

Sustaining the *Magic* in an Organization



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What is “magic” anyway? A survey of the academic literature reveals two primary orientations: 1) Various practices of pre-literate societies – such as shamanism, voodoo, sorcery, etc. – designed to make contact with and influence the supernatural realm (see for instance Hammond 1969; Jeffers 2007; Malinowski 1979; Palmer, et al. 2010); and 2) Special feelings of wonder, awe, and amusement usually reserved for childhood. Neither of these orientations has much relevance to the field of Organization Development. My trusty American Heritage dictionary is a little more helpful: “magic” definition number 4 states: “Any mysterious and overpowering quality that lends singular distinction and enchantment.” We could probably work with this one; yet it is still rather vague and far too singular. What I have in mind when I think of “magic,” based on personal experience, is more of an all-pervading atmosphere, an atmosphere where qualities like “wonder” and “enchantment” may indeed be present, yet where practical accomplishments also are greatly facilitated.

Outside the realm of academic literature, I found a very useful book for helping to understand “magic” as it may be applied to organizations – *Everyday Miracles: The Inner Art of Manifestation* by David Spangler (1996). Spangler, a self proclaimed “free-lance mystic,” was an influential figure at the spiritual community of Findhorn during the early 1970s, a time when the community was growing rapidly and earning a global reputation as a center of “magic.”¹ What made the community magical was a shared sense of openly participating in what could be called a “higher order reality.” As an example, the community’s founders would often go into meditation to communicate with “devas,” or nature spirits. The devas, as the legend goes, would provide specific instructions for how to grow vegetables in the surrounding nutrient-sparse sand of their beach spit, northern Scotland location; and, miraculously, these vegetables would grow to enormous size, attracting the attention of visitors from around the world.

Spangler emphasizes the spirit of “manifestation” that permeated the place in those days. In his book, manifestation is defined as “the act of making something invisible visible. It is the act of turning something abstract into something concrete and something potential into something real (p. 3).” As an example of manifestation in action, the story is told of how the community was constructing an important building called the “Universal Hall,” a large auditorium where performances would be held. As the building was nearing completion, the construction team ran out of materials. Very soon, a lorry driving by on the highway adjacent to

¹ See Paul Hawken (1975) *The Magic of Findhorn*, New York; Harper & Row

the community unexplainably spilled some construction materials onto the side of the road – and these turned out to be just the materials the community needed to finish the project! Or there was the time when some tiles had been gathered to floor a studio, yet nobody in the community had tile-laying experience. On the day the project was scheduled to begin, a visitor entered the community who just happened to be a professional tile-layer! Extraordinary synchronicities like this became so commonplace that the community assumed they were living in a higher order reality – though, of course, techniques of visualization, affirmation, and positive thinking were practiced assiduously in the belief that these would ensure the continuation of the magical manifestations.

Therefore, using Spangler’s material as a guide – though I wish to expand on his notions by adding some ideas of my own – in the context of this essay I wish to define “magic” as *a heightened state of awareness in which conscious connections are made with the creative flows of the universe offering expanded potentials for bringing vision into reality*. Perhaps this is not so different from the anthropological explanation after all?

The initiation of a new project, idea, or vision is fresh with unobstructed opportunity and anticipation. Accordingly, a palpable sense of “magic” may be present at the outset, perhaps going so far as a feeling that the new initiative is somehow riding the wave of planetary evolution. However, the excitement, enthusiasm, and optimism that generally characterize the start-up of an organization usually diminish and recede as the organization enters its routine operational phase. The question then becomes, “What can be done to sustain the magic?”

I will answer this question from three complementary perspectives: 1) The energy present at the very moment of initiation is crucially defining; 2) There are measures that can be taken periodically to renew, refresh, and revitalize the initiating energy; and 3) Attitude is all important. Each of these perspectives will now be taken in turn.

The start-up of an organization can be likened to a birth – in a very real sense it *is* a birth: the birth of a new entity on the world stage. Just as a human being will be born with defining characteristics, so too an organization will be born with the same. The characteristics of a newborn human being are defined by its genetic inheritance, understood to be carried in the pattern of DNA in its cells. Further, the pattern of DNA ascribed to any particular human being is the unalterable consequence of the combined DNA patterning of its donor parents, given at the time of insemination. Therefore, if we use DNA as a metaphor for the genetic inheritance of an *organization*, we can imagine a situation whereby the DNA patterning can be designed or programmed, and not left to a perhaps chance encounter as it may be in a human being.

Spangler devotes a whole chapter to a general “Genetics of Manifestation,” principles which we can apply to the particular “manifestation” of an organization.²

Imagine the DNA molecule. You have probably seen pictures of the two strands twisting and curving about each other. Each strand contains four nitrogenous bases: adenine, guanine, thymine, and cytosine...It is at these four bases that the two strands are joined by bonds of hydrogen, a bonding that unites the strands and forms the double helix.

With this image in mind as a metaphor, consider yourself and the object of your desire. You are each strands of identity, strands of being, curving from the most particulate level of material existence to the wavelike levels of the enfolded order, unity, and the mystery of the sacred. Like chemical DNA, you seek to connect at four points: as forms, as patterns, as essences, and as participants in unity (p. 122).

Spangler then proceeds to articulate the process whereby the four connecting points to the double helix can be visualized as four aspects of the manifestation project: the form, pattern, essence, and unity introduced above. “In practical terms, the double helix will take the form of a psychological and spiritual construct or image” (p. 123). This is translated as the “Seed Image.” Exercises are then provided as guides to visualizing the four aspects in relation to the particular manifestation project underway. If the manifestation project was giving birth to a new organization, then the form, pattern, essence, and unity of the organization each would be given separate space for purposeful visualization followed by documentation of the results. The visualization exercises could be done individually or within a core group. Once some clarity had been achieved, a ritual could then be performed whereby the comprehensive “Seed Image” would be metaphorically “planted” into the fertile ground of an objective reality. Ideally, the fertile ground would be prepared in advance, for obviously you would not want to plant a potent Seed Image into infertile or unreceptive objective reality!

I find Spangler’s manifestation process to be an interesting example of using the biological structures of life as a framework for purposeful human adaptation. Morgan (1986) already emphasized the necessity of replacing “mechanistic” metaphors with “organic” metaphors in the complexity of the modern organization development climate. However, I would make a distinction between the “creation” and “manifestation” phases of the process. In my conceptualization, “creation” is the outward moving, directed energy of the visualization sequence; “manifestation” is the receptive awaiting to see how the creative flows of the universe respond to our initial outpouring. According to this view, we do not or can we ever “manifest;” rather the project manifests *itself*. We can be very careful and attentive in *creating* the Seed Image; however, we cannot control how the universe will respond in *its* manifestation. This distinction may be subtle but I believe very important. In an earlier paper, *The Tao of*

² I enclose “manifestation” here in quotes because later I want to make an important distinction between “creation” and “manifestation,” concepts which Spangler seems to use interchangeably.

Manifestation, I explained how the creative outpouring phase could be described as the *yang* and the receptive awaiting phase the *yin* of a total 'tai chi' symbology of organic development. Sometimes you advance and sometimes you withdraw. While beyond the scope of this paper, these considerations add a further layer to the conscious attention that may be given to ensuring an auspicious birth to a new organization.

A colleague of mine, Ariane Burgess, founder of the organization Regenerative Culture, has further insights into the use of the DNA metaphor as applied to organization development. I quote from an email she sent on 3 June 2010, part of an ongoing conversation we've been having concerning these thought processes:

On the DNA – through observation I see that when something is conceived to be manifest that the moment of conceiving is really crucial – we need to be as conscious as we possibly can with what we choose to put into the seed form we are creating. Of course this is a challenge because unless we are enlightened there will always be unconscious elements that sneak in – these are there for our growth benefit.

Ariane displays here her sensitivity to not only the "seed form" but also to what might be called the "seed moment." Who was it that first said "timing is everything?"³ Part of Ariane's insight comes from having moved recently from New York City to the Findhorn community, where her mother lives. Ariane observes that Findhorn began in the mid-1960s, and the original founders were born sometime in the 1920s. According to Ariane's sensitive impression, this legacy carries a psychic imprint that is noticeably present in the community of today. Apparently, the community is feeling "stuck," with ingrained patterns of behavior and worldviews preventing them from moving forward to establish a posture more consistent with contemporary realities. There is even an effort to reinvigorate the practice of communicating with nature spirits so as to recapture some of the original "magic." So we see here that even a community like Findhorn can embody life-cycle dynamics characteristic of an "organization."

Yet let's look a little closer at this idea that "the moment of conceiving is really crucial" because it carries the tone – and even the language – of the birth metaphor. When was Findhorn actually "conceived?" Unlike an "organization," where the instant of conception can be accurately pinpointed to, say, the moment when a group of partners decided with a handshake to move forward with the project – or even more specifically, when the organization was actually incorporated as a legal entity in its own right – the conceiving of Findhorn must have been much more nebulous. We can verify that the founders arrived at the location sometime in the mid-1960s and that others started to be attracted to the place shortly

³ "In all events, influence over coincidences is everywhere the ambition of magic...Working with Malinowski's approach, I propose to define magic as any effort to produce miracles on demand. Although some miracles are claimed to violate laws of natural science, many and perhaps most are natural events whose miraculous character consists of their *timing*" (Merkur, 2009, p. 148, emphasis added).

thereafter, but there is no way of accurately recalling the moment, much less the defining qualities inherent in that moment, when “Findhorn” became a unique entity leading an individualized existence in its own right. Indeed, Findhorn calls itself an *un-intentional* community since nobody ever *planned* for its appearance nor prepared something like a mission statement to guide its development. It all just sort of happened.

What does this say about the idea that we can sustain the magic in an organization by designing or programming its DNA? For here is an organization world-renowned for an ongoing quality of magic, yet there was no conception, no starting point, and therefore no possibility of interpreting its DNA. I do not have any answers at this stage of my inquiry; though I imagine a clue can be found by recognizing the fervor of “manifestation” that infused the community in its early days. Perhaps Findhorn really was the manifestation of the creative flows of the universe operating at a higher order reality? Contemplating this extraordinary notion gave me a little shudder when I recalled that the last time I was there an emotional topic of discussion was the fact that Findhorn lies below sea level and is very close to the North Sea. The anticipated sea-level rise during a scenario of global warming will one day inundate the community, after which the stories of magic will become legend for future generations to ponder.

I have some insights of my own regarding this perspective that sustaining the magic in an organization has something to do with paying careful attention to the conditions present at its “birth;” and this insight comes from a nearly 30-year investigation into the dynamics of astrology. While I know that astrology often gets bad press and is usually dismissed as frivolous or fanciful – or even worse, “occult” – nevertheless, I have discerned recurring patterns of order and meaning through its study. The approach I use in astrology is called “evolutionary:” it looks at the diurnal motion of the planets (including Sun and Moon), their interactive interrelationships, and how these dynamics are reflected in events and life-cycles on Earth, including the lives of individual human beings. While far too detailed to entertain an adequate discussion here, the essential point for our concern is that meaningful analysis depends on the accurate construction of a “birth chart” displaying the pattern of planets and their orientation to a particular place on Earth at a specific point in time. A birth chart can be constructed for an individual, an event, or even an organization and becomes a ‘roadmap of potentialities’ that can guide the growth and development of the entity over time.

I used this knowledge when incorporating my educational non-profit, Village Design Institute, in 2002. Around the time in my life when setting up a non-profit seemed like an opportune strategy for advancing my goals, I began consulting my ephemeris to locate an auspicious arrangement of planets in the near future. I noticed a particularly creative pattern peaking on December 12th. This pattern was not only creative in itself, it made numerous beneficial aspects to my natal birth chart. Accordingly, I decided that this date would be a very good ‘birthday’ for my new organization. With the benefit of this knowledge, I sent off the incorporation papers requesting that the new entity be officially recorded on 12 December

2002. I even added a little note asking if the exact time of day could be noted for the very reason that I wanted to practice studying the astrology of the new corporation. To my delight, the office of the Secretary of State responded by sending me my official papers with a slip from a teletype branded with the information “recorded at 2:02.” Thus, I was able to construct an accurate birth chart for the educational non-profit Village Design Institute.

The advantages of having a birth chart for issues of organization development are twofold: 1) Deep understanding can be gained into the innate qualities and characteristics of the organization, its ‘personality,’ including how this personality may be perceived by the outside world; and 2) The dynamics of unfolding opportunities over time can be accurately perceived and analyzed, thus offering a tool for decision-making. This second benefit, especially, can be very valuable for the timing of actions. By monitoring planetary transits as they relate to and interact with the natal chart, recommended periods of advance and withdrawal can be discerned clearly; periods for investment and risk-taking can be compared with periods when it’s obviously more favorable to assume a conservative posture. A new opportunity that appears to be very promising on the surface may reveal underlying dynamics that could lead to contention or misunderstandings. As an example from the Village Design Institute, I know that transiting Pluto will be making a conjunction over the next few years with the organization’s natal Mercury. The symbolism here is that this will be an excellent time to communicate the organization’s purpose to the world. Investment in presenting and distributing ideas and writings should be handsomely rewarded; or at least I know that this is the time to focus on such activities.

So we see that utilizing the discipline of astrology as a technique for influencing the qualities and characteristics of an organization at the moment of conception can be another way to sustain the magic. Potential peak periods can be energized for maximum effect. By doing so, we are connecting with the “creative flows of the universe” to offer “expanded potentials for bringing vision into reality.” Soon I will be setting up a Limited Liability Company to partner with my non-profit – and you can be sure that I am already scanning the horizon to locate an auspicious planetary configuration to serve as the birth pattern for this new organization.

The second consideration that was introduced as a method for sustaining the magic in an organization was described as “there are measures that can be taken periodically to renew, refresh, and revitalize the initiating energy.” The people I talked with about these ideas unambiguously encapsulated this second consideration as “ritual.” My trusty American Heritage defines ritual as, “The prescribed form or order of conducting a religious or solemn ceremony” – to which I would reply, “Nonsense!” Why can’t rituals be celebratory and uplifting, even pompous or flamboyant, maybe even at times outright silly?

I prefer the approach taken by my friend Sylvia Hales, registered agent for the Village Design Institute. According to Sylvia, “In community we hold magic through intent, and we imprint the intent through ritual...Magic is a way to come into harmony; daily and seasonal rituals sustain the magic through meaning-making and intent” (personal communication, 1 December 2010). I have been to some of the rituals at Sylvia’s place and I can say most assuredly that they were not anything like “solemn.” For example, there was the annual solstice ritual in which a maypole was raised, festooned with brightly colored ribbons and crowned with a bouquet of fresh-cut flowers. Children dressed in fairy costumes and grinning adults grasped the ribbons while walking in a circle to wrap the ribbons around the pole, all the while affirming something to the effect, “Thank you for our many blessings; may you continue to shine favorably on all our activities.” This particular ritual was designed to maintain beneficial relations with the annual solar rhythm. Another seasonal ritual at Sylvia’s place is the annual autumnal “Cider Press Fest,” a time when friends are gathered to harvest the abundant apples on site and convert them into fresh cider. This ritual, besides the very practical function of coordinating a collective apple harvest, is designed to reaffirm the original intentions for starting the community. Seasonal rituals like these can be complemented with daily rituals such as performing a morning “sun salutation” or even simply by offering a prayer before a meal. Each of these rituals has a common purpose: reconnecting with and sustaining the magic – that is, the heightened awareness of opportunities for expanded potential – that was originally felt or embodied at some defining “seed moment” in the past.

And while Sylvia sure looks enchanting in a fairy costume, she is not at all starry-eyed about these matters. Her experience has led her to recognize that situations and relations in a community – and, we can extrapolate, in any organization – can sometimes go down into deep, dark places; yet, for Sylvia, that is the very reason for conducting the rituals in the first place. No matter how high or exalted or promising the feelings in a collective enterprise may be at some particular point in time, those feelings will eventually, inevitably fade – we can lose the magic. And so, rituals are instituted to keep reminding everyone of those special times and to renew, refresh, and revitalize the initiating energy. For Sylvia, it all comes down to *intention*. If we were never sad, how would we know what it’s like to be happy? Therefore, renewed intention keeps us on course amid the vagaries of a collective enterprise; and deliberate ritual sustains us in between those high energy surges that we call “magic.”

Another point deserves attention here, a reiteration of the “manifestation” versus “creation” theme of sustainable magic. In July of 2003, I implemented the Graduate Design Project of my first Master’s degree. This Project was the design of a 5-day residential Ecovillage Design Course, and the site selected for implementation was Sylvia’s Pragtri Farm. In my design of the course, I wanted to give special attention to the notion of ‘whole body awareness’ as a pre-requisite for good, competent design. Accordingly, there were many activities, some blithely playful, designed to get participants more into their bodies before entering the design

phase. I also did not skimp on food, but considered a well-fed cast to be a reliable source of good morale; as such, I hired a professional chef who turned every meal into a sumptuous feast. My point is that I made conscious decisions to ‘create’ a loose and lively, festive atmosphere in the course; yet what transpired was a magic beyond my wildest expectations – the magic manifested *itself*; I could not have created it.

Of course, Sylvia was a big part of this. For months beforehand we worked together to plan the various activities and to situate them at their best locations on the property. Sylvia calls this “creating the container.” By creating a suitable container and by conducting ourselves in an appropriate manner, we in effect *invited the magic to come in*. The magic came in the form of unexpected and unplanned occurrences, the high energy of the final presentations, and a heightened overall atmosphere of happiness and togetherness that at times approached giddy. All the participants played a role in this. The essential point is that we did not *create* this magic; the magic manifested *itself* – we were more like humble stewards. Of course, our attitude and openness to such things sure helped – and that brings us to the third consideration.

I first met Brita Adkinson in 1996, during my initial visit to Findhorn.⁴ I was enrolled in the “Experience Week” program and Brita was our workshop leader. Experience Week is often a person’s introduction to both Findhorn *and* living in community. The week is arranged as a series of events – various games, exercises, and shared group activities – designed to accelerate “community building.” My Experience Week group included 24 fascinating people from all around the globe; and, I must say, the techniques devised by the Findhorn community were exceedingly effective: by the end of the week, this total group of strangers was feeling like an extended family, ready to go out and form a new community of our own! The experience was at once profound and cathartic. As a demonstration of this, at our closing circle, a mature gentleman from London broke down in tears, explaining between sobs, “This has been wonderful but I don’t think I could ever do it again; it’s all been a bit too much.” His barriers had been penetrated; his soft and tender inner nature had been revealed to the group and perhaps to himself for the very first time. He was feeling vulnerable.

Brita had a way of weaving magic into our activities. With her bright eyes twinkling, she was always so sure and confident when providing the instructions for our next round of exercises. She was masterful in her timing and execution of an activity, and usually knowingly shared in the laughter that followed the penetration of another barrier, the expected aftermath of another community building exercise. Brita’s husband originated from my part of the world, the Bellingham area. When she found out that I was a student at Fairhaven College, she invited

⁴ I did not anticipate when conceptualizing this paper that Findhorn would play such a prominent role; it just sort of worked out like that. I guess this reveals both my own orientation to organization development and the special place Findhorn holds in the world of magic.

me to her home for dinner, for it turned out that her son Paul had reached college age and was considering moving to the homeland of his father to attend Fairhaven College! I must admit, I felt pretty privileged seated at the dinner table of our Findhorn workshop leader – but then again, I had already made myself open to these kinds of synchronicities, meeting the right people at the right time in the right place. Some would call that magic; I would say it's more of an attitude.

Anyway, Paul did move to Bellingham to attend Fairhaven College – perhaps influenced by my sterling recommendation – and several years later Brita followed. She now lives in a magical house in the foothills, a custom house with unusual geometries built by her husband (who has since passed away) and his expert carpenter brother. The house is named Wambeliska, after an enchanted fairytale land, and has become the host-site for Transformation Game workshops. I describe all this here because I think the whole story is rather magical – it arises from the heightened awareness that comes from participating in a higher order reality.

I'm still in contact with Brita, so naturally I thought about interviewing her for insights into sustaining the magic in an organization. We met at the upper story café of Village Books, overlooking the village green of Fairhaven. Brita's eyes still twinkle; she seems to embody a perennial quality of youthfulness, a never-fading excitement about life's possibilities. I asked her, "What sustains the magic?"

Brita can be an animated storyteller, so I sat back in my chair and listened to some old tales of the Findhorn days. Apparently, there was a feeling in the community in the early 70s that they had a mission to bring out "deepest spiritual truths and distribute these to the public." According to Brita's interpretation, by the late 90s this mission had been fulfilled: there were yoga classes everywhere, environmental consciousness was on the rise, alternative healing techniques were widely accepted, spiritual matters could be discussed openly, etc. Perhaps this 'having completed its mission' would help to explain the lack of purpose that Ariane detected in the community of today? I still wanted to know more about the magic.

Brita relayed the tale about how she was working for the Education Committee but got fed up with the politics and ego contests. She even described a situation where one group pillaged the funds of another to fill the hole made by their mismanagement. This is not the kind of stuff one sees during Experience Week! Brita adapted by resigning from the Education Committee to become trained as a workshop leader – and there she found the magic again, by working with the wide-eyed students coming through the place who were experiencing the magic for the very first time. Brita concluded at the time, "This place is magic *in spite of* the people running the place."

As our conversation progressed, my former workshop leader assumed a much more personal, almost advisory tone: "Hold onto your vision like a precious seed and don't let it go. A vision is vulnerable. What's most important is to keep the magic alive inside you. Magic by

definition has to be re-created and re-inspired. Life is a river, so review from time to time your mission statement and your goals. Obstructions are there to give us greater clarity.” Then, sounding like a wise crone yet one with the sparkling eyes of an adolescent, she re-admonished me, “Hold onto your vision. Keep the magic in your own heart.”

As I returned home and reflected on what I had just heard, I had to acknowledge the immense importance of it; for, any organization, be it an ecovillage or a corporation, is merely the assemblage of so many individuals. Any magic that comes through the place is going to begin with these individuals, as a consequence of their actions and as a reflection of their attitudes. Even so, I can never control the thoughts and behavior of others. That means that if I want to see some magic around here, it’s got to begin with me (or you!). “Keep the magic in your own heart.” This may be the most valuable perspective of all.



You know how men have always hankered after unlawful magic, and you know what a great part in magic words have always played...That word names the universal’s principle, and to possess it is after a fashion to possess the universe itself. “God,” “Matter,” “Reason,” “the Absolute,” “Energy,” are so many solving names. You can rest when you have them. You are at the end of your metaphysical quest...But if you follow the pragmatic method, you cannot look on any such word as closing your quest...It appears less as a solution, than as a program for more work, and more particularly as an indication of the ways in which existing realities may be changed” (James, 1907/1951, p. 131, as quoted in White, 1998, p. 13, emphasis in original).

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