comes, literally, from a deeper place in our body. Not only the head and the hand are in motion, but the entire torso is engaged in our output.

We realize the story in the room is coming from a cultural frame of reference beyond the room; the facts coming out have causal underpinning. No bird, no story, exists as an island. Something came before the lone bird flying, and something will come after. We could connect the scenes of (1) a lone bird flying with (2) a bird reaching the coast—and by establishing that relation show the bird's path.

We shift from noticing moments in time to sensing movements over time. As we inquire, we start to inhabit the story and make sense of it on an expanded scale. What happens between the bird taking flight and the bird landing? What was the bird's behavior along the way? What influences, such as weather or predators, did it encounter?

Level four scribing: Surface.
We reveal what wants to be seen.

Using level four listening, “generative listening,” we connect with our capacity to let go and let come an emerging future possibility that reveals more fully who we are and who we want to be.

In level four, or generative, scribing we sense and uncover the highest potentiality for the systems we serve. This requires being sensitive not only to the content that is obvious and clear, but also to the content that is fuzzy, blurred, faint—small tones of hesitancy in a speaker's voice, long pauses between words, coughing that subtly interrupts a sentence.

In level four scribing, we connect with source, and with social and energetic fields. We listen to voices in the room. We *also* have our full selves open and receptive to all kinds of sensory and intuitive inputs: rain on the roof, a fly buzzing around someone's juice cup, the freshness or staleness of the air, the quality of being of the presenter and other participants (at ease, jittery, highly focused . . .), the light, the shadows—a sort of pulse in the air.

Here we might inquire into the space around the bird along its entire path. Why is it flying alone? Is it seeking its flock? Where will the flock go next? Will it stay intact? What is the season? What is its health?

To understand how to apply these levels more concretely, simply replace “bird” with “business plan,” “flying” with “management process,” “coast” with “quarterly profits,” “flock” with “strategic plan,” “predators” with “competition,” “weather” with “economic climate,” and “calling” with “vision.” And then imagine what drawing or facilitating those aspects of a conversation would be like.

Match the level of scribing to the needs of the situation.

I would not show up for a summer picnic wearing a down jacket and carrying snowshoes. Likewise, I would not expect to exercise generative scribing in a thirty-minute introduction, where three people had eight minutes each to set up their content expertise. Different settings require different approaches. And each level of scribing has a value and relevant application.

Level one scribing is great for conferences where presentations are short and multiple people share their thoughts in bursts. (See appendix Figure 22.)

Level two scribing is useful for panel discussions, academic lectures, negotiations, strategic planning, even system mapping. (See appendix Figure 23.)

Level three scribing is relational, emphasizing the interaction between elements. It's a useful approach in storytelling, dialogue, culture mapping. (See appendix Figure 24.)

And with level four scribing, as in appendix Figure 25, we draw what must be drawn in the developing reality, representing the absolute present moment as it unfolds, in right time. It's useful in ongoing large-scale change initiatives, cross-sector and multi-stakeholder settings, contexts of societal transformation.

generative scribing

Generative scribing is a drawing process with which we open to the unknown to bring it to life—of, and for, a social body.

My experience with this kind of work, where we operate from source, leads me to believe that the key to generative scribing is sensing from the heart.

It's not circling or hovering. It's not counting the minutes until a person stops speaking and we can go home. It's not staying comfortable with me-them. It's not *not* caring.

It is piercing through to something essential. Seeing clearly without fear of the result or consequence of what comes forward. It requires trust in the complete blankness of things. It can only happen when the social body (a handful or thousands of people) is committed to being together in place and time—and in right timing—committed to joining in the absolute present moment. (See appendix Figure 26.)

It's groping in the dark to find threads of hope, and getting that out and up on a wall for others to see.

It's believing that anyone who witnesses the drawing is an active participant in its creation. There is no "other."

There is a hand that holds a marker, that leans forward from the extended arm of an upright physical body acting purely on behalf of the whole.

I draw because we exist; I draw as a social act.

Generative scribing is drawing to ease the challenge of societal inversion, where we are shifting from a state of division to a state of inclusion, traversing an unknown.

I have often wondered—especially in light of symbolic art, such as that of indigenous peoples—about the true potential of scribing to cross physical and spiritual lines.

Can a scribed image embody the dimensionality of past, present, and future in a larger timelessness, all at once?

How far can we push the comprehensive limits of systems, and our own limits, to shift the place of understanding between known and unknown worlds? Can scribing generate a vibrational field that goes beyond literal words and transcends the moment?

To date, to attempt to shift into this space, I have taken an integrative approach to revealing unnamed wholeness; I've synthesized multiple threads of content into one encapsulating picture, or a series of pictures. In a way it's the opposite of storytelling, which I have interpreted as the sharing of existing data in linear flow.

Once when I approached three very large, looming, black banners of blank paper, I recalled a similar sensation of darkness, of uncertainty. (See appendix Figure 27.)

It was tied to a memory from a night sailing on the ocean with my dad and brother. We had charts, but there was no land in sight—just cold rolling waters, an impenetrable indigo through which the boat somehow cut. For a few hours, or maybe it was only one hour, we had no radio and no indication of whether storms or other vessels were headed our way.

But my dad, having navigated for years in all kinds of weather and water, has always been confident in his ability to read the conditions and guide a boat. That night—aside from a close encounter with a fishing vessel, which we approached more out of curiosity than in lost wandering—we were, indeed, fine.

Generative scribes aid with societal tacking.

As a verb, “to tack” is “to change course by turning a boat’s head into and through the wind.” As a noun, “tack” is “a small, sharp, broad-headed nail” and “a long stitch used to fasten fabrics together temporarily, prior to permanent sewing.” All of these meanings make sense in scribing! Scribed images can inform a redirection in corporate strategy (changing course), land a point with precise language (as a nail), and hold ideas together as they take shape (fasten).



As our society rolls in and out of foggy waters, scribes can help chart the seas.

Scribes create visual structures that aid in navigating disconnects. In doing so, we balance the challenges of the times with hope for our times. (See appendix Figure 28.)

This demands constant fluidity between sensing, comprehending, and crafting. Before drawing, I center myself. I find someone in the audience and look them in the eye to activate my heart. I question the structure and dynamics of the setting. I absorb many words before knowing which ones are the pearls and emptying those onto a two-dimensional plane.

We listen to empathize and to represent.

It is with a continually swaying spirit—between what is and what could be—that I draw, that I write.

And, with a far-flung aspiration, I encourage anyone who has reached this point in the book to take on the challenge and transformational gifts that generative scribing has to offer. If your craft or practice is something other than scribing, then you can apply a generative approach to that too!

My experience is just a starting point. It's our opportunity, together, to further define this art form and tap its full possibility.





Figure 20: *Joy*. Custom-mixed Neuland dry-erase ink in a 50mm Montana case, wrapped with cohesive flexible elastic to help secure my grip. 2015.

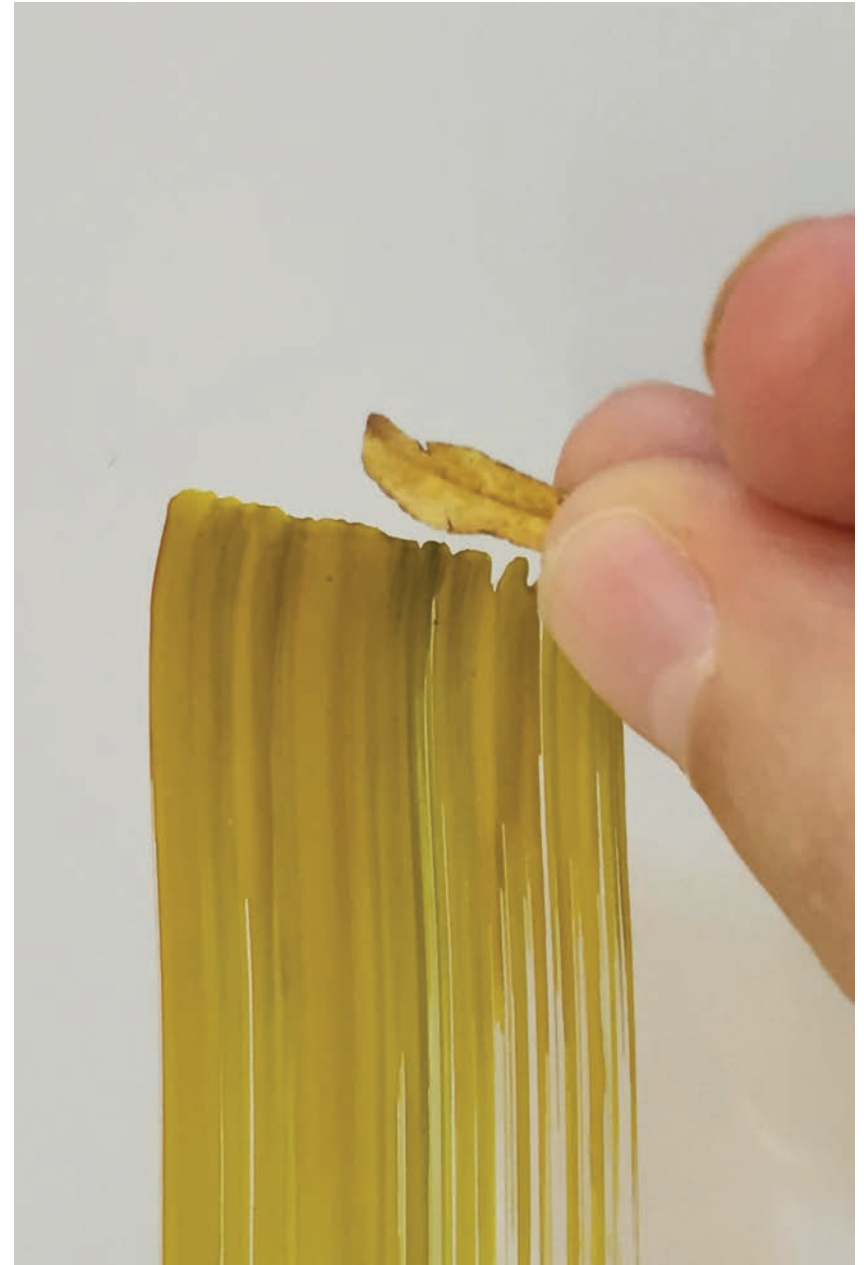


Figure 21: *More Joy*. Custom mixed Neuland dry-erase ink that ended up matching a leaf I had in mind and then found on the floor while drawing. 2015.



Figure 22: Level One Scribing. "Lightning Talks" consist of a series of three-minute bursts of content, where it's most important to accurately track data. Colored and digitized in Adobe Photoshop. Permanent ink on foam board, 40" h x 60" w, 2015.

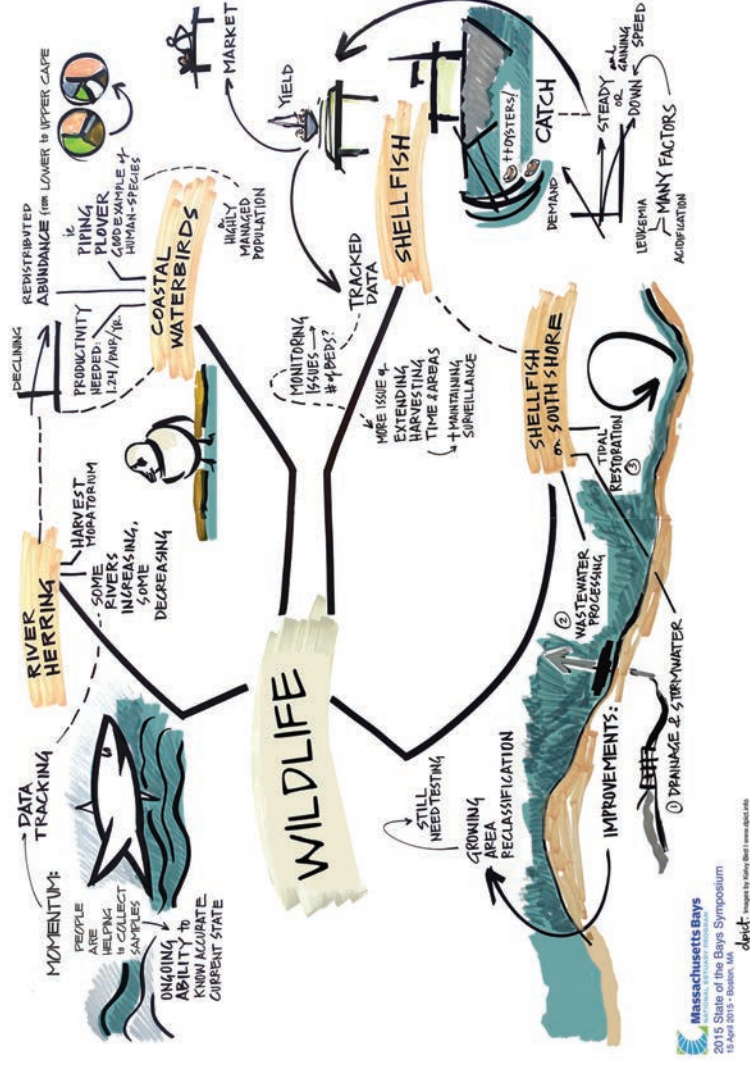


Figure 23: Level Two Scribing. Multiple presentations on the topic of wildlife, for a State of the Bays Symposium with Massachusetts Bays National Estuary Program. Permanent ink on foam board, 40" h x 60" w, 2015.

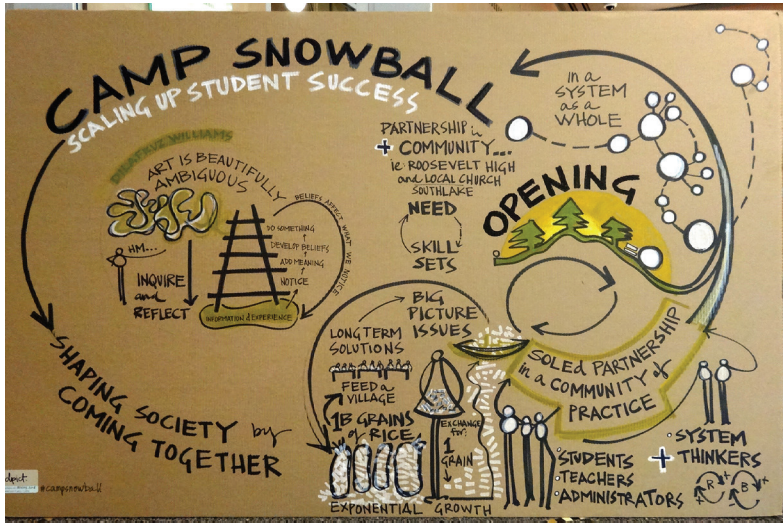


Figure 24: *Level Three Scribing*. This is an example of contextually and visually relating elements, where multiple speakers set the intent for a week-long program. The top image is the “raw” photograph, and the bottom is the digitally enhanced file. Portland, OR, USA. Permanent ink and acrylic paint on cardboard, 4’h x 6’w, 2014. www.academyforchange.org.

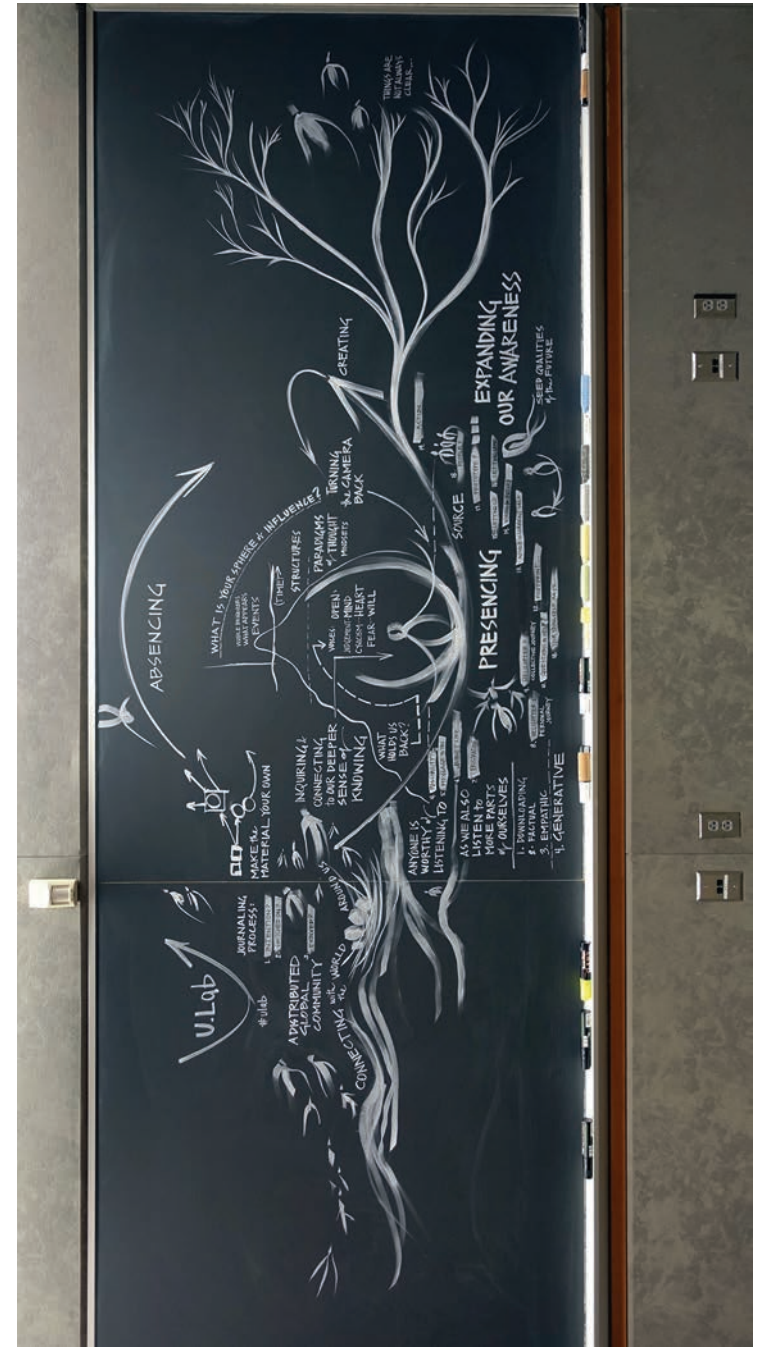


Figure 25: *Level Four Scribing*. Example from u.lab 90-minute session, broadcast live to about 8,000 people from Cambridge, MA, USA. I had multiple chalks and inks ready, but only needed to use one brush and two markers. Chalk/ink on blackboard, 5’h x 10’w, 2016.

AS WE CASCADE, WE ASCEND



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Figure 28: Generative Scribing. u.school Ecology. Example of three uses of time and of generative scribing, from a two-day session with about thirty people, in Nauen, Germany. Acrylic paint on paper, 9'h x 12'w, 2016.



Figure 29: *Removal.* The careful removal of the artifact from the wall, after digital documentation.



Figure 30: *Distribution.* I refolded the drawing into sections, for different parts of the system (China, Scotland, and Brazil) to take back to their local hubs.



Figure 31: *Trust.* Detail from Figure 28, and an example of trusting that I would capture the pieces that needed to be seen together. "Invert" became a key theme of the drawing.