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## Optimising Performance: How Jungian Alchemy Informs Organisational Transformation

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## **Optimising Performance: How Jungian Alchemy informs Organizational Transformation**

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### **Abstract**

In this paper we explore the alchemical possibilities of aesthetics in transforming organizational performance. We ground our discussion in an exploration of how four alchemical elements – earth, water, air and fire – identified in the work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung, can catalyse transformation. Inspired by Jung, we examine how these elements help us to better build awareness – of ourselves, of others in teams and work groups, and of untapped potential in organizational contexts. By developing greater awareness of aesthetics and their alchemical potential, leaders can better navigate the emergent and complex workings of organizational transformation processes, whether change is the desired outcome of a process, or is an undesired consequence of forces beyond an organization's control.

**Keywords:** Organizational change; conflict engagement; arts-based methods; expressive arts; Jungian theory; alchemy

## Optimising Performance: How Jungian Alchemy informs Organizational Transformation

Organizational transformation has been the subject of countless articles, many of which offer prescriptive steps toward achieving it (Romanelli and Tushman 1994; Shani, Greenbaum, and Verganti 2018). Each prescription varies with context, culture and discipline, but common denominators tend to be ubiquitous. Often, guidance features linear, multi-step processes married with strategy, structure and skills aimed toward increased efficiency, effectiveness or change management (Kanter, Stein, and Jick 1992; Kotter 1996; Luecke 2003; Todnem By 2005). What many prescriptions do not provide is insight into the essential roles that experiential aspects of beauty and nature—*aesthetic elements*—play in transforming organizational performance. Overlooked through lenses that accent utility and orderliness, aesthetics introduce a range of sensual, embodied dimensions that make transformation more likely as whole selves are engaged in its service. When aesthetics are integrated into organizational transformation processes, the importance of intuition and relational capacities are highlighted. Desired outcomes become more vivid and compelling; fields of possibility appear that were unavailable or invisible via more analytic ways of engaging.

In this article, we tap into a significant vein of scientific, philosophical and aesthetic work that underlines ways we are all interconnected, revealing humans as agile and sensorily-informed agents of transformation. What we previously believed as real—Cartesian duality of mind and body and separateness between individuals and objects—is a fast-fading myth (Damasio 1999). This significant shift in thinking has profound implications for creative approaches to organizational transformation.

We ground this discussion in an exploration of how four alchemical elements identified in the work of Swiss psychiatrist Carl Jung (1980) can catalyse transformation. Jung situated his work on alchemy in analogous operations performed by medieval scholars seeking to transform lead into gold. Alchemy, historically concerned with changing states and physical properties, including turning one substance into another, is essentially concerned with transformation. Jung associated alchemy with the process of individuation, integrating inner and outer aspects of our beings. He imagined the four elements of earth, water, air and fire as symbolically associated with differentiation and transformation (Jung 1980). Ryce-Menuhin describes Jung's contribution this way:

"One of C. G. Jung's most original contributions was his analogical work on psychological processes as developmental in the same sense as the alchemists were searching for ultimate selfhood through the language of the refining of metals into gold." (Ryce-Menuhin 1994:2)

Inspired by Jung, we examine how the elements of earth, water, air and fire can help increase self-awareness as well as consciousness of team and work group members' perspectives, and of untapped organizational potential. By developing greater awareness of aesthetics and their alchemical potential, leaders can better navigate the emergent and complex workings of organizational transformation, whether change is the desired outcome of a process, or is an undesired consequence of forces beyond an organization's control.

Grounding understandings of transformation processes in the aesthetic domain *via* these four elements usefully surfaces gaps. In aesthetic products, truth—insofar as truth exists—is the gap between the map (the product) and the territory (what is represented). In organizational processes, gaps frequently exist between counterparts' perceptions and their

preferred or actual approaches to navigating transformational shifts. Gaps also exist between each person's experience of an organizational transformation process—what is seen as salient, necessary and possible—and perceptions of the issues involved. Fissures may exist between leaders and others in an organization. The elements of earth, fire, water and air serve both as metaphors and material avenues for planning meaningful engagement, highlighting gaps and guiding transformation as they evoke particular qualities.

It is important to acknowledge at the outset that Jung-inspired alchemical processes are not a panacea. Transformation, as we have seen all too-often, can be generative or destructive. Changes in organizations can yield constriction or spaciousness; trust can wax or wane as can momentum and productivity. In advocating the use of alchemical imagery and frames in organizational change, we argue that their vitality and capacity to touch people deeply is a part of their potency. Thus, we must also acknowledge that, as fixed or settled aspects of individual personalities or organizational human systems are shifted, dark forces can also be released. We present this work not in an attempt to tame or sanitise subterranean forces with their potential to illuminate or darken human relations, but as an entrée to conversation. We hope to continue dialogue and exploration about how this work can be used ethically in organizations, and to find practice-grounded ways to distinguish between the aesthetic applications of the work examined in this paper and in-depth psychology applications of Jung's work in organizations; the latter are clearly outside the scope of this paper. With this caveat, we describe Jung's work in relation to alchemy.

Jung (1980) mapped alchemy onto four elements to illuminate individual psychological development *via* their corresponding alchemical processes of *coagulatio* (earth), *solutio* (water), *sublimatio* (air) and *calcinatio* (fire). In this article, we map his work onto organizational transformation processes, pointing to deeper, more holistic and aesthetically-grounded engagement and, ultimately, better outcomes. Just as humans individuate and mature in ways that are still not well understood, organizations have the capacity to mature during the course of these processes.

We take inspiration from the ground-breaking work of Jungian analyst Edward F. Edinger, who maintains that the procedures followed by ancient alchemists in their attempts to transform matter are helpfully analogous to Jungian psychotherapy (Edinger 1994). Seeking to extend his insights to organizational transformation processes, we plumb Edinger's explanation of why Jung's alchemical work is so fruitful for us in the twenty-first century. He suggests that psychotherapy involves shifting the fixed, settled aspects of the personality that are rigid and static in ways that foster possibility. To do so, these fixed aspects are "reduced or led back to their original, undifferentiated condition as part of the process of psychic transformation" (Edinger 1994:10). As openness and susceptibility to change arises through psychoanalysis, the personality can be re-formed in more adaptive, functional and responsive ways. Applying this analogy to organizational transformation, we will first describe each of the elements and their corresponding alchemical properties. Then, we will describe how these properties can assist in identifying and touching-in to the core values and transformative potential of an organization, yielding aesthetic beauty in the process.

The four elements of earth, water, air and fire and their corresponding alchemical properties are described below (fig 1), with discussions of how they might expand awareness and thus capacities for effective organizational transformation. Edinger draws from the Latin and offers the terms *coagulatio*, *solutio*, *sublimatio* and *calcinatio* to distinguish psychological processes from the chemical procedures of the early alchemists (Edinger 1994: 15). Though we describe each element and operation individually, it is their

combination that fosters alchemy. Below are the four elements as described by Edinger and Jung (1980) with their corresponding properties:

Element	Alchemical Operation	Properties	Gifts	Pitfalls
<b>EARTH</b>	<i>Coagulatio</i>	Anchoring; supporting; centring; integrating	Reliability; distilling	Rigidity; unyielding
<b>WATER</b>	<i>Solutio</i>	Flowing; fluid; dynamic; powerful	Releasing; momentum	Dissolving things of value; floods of emotions
<b>AIR</b>	<i>Sublimatio</i>	Seeing from a wider perspective	Intuition; speed	Bypassing thought; impersonal
<b>FIRE</b>	<i>Calcinatio</i>	Purifying; refining; illuminating	Igniting hope; clarity	Destruction; untempered zeal

**Figure 1: The four elements and their alchemical properties**

Each of these elements functions in three ways in organizational transformation: as a diagnostic tool; as a resource for process design and for engaging the conflict that often accompanies transformative processes; and as a prism that supports imagining, planning and monitoring implementation of desired future states. Because the elements and associated properties are in most people's vernaculars, they easily lend themselves to these three functions. As we describe each of the elements in turn, we will give examples of how they can be used, concluding with a discussion of the alchemical combination of the elements.

### **Preparing the ground for organizational transformation: the element of earth and the alchemical process of *coagulatio***

What is the first thing we do when preparing to take on a new professional task that will challenge us to raise our performance standards? Some would say we should first "ground" ourselves, clearing our mind of other tasks and generally coming into our physical center. When an electrical current is grounded, it protects users from dangerous exposure to surges or uninsulated electricity. Grounding gives the current a place to go that absorbs its energy without damaging things around it. Humans "ground" using variable means including physical and imaginal practices that may produce similar protective effects. To be grounded is to feel a connection with our core, to have a strong and rooted sense of ourselves. For an organization, being grounded can mean being conscious of shared values and mission. When we are in a grounded state, we are less susceptible to being upset by unpleasant emotions or unexpected events; we react with more equanimity.

#### *Earth and coagulatio in organizational transformation*

As we ground, we may feel a connection to the earth with its powerful properties of stability, support and integration. The alchemical process of *coagulatio*, associated with earth, relates to things coalescing, or becoming solid and trustworthy. *Coagulatio* is frequently encountered at the beginning of transformation processes: people tend to resist change by clinging to the fixed and familiar ways of the past and present; alternatively, they may hold solid views and very clear ideas of what should be changed and how. Well-designed transformation processes can challenge deeply-entrenched "home ground" positions. When participants are invited to

ground when commencing an organizational transformation process, a bigger sensory world can be embraced, one that widens apertures, deepens a spirit of enquiry and increases perceptive and reflexive abilities and the capacities to resonate and attune with others. This new ground can offer a shared starting point to participants experiencing challenges and change. *Coagulatio* can happen many times throughout organizational transformation processes as breakthroughs occur and parties gradually come to establish ways of moving forward that cohere.

For example, at the outset of a process designed to create an integrated conflict management system for their workplace, employees were invited to walk silently in a nearby woodland. While there, they were asked to notice and be prepared to share an image from their walk that spoke to their aspirations for how communication and conflict could best be handled in their workplace. Sharing infused the process with aesthetic pleasure associated with these images, heightening imagination and possibility rather than the more bounded rational thought that is often accented in organizational processes. Through these walks, they experienced what South Africans call *Ubuntu*—the interconnectedness of being human (Sachs 2010). *Ubuntu* can look very different in diverse cultural contexts, but always involves engaging the senses. The human senses—visual, kinaesthetic, auditory, gustatory, olfactory—open up aesthetic and artful opportunities for workplace colleagues, members of professional communities, employees of corporations or business partners to reconnect with one another at a deeply human level. In other words, engaging in organizational transformation from an awareness of *Ubuntu* is a way toward *coagulatio* (Bernard 2013).

Bolstering the case for nature-based and aesthetic interventions, researchers point to the potentially transformative physiological and psychological effects on us when we undergo an experience of awe (Allen 2018). In their seminal article, Keltner and Haidt (2003) conclude that awe comprises two critical elements, namely a perceived vastness and a need for accommodation. Here “[v]astness refers to anything that is experienced as being larger than the self or the self’s level of experience or frame of reference.” (Keltner and Haidt 2003:303) Further, the experience of awe leaves us wanting but unable to make sense of an experience within our current mental structures, and this is described as a “need for accommodation” (Keltner and Haidt 2003:304). It is this combination of an overwhelming sense of vastness of the experience and the desire to make sense of it all, which can increase our capacity to shift our frame of reference. In this way, carefully curated awe-inducing experiences in organizational transformation processes unsettle the earthen solidity of the status quo and invite the possibility to imagine new shared ground: *coagulatio* in action.

#### *Coagulatio in action: ideas for transforming organizational performance*

Drawing upon the element of earth and the alchemical process of *coagulatio*, change agents can support participants to “ground” themselves as they prepare to engage in transforming organizational performance. Four ideas follow, building on the previous discussion:

1. *Invite nature into transformation processes.* A walk after lunch can help participants and leaders of organizational transformation processes to reconnect to their centers. Seeds of transformation can be sown as participants experience the gifts of nature and analogise to their interpersonal relations.
2. *Invite aesthetics into transformation processes.* Introducing multiple art forms into the organizational transformation space—music, painting, dance, song and others—

strengthens participants' common ground. Knill, a founder of Expressive Arts, emphasises that a low skill/high sensitivity emphasis is most productive in organizational settings (Knill 1999). Emphasising self- and other-awareness, such experiences can create and buttress *coagulatio* as a firm foundation for identifying, understanding, and bridging gaps in understandings and perception. A visit to a relevant site, performance or exhibition can likewise seed aesthetics into transformative processes. For example, participants in a federal agency tasked with environmental protection went together to a disappearing glacier before engaging in a visioning exercise. Though everyone was aware of the phenomenon of melting glaciers, the awe-inducing experience of seeing, feeling—even touching—the beleaguered glacier deepened their resolve and augmented their momentum toward re-imagining their work in new ways.

3. *Invite aesthetic markers of success into transformation processes.* Watch for moments when things “gel” and find ways to signal or mark these to anchor collective experiences of *coagulatio*. As dialogue deepens, and participants begin to listen for shared meaning rather than focusing on advocating their preferred outcomes, mark interim successes. Something as simple as drawing a symbol on a stickie note and adding it to an adjacent wall, or doing a short celebratory activity involving movement or sound to mark ongoing progress can be effective in deepening *coagulatio*.
4. *Invite tangible acknowledgement of interdependence into transformation processes.* Seed transformation processes with collaborative invitations by using collective language grounded in aesthetic metaphors. Many leaders use journeys or processes from nature (e.g. evolution, transformation, metamorphosis) as metaphors to emphasise *coagulatio*. When metaphors emphasise interdependence as central to generating sustainable relational and substantive outcomes for all participants, they deepen a group's capacity for *coagulatio*.

Not only can *coagulatio*-informed approaches help participants in transformation processes connect across differences, they bring everyone involved into deeper mutual presence with one another. The importance of mutuality and reciprocity across aesthetic experience and transformation processes leads us to the next element: water. Water connotes flow, dynamism, fluidity and clarity, all of which invoke reciprocity.

### **Flow in organizational transformation: the element of water and the alchemical process of *solutio***

Our bodies consist primarily of water. Like water, we can freeze and be blocked; we can pretend to disappear like gas; or we can experience a sense of flow together as when the river meets the ocean. As the structures of water molecules alter in adapting to their surrounding environments, so do we. Positive emotions generated in transformative processes may increase receptivity to mutual interests and help generate new neural pathways for individuals in the organization, opening previously unimagined avenues to transform collective performance.

Our brains are social organs, as work on mirror neurons has shown (Gallese 2005; Goleman 2006; Singer 2006). The social brain has the qualities of water—fluid yet robust, strong yet yielding, open to connection yet individually experienced. It has the capacity to perceive—and fill in—gaps it encounters. This openness and vulnerability of the social brain further buttresses the importance of *solutio*, the process of finding a state of “flow” in organizational transformation initiatives.

### *Water and solutio in organizational transformation*

The property of water to appear in different forms—gas, solid or liquid—resembles the variety of human possibilities in changing circumstances. Responses to impending transformation may appear as:

- solid, fixed, entrenched positions which resist change or compete against one another for a preferred outcome (water as ice);
- covert ways of avoiding transformation (water as steam or gas); or
- fluid responses characterized by flow, exploration, connection, movement (liquid water).

As the alchemical operation of *solutio* turns solids into liquids, so organizational transformation processes entail shifting what is into a new form. Consider the example of rumours circulating about a likely merger between an organization and its rival. Employees may enter a meeting where the merger is being discussed feeling solidly (if precariously) attached to their organizational identity. A skilled facilitator can help to generate a sense of flow among participants as they encounter change. Resistance can dissolve if those affected feel enough ground under their feet while entertaining new possibilities and synergies. While navigating organizational transformation processes is always complex, skilful leaders help those involved find ways to dissolve some aspects of the past while finding a new fluency with the future. In this way, *solutio* contributes to generating positive momentum and a dissolving of old forms.

Of course, the operation of *solutio* is challenging; it is difficult to open to the unknown and often easier to remain attached to the *coagulatio* of familiar ground. *Solutio*, connected to the emotions, necessarily involves affective change and yields a fluidity of being to enhance momentum or “flow” in ongoing workplace and commercial relations. Leaders of transformative processes can draw attention to flux, framing opportunities to come to agreements, achieve performance goals, and address challenges as participating in the flow rather than merely standing on the river’s edge. As indicated previously, the creation of aesthetically-infused experiences of awe can trigger affective change (Allen 2018, Keltner and Haidt 2003) and be harnessed in organizational transformation processes.

### *Solutio in action: ideas for transforming organizational performance*

How can we access *solutio* and put it to work for us in organizational transformation processes? *Solutio* is particularly useful in addressing impasse, or times when a process feels “stuck”. Incorporating multi-sensory aesthetic experiences may be helpful. For example, when working with a group following a reorganization, we invited everyone to draw their experience of their current relations. Pictures ranged from a sinking ship, to a collapsing building, to a placid lake with monsters beneath the surface, viscerally and emotionally representing the intensity of upheaval in the group. Speaking from the pictures, participants framed their concerns aesthetically, revealing the gap between their images and their frustration about how to move forward. The sensory images also introduced fluidity, as many of them included water and all of them depicted movement or inhibitions to movement. Conversations followed about how to craft new systems and how to reclaim flow in the midst of the unfamiliar.

Later, while addressing leadership conflicts in the merged organization, participants were invited to use movement and materials to represent their experiences. From a collection of assorted materials, they chose multi-coloured yarn to wind around their leader who had taken refuge from the chaos under a table. His choice to seek refuge there and their action



of winding the yarn around him gave way to a discussion about their perceptions that he was too-often unavailable, immobilised by the demands and conflicted loyalties of those around him in his new role. Seated in their midst with yarn spun all around him, the leader was viscerally able to articulate his experience of trying to negotiate new sets of relations within the organization and with external partners while meeting role expectations. Simultaneously, he felt tied down and held back by conflicting expectations and the challenge of creating a new, hybrid culture out of two distinct, historical sets of norms, cultural prescriptions and structures. From the experience, everyone came to understand that the leader's main need was mobility, and they were then able to problem-solve ways that his manoeuvrability could be enhanced and his leadership be made more available and fluid. The operation of *solutio* was at work here as those involved found new fluidity, beginning to see the problem as something amenable to action rather than something intractable.

Movement is an excellent way to introduce flow to uneasy dynamics when things feel stuck. As leaders of transformation processes, we can use movement to release us when we feel ourselves blocked or unsure about the next move. Notice how taking a walk near water can be calming. When impasse arises, *solutio* reminds us to change modes. If analysing, check what is being sensed. If sitting still, start moving. If stuck on one issue, try another. If trying hard to see, listen. If locked in the business mode of the office, move way from a "business as usual" location. If overwhelmed by talking, take time for silence, breaks and reflection. If stuck on the horns of a dilemma, focus on a different part of the beast. If taking issues too seriously, infuse the work with an appropriate amount of playfulness. When a needle gets stuck in an LP, it can be moved back or forward to the beginning of the track or to another song. The air is again filled with music. This brings us to the third element: air and its accompanying operation, *sublimatio*.

### **Exploring the space of identity in organizational transformation processes: The element of air and the alchemical process of *sublimatio***

So far, we have explored the elements of earth and water as sources of aesthetic wisdom for leaders of organizational transformation processes. We also have looked at how drawing on aesthetic elements helps navigate gaps between what has been and what can be. Of course, gaps exist not only within organizations, but within individuals. This brings us to the element of air and its associated gifts of spaciousness and perspective.

Edinger writes that "[t]he term "sublimation" derives from the Latin *sublimis*, meaning "high" (Edinger 1994: 116; Soukhanov 2010). The element of air reminds us that we can get above a problem, seeing it from a bigger view or in a more spacious way. In air, we have the possibility to ascend to a vantage point above the confining entanglements of practical existence with its many challenges. Air releases the hidden spirit in matter; it opens the possibility that we are more than we think.

Italian architect Carlo Scarpa was famous for his use of gaps in architecture. One of his notable works, the *Fondazione Querini Stampalia*, is a testament to the power of designing strategic gaps to invite the outside in and the inside out, to create contrasts and tensions, and to yield a different sense of "space". Also with a focus on otherwise overlooked spaces, Judy Brown, in her poem, *Fire*, writes: "What makes a fire burn is space between the logs, a breathing space." (Brown 2003:89). Designer Alan Fletcher explores why space is important, He writes: "[s]pace is substance. Cézanne painted and modelled space. Giacometti sculpted by "taking the fat off space". Mallarmé conceived poems with absences as well as words. Ralph Richardson asserted that acting lay in pauses... Isaac Stern described music as "that little bit between each note—silences which give the form." The

Japanese have a word (*ma*) for this interval which gives shape to the whole. In the West we have neither word nor term. A serious omission." (Fletcher 2001:370).

It is enlightening to apply this "philosophy of gaps" to the world of organizational transformation through the operation of *sublimatio*. In the West, we are preoccupied with filling up space, and tend to over-rely on words to convey meanings. As facilitators of transformative processes, we use speech to convene, structure, order and identify issues and to uncover common ground. The work of these artists and architects highlights the potential power of using *gaps* to create spaces in which participants in transformation processes, relieved of pressure to fill spaces, can explore, innovate and diversify. It is as though more air literally enters the room. Air is not only vital to human life. Its qualities of invisibility and ineffability relate directly to intuition and imagination: two important aspects of organizational transformation processes. It also relates to the ephemeral phenomenon of identity.

#### *Air and sublimatio in organizational transformation*

Because air is invisible, *sublimatio* reminds us that many invisible factors can influence organizational transformation processes including structures and habits that form part of the status quo. Identity is one such factor; it is both critically important and elusive to name. Frequently invisible both to us and others in organizational settings, identity images of self and the collective can keep us from embracing needed change. Like air, identity is dynamic and elusive. How would you convey your identity without words to someone you had just met? How would it be different if you were communicating your identity to someone from your own group or organization? When people hold different perceptions of ideal or actual organizational identities, related tensions may prevent effective collaboration, even if, like air, those tensions cannot be seen. Because identity has both fixed and malleable components, it is difficult to capture.

Walt Whitman poetically addresses this phenomenon, asking, "Do I contradict myself? Very well, then I contradict myself, I am large, I contain multitudes" (Whitman 1891). Through the element of air, we can see where paradoxes and polarities co-exist, and when there is alignment. As leaders or participants in transformative processes, we get a little bit closer to finding what moves and motivates us as we give form to paradoxes and polarities. We may get a glimpse into those places where our individual and collective "bedrocks of being" have their foundation, even as we see only their manifestations in the air of human interactions.

While we often think about identity in a static sense, nothing could be further from the truth. *Sublimatio* reminds us that identity slides and shifts, eliding in the thin air of our awareness. Our identity calibrates and calculates with every encounter. Multi-faceted identities continually shape how we view ourselves, how we perceive, experience, make sense of and react to one another, and how we experience our contexts (Honeyman and Schneider 2018).

No aspect of identity operates in isolation, and this is true both for intra-organizational dynamics and intra-personal ones. Pörsken and Schulz von Thun (2014) refer to inner dynamics as involving an inner team. Inner team members continually interact with one another, and with others" inner teams (Alexander, Howieson, and Fox 2015; Goodman 2014). Richards advises that we learn to know and acknowledge these voices as far as we are aware and able, so that we find ourselves "peaceably at war, neither victorious nor defeated" (Richards 1998:233). In welcoming the insights of these different voices in ourselves and others, we see more of a full spectrum, and what was invisible becomes

visible. We see what previously could not be seen, including our intertwined, interdependent natures. As human beings, we are porous. Daniel Goleman (2006) uses the term social intelligence to highlight how visual, auditory, kinaesthetic, olfactory and gustatory senses cue us in adapting our behaviour to social contexts. Thus, *sublimatio* is occurring as we reflect on how transformative processes affect behaviour and performance. Once we are attuned to *sublimatio*, we see patterns with more acuity.

Organizational processes proceed more constructively when we are aware of our inner terrains and notice when we or others are blocking aspects of our "inner team". Sometimes, an unvoiced aspect of an organizational value needs to be uncovered and welcomed. At other times, an organization is out of balance and needs a ritual through which to welcome in what has been symbolically "orphaned". Working with an organization in conflict, we learned that the Executive Director had cancelled all informal gatherings including birthday celebrations and weekly brown bag lunches. With these opportunities for spacious exchange squelched, workers in the organization sensed more tension and rising levels of conflict. Only when venues for free exchange were re-opened did the climate of the organization shift. Had we been able to do *fMRIs* of the workers, we predict that stress-associated brain activity would have gradually lessened (Spencer, Fox, and Day 2004). In a state of spaciousness, perspective returns, and the beauty associated with proportionality and balance is again accessible.

Inviting the properties of *sublimatio* can infuse organizational transformation processes with more beauty. Air, with its association with clarity and quickness, reminds us not to cloud the atmosphere with judgments and preconceptions. Staying open to needed oxygen, we infuse work with the resources of respect and curiosity, thus facilitating more rapid and satisfying progress. Aware of the physical ways our intuition communicates to us, we learn to be more aware of what exists that we cannot touch. *Sublimatio*, literally rising above, reminds us to find ways to increase perspective when we feel locked into just one way of seeing. As we hone our intuition, we increase our capacity to discern unseen dynamics and to respond to the conflict that accompanies change.

### ***Sublimatio* in action: ideas for transforming organizational performance**

Connecting *sublimatio* with identity, ask: How often have I posed the greatest obstacle to moving a process forward? If my inner identities are locked in positional battle, is there space to breathe? Is there an open pathway to my grounded center? Can I see beyond my narrow trajectory? Do I have peripheral vision? We can also pose these questions in relation to our organization. In the midst of transformative processes, we are more effective when we step into and embrace vast possibilities recognising both what is stable and the reality of ongoing flux.

Drawing on the element of air, we can improve our capacity for reflexive practice as facilitators, leaders and participants in transformative processes by:

1. *Increasing awareness of self and others.* An organizational leader might take a group through a mindfulness activity to inoculate against tension or emotional hijacking. Participants can also be invited to take an inventory of past responses to change, and of times when their awareness and acceptance of facets of another's identity were broadened through creative engagement.
2. *Increasing awareness of context.* Participants can be invited to notice what is beautiful around them. How could beauty be more integrated into an organizational process? Sometimes, flowers or other things from nature or a photo of someone or something

beloved can be placed in the center of a table. As awareness of context expands in nuance and complexity, spaciousness is invited into processes.

Participants can also ask this simple question related to imagination and the associated operation, *sublimatio*: What could be different about this situation?

Drawing upon the element of air, we can become more intuitive and effective in our various roles in transformation processes. Intuition can be lightning quick, revealing a close sister to the element of air in transformative processes: fire.

### **Dynamics and mobilization in organizational transformation processes: The element of fire and the alchemical process of *calcinatio***

Fire illuminates and cleanses. Replete with kinetic energy, it is dynamic, unpredictable and often beautiful. It can also be destructive, leaving charred remains in its wake. Fire is contagious: it easily spreads. Fire is often invoked by those involved in transformative processes, and not usually in positive ways. Attitudes toward the intense fire of disagreement are all-important. As with fire, we must discern when to avoid conflict, when to try to manage it, and when to try to tap its transformative potential. It is difficult to dialogue with a fierce fire. Deepening understandings of its dynamics, we tap into its unrivalled energy and passion to realise organizational potentials: the operation of *calcinatio*.

#### *Fire and calcinatio in organizational transformation*

How can facilitating organizational transformation be as dynamic and energised as fire without causing great damage? How can we harness passions for justice, fairness and possibility even in the face of unpredictable consequences? Consider the international community's Paris climate change negotiations in 2015. With a clear scientific consensus that human actions are causing catastrophic climate chaos, international urgency drove a push to coordinate responses. Yet, it was difficult to navigate a complex negotiation process involving long-time adversaries and allies across divides of politics and power. One of the successful processes used repeatedly in the negotiation was an African process called an *Indaba*. Parties worked in small groups, naming their bright-line boundaries, while also identifying places where progress was possible. Multiple *Indabas* contributed to contagious momentum that yielded a successful agreement (Rathi 2015).

The element of fire evokes vivid aesthetic, contagious dimensions of transformative processes. Fire mirrors emotional contagion (Goleman 2006) as we continually influence each others' states. This phenomenon helps to explain the unexpected twists and turns of an organizational transformative process—such as when participants adopt a new perspective or are ignited with a flame of compassion toward others as they realise their interdependence and vulnerability.

Mary Catherine Richards (1998) had some powerful insights about the alchemy of fire and conflict in a chapter she wrote called *Separating and Connecting: The Vessel and the Fire*. Richards felt challenged to write about conflict in a way that was not watered down, but addressed its true dynamism, complexity and paradoxical gifts as an engine of transformation as well as a vehicle of destruction. One night, she dreamed that there was a large fire on the horizon, spreading toward her California neighbourhood. Forced to evacuate, she and a neighbour gathered up a few of the most precious of her pots and drove away. As they were leaving, they encountered an acquaintance who came into the room with the pots that were her lifework. He just stood there. Though they admonished him to leave, he remained.

Days later, when—in her dream—they were allowed to return, Richards went into the charred remains of the room with her pots. To her surprise, the pots were still there, intact, and even more beautiful than when she had left. The man was also still standing where they had left him days before. When they asked him how this was so, he said, “Everything is still here. Only the colour is deepened.” (Richards 1998:234) As the pots were kissed by the fire’s intensity, their colours came out more strongly and with more nuance than before. From this dream, Richards found a way to describe one of the paradoxes of conflict: that if we can withstand its ferocity, it can burn away those things within and between us (individually and collectively) that keep us attached to being right rather than to living in peace. Richards writes:

“When colour deepens, it adds both darkness and light to itself; it contains more colour. Goethe said that colour is “the sufferings of light”. *The sufferings of light!* That is, what light undergoes, we undergo; as vessels, we are deepened by our capacities for darkness and for light. It is an inner light that wakes in the lustrous stone. It is our darkness, our guilt and guile and greed and hopelessness that, undergone like a fire, may flame through our consciousness, through our sense of ourselves, deepening our capacities, changing into coloured light. Though we may feel annihilated in the process, we are intact.” (Richards 1998:234)

The operation of *calcinatio* reminds us to cultivate ways of standing in the fire of disagreement, both internally and in the external world. How can transformation processes be as dynamic as fire, and as energized, without causing great damage? How can we harness our passions for imagined futures in the face of potentially dangerous consequences if we do not? As human beings, we have an incredible capacity to emerge out of the ashes of conflict’s blaze, stronger even if shaken. *Calcinatio* reveals that resilience and transformation are related to our ability to tap into collective humanness after a shared experience of conflict, as we may be both vulnerable and accessible in new ways.

### ***Calcinatio* in action: ideas for transforming organizational performance**

Effective transformation processes require self and other awareness as well as awareness of context for both facilitators and participants. Yet, it is not easy to separate these three aspects of awareness. Drawing on the element of fire and the process of *calcinatio*, we can enhance our capacities for effectiveness by:

- Reflecting on personal responses to escalation and intensity. How can passion for work and mission be channelled into the positive qualities of fire including illumination, warmth and energy?
- Asking courageous questions about how past experiences have shaped responses to conflict. Have the fires of conflict deepened our colours? Have they revealed darker, less attractive sides of us?
- Watching for conditions that might ignite the warmth of connection or belonging. For example, invite participants in transformation processes to share a personal story with others, or use structural systemic constellation work (Sparrer 2009).
- As facilitators, asking ourselves as how we can model stepping safely into the fire of authenticity as a catalyst for constructive contagion.
- Pausing in the path of fiery conflict, we can ask what remains intact and what has changed. Has the scorching of an assumed order of things introduced more nuanced hues into the landscape of organizational possibilities? Can participants see things

that were previously hidden to them? If so, how can these developments inform ongoing progress?

*Calcinatio* is an intense operation, one that requires courage and subtlety as we face something more powerful than we are as individuals and even collectives. Combined, *calcinatio*, *sublimatio*, *solutio* and *coagulatio* have a potency that transcends any of them alone. Together, they can yield insightful diagnostics, and can function as resources for process design and for engaging conflict. They are also a powerful prism to support imagining, planning and monitoring implementation of desired future states. In the final section below, we examine how the alchemical combination of these four elements and associated operations can fulfil these three functions.

### **The alchemy of the elements**

Each of the elements and associated operations described above carries more dimensions than we have been able to briefly describe. For example, taking a walk after lunch is an illustration of *coagulatio* because it helps support cohesion and sense-making; at the same time it could also relate to *solutio* in the sense of a state of flow or *sublimatio* in terms of expanding perspective. In another illustration of the multiple dimensions of each element and its corresponding alchemical operation, *solutio* has the following symbolism, according to Jungian analyst Edward F. Edinger who applied Jungian alchemy to psychological processes:

“(1) return to the womb or primal state; (2) dissolution, dispersal...; (3) containment of a lesser thing by a greater; (4) rebirth, rejuvenation, immersion in the creative energy flow; (5) purification...; (6) solution of problems; (7) melting or softening.” (Edinger 1994:78)

Each of the other three elements also enfold multiple dimensions which are beyond the scope of this article. Bearing in mind the complexity and fruitfulness of these operations, we illustrate their capacities for supporting organizational transformation processes as 1) a diagnostic tool, 2) a resource for process design and conflict engagement, and 3) a way to support imagining, planning and monitoring implementation of desired future states.

### **Diagnostic and analytical capacities of alchemy**

One of the most useful applications of the alchemical operations combined is in diagnostic or analytical work. One of the authors recalls a consulting engagement with an organization where everyone she spoke with had a different take on what was wrong. The illustration that follows is written in her voice.

In the years preceding my involvement, the organization had grown rapidly. Recently, the kitchen-table founders had fired an entire team of employees, mistakenly thinking that they were causing conflict and unrest and that firing them would return the organization to its pre-expansion functionality. I spoke with people from across the organization. Some said communication channels were occluded; others spoke of erratic and unpredictable management practices; still others talked about unchecked, unvoiced conflicts as the core challenge. Newer employees, hired to fill the gaps left by the team firing, described a precarious workplace in which what was really going on could not be named and skeletons hid behind unmarked doors. Faced with so many different stories, I used alchemical imagery to diagnose the central issues.

Listening closely to the accounts of employees and the organization's leaders, I noticed that their metaphors came predominantly from *solutio*. They spoke of "walking on thin ice" of "frozen relationships" and "icy communication". Employees talked of needing a container for many feelings and experiences that could not be expressed without possibly endangering their job security. Rumours about why the team had been dismissed abounded, creating a vapour of innuendo in which everyone, uneasily, worked. As I reflected on what I had heard, I recognised a preponderance of images related to water as ice, and water as a gas. Many were longing for a return to functional flow in the workplace, but they did not know how to get there.

There were also references to a deficit of *coagulatio*. Workers described "not knowing where the ground was" and "feeling that the rug had been pulled out from under them". They were blocked from accessing *sublimatio*—intuition, perspective and insight—by their sense of precariousness. The *calcinatio* passion that had drawn them initially to this purpose-driven organization had been covered up by a sense of vulnerability and uncertainty.

As I reflected on these metaphors, I asked myself about the balance of the four elements in this organization. Few people seemed to have access to the illuminating, enlivening properties of fire. Many did not trust their intuition, and felt that the perspective they had gained over years of dedicated work was occluded by recent events. Amidst this deficit of fire and air, the ground was shifting and various forms of water were over-emphasised. I realised that I would need to design a transformative process that balanced these elements, and opened safe ways to restore their connections to the vital operations of *calcinatio* and *sublimatio*, while deepening their sense of *coagulatio* or ground. Emphasis on *solutio* was both out of balance and in need of other aspects of water beyond ice and vapour. Before moving into process design, I spent some time journaling and drawing scenes in which water as ice and vapour occluded light as well as fresh air circulation, and even blocked the reliability of earth. I generated a number of questions arising from this analysis, including:

- What is it like to be in an environment where ice and vapour predominate? Which sensations, feelings and thoughts did I hear people describe that correspond to this environment?
- What might people do to adapt to such an environment? Which of these behaviours had I seen or heard about in speaking with people in the workplace?
- Which under-represented element would be most-needed to establish a foundation for transformative work?
- How did the imbalance of elements I perceived relate to the conflicts described by workers?

After this sensory exploration, I was ready to begin collaboratively designing a transformative process that could lead, ultimately, to a space in which organizational conflicts could be engaged and productivity restored.

### **Alchemy as resource for process design and conflict engagement**

Working from this image of too-much *solutio* in the form of vapour and ice, my conviction deepened that flow needed to be restored to the organization as a starting point. I wanted to design a way for the workers to come together that was low-stakes and did not have the effect of reifying the precarious, icy islands on which they described themselves standing. Once they had a shared experience of flow—of ice melting and vapour taking beautiful and more supportive form as water—they could begin to re-find their ground (*coagulatio*) and

the passions that drew them to the work initially (*calcination*).

I remembered that several workers had used the terms “old-timers” and “newcomers” to identify and to distinguish those who had been with the organization for a long time from those who had been hired after the team dismissal. I imagined breathing more spaciousness and visibility (*sublimatio*) into their midst. Missing was the alchemical presence of beauty, pleasure and enjoyment in the midst of inchoate tensions and frozen communication. I evoked the element of air (*sublimatio*) to inspire me to create an experience that would mirror the dynamics I had observed and heard about in the organization.

On the day our process began, and after briefing the leaders of the organization, I invited the newcomers and oldtimers to self-select into two different rooms. I distributed several tennis balls to the oldtimers, and then I played a clearly-structured piece of rhythmic music. Their task was to create—without talking—an inclusive, nonverbal routine of sequenced tennis-ball passing that could be reliably reproduced in time to the music for its entire 5.5 minutes. Once they had created a routine and could repeat it easily, I went to the newcomers and told them that there was an activity underway in the other room. Their assignment was to go to the other room and to join the activity, finding ways to contribute to, participate in, or even enhance it.

When the newcomers got to the oldtimers’ room, I started the music and the oldtimers began their routine. They had practiced it several times, so could perform the tennis-ball passing exactly in time with the music and start again seamlessly when the routine was complete and everyone had passed the ball in sequence. The newcomers watched as the sequence was performed. Some of them tried to find the end of the sequence and insert themselves there. Others looked for gaps through which to enter the routine. Some stood on the sidelines and did not attempt to join actively. A few tried to speak over the loud music to ask their oldtimer counterparts for advice or instruction. Most of the oldtimers continued the routine, alternately ignoring, brushing aside or even blocking the newcomers who sought to participate. Only one or two oldtimers broke the rhythm of the routine to open a space for some of the newcomers to participate.

When the music ended, both the oldtimers and the newcomers were frustrated. We sat in a circle and debriefed. Some oldtimers spoke of how they resisted the intrusions of the newcomers, and the disruption to their routine. The routine was quite transparent, they opined, yet their counterparts were interfering with their capacity to complete it. Newcomers reported a sense of exclusion, even shunning. They were frustrated at not knowing what was going on, or how to be a part of it. They were resentful of their oldtimer colleagues who did not make it easy for them to participate. Correspondingly, several oldtimers reported that they resented the assumptions of the newcomers that it was ok to simply join in.

We took a break. I reflected using alchemical imagery. The oldtimers had re-found the flow (*solutio* as water) they had experienced before the newcomers were hired to replace the dismissed team. The newcomers had experienced the iciness (*solutio* as ice) of exclusion even more acutely, and understood it even less than the frustration they reported in the workplace emerging from what they perceived as the oldtimers’ unwillingness to include, communicate and collaborate. The oldtimers had experienced familiar ground (*coagulatio*) while the newcomers found nothing solid to support their integration. The oldtimers began to experience pleasure and renewed energy (*calcination*) as they enjoyed passing the balls in collective time to the music. Some of them evidenced pleasure in working only with familiar others and even in excluding the newcomers. Some *calcination* was also present amongst



the newcomers, for whom passions of frustration were heightened in the exclusion from meaningful engagement.

When they came back from break, we dialogued in small mixed clusters of newcomers and oldtimers and then the whole group as they reflected on their experiences. Quickly, they drew analogies to their workplace experiences since the team had been dismissed and replaced. Newcomers were doing their best to integrate (*coagulatio*) but there was no flow or ease (*solutio* as water) between the groups. Using the experience of the ball routine, they gained perspective (*sublimatio*) and empathy for what it was like for those in the other group. Newcomers *felt* what it was like for the oldtimers to experience compromised productivity in the face of people who were not acclimatised to the workplace culture. Oldtimers understood more viscerally how painful the experience of trying to integrate (*coagulatio*) had been for the newcomers. The ball routine had replaced negative personal attributions across the two groups with a (*sublimatio*) experience of perspective. On this foundation (*coagulatio*), they explored specific conflicts in detail and found ways to address them in the future. This successful experience reignited a positive sense of purpose and passion (*calcinatio*) in their midst. After some time, we drew again on alchemy in imagining and planning ways of working in the future.

### **Alchemy as a way to support imagining, planning and monitoring implementation of desired future states**

When we met months later, we again began with balls and music. The oldtimers and the newcomers were each assigned their own rooms and asked to put together a routine to chosen music with tennis balls without speaking. Once the routines were complete and could be repeated, I invited them to create a process for communicating their routine, and for integrating their counterparts from the other room. They did so in inventive ways, drawing on the imagery of alchemy that had infused our earlier work together. I reminded them that balancing the elements of earth, water, air and fire was important in the workplace, and that—as they did so—they would find more energy and pleasure in their work.

Drawing from expressive arts, we collaborated on a number of visual arts and movement activities designed to heighten their awareness of alchemical balance in the organization and to mobilise the gifts of the elements. I presented a schematic reproduced below (fig 2) with the elements corresponding with the four directions, with air on the top, earth on the bottom, fire on the left and water on the right in a representation of Jung's quaternity. We drew mandalas with these four quadrants as participants imagined and gave vivid form to their aspirations for the organization's future. Jung wrote of mandala-making as revelatory and powerful, fostering the alchemy of wholeness (Jung 1955). In *Memories, Dreams and Reflections*, Jung suggests that: "[i]n the products of the unconscious, we discover mandala symbols, that is circular and quaternity figures which express wholeness, and whenever we wish to express wholeness, we employ just such figures." (Jung 1963:324)



**Figure 2: Schematic based on Jung's Quaternity**

As this second series of sessions ended, employees of the organization reported feeling far less precarious and a heightened sense of belonging. *Coagulatio* had been restored; there was a strengthened relational foundation from which they could draw in engaging conflicts. A new vision had emerged for the organization, relevant both to its collaborative approaches to work and to its uniting goals. Thus, *calcinatio* had been freed to lend its clarity and energy to their endeavours as the *solutio* ice had melted. The workplace was far from perfect; *sublimatio* as vapour still got out of balance when vulnerabilities were accentuated, but leadership coaching had helped the founders communicate increased security and support to workers. Poignantly, workers and the founders had a new common language, a language of balance, proportion and perspective to inform their ongoing efforts.

Reflecting on this intervention, I recognized that participants had readily grasped the alchemical imagery offered as a proxy for talking about difficult subjects. It lent not only spaciousness and defused tension to their communication, but vitality and dynamism. As aesthetic properties of the four elements were woven into the intervention, participants used phenomenological language to describe challenges, frustrations and conflicts rather than blaming, judgmental language. This further contributed to a positive shift in the workplace atmosphere.

At the same time, I recognized how the caveat expressed earlier about the use of Jungian work had also come into play. In composing and performing their tennis ball sequence to the exclusion of the newcomers, some members of the oldtimers group derived pleasure. *Calcinatio* surfaced that illuminated and further fused bonds in the oldtimer group at the expense of newcomers. This dimension of the experience illustrates the deftness needed when employing alchemical tools. These tools have an amplification effect that can reify divisions or emphasize negative phenomena. The debrief had to be handled with care so that the psychodynamic aspects of the work were not the focus, but rather its aesthetic properties and associated openings and insights. The groups' experiences in real time were the focus, as mediated through the alchemical properties and aesthetic dimensions of music and rhythm, rather than its subterranean genesis or more psychodynamic explanations.

These important boundaries between an aesthetic emphasis and a psychodynamic one are explored in the field of expressive arts. In expressive arts, the principle of decentering is used to describe its intention of creating spaciousness around rigid patterns (Knill 2011: 55). Knill, one of the founders of the expressive arts field, maintains that practices accenting the aesthetic rather than the analytical accentuate the human body's capacity as a multifaceted expressive, perceptual and relational center. In doing this work, facilitators and organizational consultants cultivate *aesthetic responsibility*, recognizing that its ultimate aim is to help people regain the capacities for creative action that may have been diminished (Levine 2011: 29). By maintaining a phenomenological focus, participants are guided to explore the yields of their aesthetic experiences in sensory, then practical terms, rather than analysing psychological meanings of their or others' aesthetic expressions. Ethical use of alchemical work in organizations means awareness of these boundaries, and appropriate training in expressive arts or another related modality so that aesthetic work is clearly situated and appropriately engaged.

### Conclusion

How to incorporate and honour aesthetics in this quest for alchemy in ongoing and labyrinthine transformative processes? Conflicts arising in their midst can be vehicles through which individuals and organizations may mature and progress. As we learn to respect the intense fire of disagreement, introducing fluidity to our fiercely defended egos and embracing our quicker-than-air intuition, we find ourselves standing on new ground. It is the ground not of arrival, but of becoming. The alchemy of grounding transformative processes in awareness of self, other and context through the four elements is a foundation we can rely upon.

Combining powerful imagery from the four elements with awareness of unconscious aspects of inner and organizational relationships, we move into new possibilities. Understanding ourselves as both actors in human systems and leaders with influence means acknowledging the multi-sensory encounters within and between us, and the elemental, alchemical wisdom they offer. As we embrace aesthetic engagement and the alchemy of the elements as resources in organizational processes, we gain more dynamic understandings of our work and the contexts in which our work is done. This points the way to virtuosity and pleasure, and to more satisfying, full-spectrum outcomes. As aesthetic aspects of organizational work are evoked and welcomed, alchemy becomes a vehicle for texture, beauty, nuance and multi-dimensional possibilities.

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