

June 2002, Volume 7, #2: Organizations as Living Organisms: Developing a Seven-fold View

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Introduction

In this essay I would like to develop a view of Waldorf Schools and other organizations that profess to honor the reality of human beings as beings of body, soul, and spirit. I must make it clear that while I am not a management or organizational expert, I have life-long experience in working in the Camphill movement and in a number of Waldorf schools throughout the world. My viewpoint is therefore that of a person dealing with growing and adult human beings.

The picture that I am hoping to develop here should, ideally, be worked over by all persons intimately involved in an organization or a school. These include people in managerial and administrative positions, faculty, and recipients of services, such as parents in a school. The picture of a healthy, and therefore living, organism needs to be seen in the context of a specific place, time, and organization. It is possible that several rounds of conversations are needed before the specific picture emerges with respect to the matrix of the ideal I will describe. Consequently, it will take further rounds of conversation to delineate an approach intended to re-shape the organization so that it becomes healthy.

It has become habitual among those involved with anthroposophical institutions to speak in human terms about organizations such as Waldorf Schools, or other institutions inspired by Rudolf Steiner's philosophy. Comparisons are often made between organizational and human phases of growth and development. These are very tempting comparisons, but communities of men and women working together may develop over much longer time periods than a human life span. Moreover, the interaction matrix of an organization is much more complex than a single human life. Think of a city, a nation!

I would like to propose a different model of looking at the living time profile of an organism or organization. I do so not because I believe previous models were wrong or because I think that applying human phases of development to organizations was erroneous but because I believe that an organization that is meant to be living must be measured against and spoken about in terms of the forces of life.

The forces of life manifest in greatest purity in the world of plants. Each plant manifests in some form or other the following aspects: its rootedness in the ground; the flowingness of liquid intake and transformation; an air exchange with the surrounding; a reaction to warmth; a reaction to light; a manifestation of geometrical, mathematical principles, which are also inherent in sound and music; and finally, the crowning profile of a living organism: life itself. *Air, Water, Fire, and Earth* are the ancient life principles of antiquity. Three others need to be added: *Light, Form, and Life*.

These are the seven principles, which I suggest may lead one to a clearer understanding of the health and well-being of an institution. I will describe these principles from the viewpoint of a

tree and also from the viewpoint of a group of individuals working together. I shall conclude with some comments on gatherings, meetings, and organs of a living organism.

The Seven-Fold Picture in its Living Manifestation

When looking at a tree, one can divide its form principles into roots, trunk, and crown, and assign to each its function; that is one way of understanding. If, however, we follow the seven life principles in their activity in sustaining the tree in its totality, then we arrive at a different picture. If we track the activity of individuals in different areas of an organization by using the first picture and determine that one person works at the root of the organizational tree, another at the crown, a third at the level of the trunk, then we fix each person's level of involvement. This is routinely done in various organizational charts that separate out the functions of different people or groups involved in an enterprise. Organizational charts contain interconnected areas. Applied to a Waldorf School these might include the faculty, administration, board, parents, committees, and so forth.

Problems in a school often arise, however, because people feel themselves chained to a particular area by their job description. In reality human beings participate—consciously and unconsciously—in all areas of an enterprise, and are affected by all areas. The possibility of freeing individuals from their narrow functional confines so that they may become free participants in the growth and nurture of their organizational tree constitutes my hope in presenting the following picture of sevenfold life activity.

The Seven Life-Sustaining Elements in the Plant World and in Human Organizations

The Solid, Earth Element

The earth provides the firm basis for a tree's roots, enabling the tree to grow at a particular place at a particular time. A tree's roots, together with the firm ground, may be seen as representing the physical plant or the buildings and grounds of a school or other institution.

An organization should have a deep taproot—a main building—and smaller service roots and rootlets, which help it to penetrate deeply into the community. In a school, off-site kindergartens and related programs, for instance, serve as such additional roots.

The earth element shows the extent to which a school is grounded and has its own place in the physical world in a permanent location: in other words, whether an organization has really sunk its roots into the physical world. It also shows whether the tree—the mission or impulse of the organization—has rooted itself in suitable soil. The characteristic signature of the earth element is a square or crystalline form principle; its spatial dimensions tend to be compressed and concentrated, and its time signature is a slow and carefully-stepped growth pattern. It is hardy, however, and once established, will likely last for years.

The specific qualities of the ground may also influence significantly the way an organizational tree is able to connect with the physical world and incarnate itself in a particular location. Sand, clay, granite, limestone, etc., all influence the roots of a tree quite differently.

The Liquid, Water element

The liquid element enables the life-giving forces and substances to permeate a tree in order to sustain and foster growth. As it courses through all parts of a tree, the liquid element itself is changed, eventually transformed into vapor, and released into the atmosphere. As it rises and falls in the sap and evaporates through the leaves to join the atmosphere, the water element is also a symbol and picture of the flow of money and its transformation through the organism. The money stream that surges or trickles through the organizational tree provides a picture of money circulation—its availability, its procurement and source, and finally, the areas it stimulates when rejoining the general atmosphere.

The different sources of water—such as groundwater, or an aquifer or its absence—need to be seen as a variety of money sources, as the general monetary constitution of the community at large. A water-rich, year-round river close to the school may be a reliable and continuous cash supply, while a seasonal stream may create a great struggle for survival. The characteristic water signature is a half-moon shape, which indicates a tendency to spread out and fill all available space and a strong cyclical quality in its time dimension of growth and development—thus uniting regular and seasonal activity.

A school or other organization may be seen, for instance, as a tree that needs water but lives in a desert. Or it could be seen as a tree that is established in a region with an ample aquifer but finds itself prevented from reaching it by deep layers of rock. These are but two possibilities that need close scrutiny by those who are part of the organism. In the first instance it is clear that the community will not support this type of organism. In the second instance there may be ample money in the community, but the mode of access has yet to be found.

The Gaseous, Airy Element

The air surrounding a tree is altered by the tree's metabolism in hourly, daily, monthly, and yearly cycles. The air element represents the atmosphere of the community surrounding the school tree. Both water and air elements are connected to the leaves of the tree. The quality of the air shows how positively or negatively the larger community acts towards the school. The airy element is intimately connected to the light. With the help of light, trees take in carbon dioxide during the day and then give off oxygen at night. This life-giving element of oxygen enlivens the whole community.

The quality of air affects the growth of a tree. Smog-filled air, for example, may be poisonous to trees, while pure air fosters healthy growth and development. Ocean air is different from mountain air, desert air, or air rich with tropical forest humidity. Moreover, there are innumerable types of air currents, depending on the typical weather patterns of a region: regular refreshing breezes, tropical storms, polar winds, danger of hurricanes and monsoons, and localized wind patterns in great abundance. The characteristic signature of the air element is its tendency to form triangular, arrow-head shapes. In its great expansiveness, it fills all available space. It is also fickle and capriciously changeable, volatile and irregular in its tempo of development—a perfect picture of public response.

One of the vital points for the health of the school tree is whether the atmosphere surrounding the school is filled with light and pure air, or is continually murky and polluted.

The Warmth Element

Warmth works in diverse ways on diverse levels of life and organization. It fills the atmosphere with its expanding quality to bring flowers and seeds into existence so that the future of a tree may be ensured. A school tree needs the warmth of the good will of the whole school community as well as that of the greater community in which it exists. Likewise, it needs the internally active warmth element within the organization so that children, teachers, and parents alike may bring their good will to bear to create seeds for the future. The warmth element is pervasive, and needs to permeate all areas of the organism, for it carries the human element of will into all functions of life.

Questions regarding the working of the warmth element are crucial to the well-being of the organism: When and how it is created; who is able to create it; who benefits from it; and, most importantly, is it possible to have too much warmth? The direction and focusing of the warmth of the will is a vital consideration for the healthy functioning of an organism like a Waldorf school. Are there frequent periods of intense warmth, when a great deal is accomplished, interspersed with benign rest periods? Or is there a continuous blast of a furnace, stoked by certain individuals, which threatens to destroy and burn up most individuals' impulses and never allows for rest and recuperation? Is there perennial cold, which makes every smallest initiative a painful process of exertion?

The essential signature of the warmth element is its capacity to permeate everything and unite all objects formed by the other elements—even all humanity—in a great sphere of warmth. The form and spatial dimension of warmth is spherical. As regards temporal development patterns, warmth always thrusts forward in expansion unless stopped by cooler elements.

The capacity to lay the foundation for the future is bound up with the specific working of the warmth element around and within the organizational tree. Warmth works to manifest the fruits of the past and the seeds for the future. It is probably the most difficult element to control, focus, and harness, since it springs spontaneously from the hearts of human beings inspired by their mission and work, and thus has a far wider range into the surrounding community than the other elements.

The Element of Light

The light element permeates atmospheric warmth and air insofar as they are not suffused by water in the form of clouds, mist, or fog. The light element penetrates liquids depending on their nature; clear water allows light to permeate completely, although it bends the beam of light. Light bounces off the surface of opaque, solid matter, but if the material is transparent or translucent, it allows light to pass through, though usually with some refraction.

What does the light element of an organization represent, and what is the source of this light? Since ancient times light has been equated with wisdom and knowledge. The light element in an organization such as a Waldorf school has its source in the pedagogical knowledge and insights of the faculty. The pedagogical research of individual faculty members, over and above the work of the whole faculty, contributes to this source. The receptivity of the “solid substances” and “denser elements” in a community determine whether the light of wisdom and knowledge is able

to shine out and become a beacon to its community, or whether the light is kept under a bushel and hidden from public view.

Let us clarify the relationship of light to the physical elements: a source of light needs continuous renewal and regeneration. The striving for knowledge and insight, the search for deepening and ever-honing one's thinking capacities—whether one's immediate task is as an individual or as part of a group, as a parent, teacher, or board member— feeds the light. To keep the source pure and shining is no mean task, for light may be perverted to become splintered and dehumanized. If the latter happens and insights are applied egotistically for personal advantage, then beams of light become thorns to pierce the hearts and souls of others. Intellectual arrogance has a most detrimental effect on one's fellow men. Then light may harden into wounding intellectualism, which is a consequence of the selfish use of wisdom and knowledge.

Communication is necessary so that light can enlighten interactions with others and not impose barriers, for it is possible for light to turn into thorns. This actually occurs in the plant kingdom: too strong a light or too great a sensitivity in a plant results in thorns, evidence that the light has become too physical.

Those who represent the human environment of an organization are quite sensitive to the quality of the light that streams out. They know if management is impervious and closes itself off or if a school's faculty insist that they "know better."

With respect to light and the lighter elements: light should permeate the warmth of good will and direct its actions meaningfully. Light should also be able to shine out into the airy atmosphere of the greater community. There it may meet many obstacles and obstructions in the forms of murky or polluted atmosphere.

Water and liquids—representing the money stream of an organization—may be transparent and permeable to the light of insight and wisdom, but if they carry too much mud and other impurities, they may reject the light. Even in clear water the direction of light is distorted.

Solid matter—unless composed of a translucent or transparent material—does not allow light to enter, but rejects it on its surface. Human beings need to transform matter by art to make it light-permeable. One example is the use of glazed wall surfaces, which allow the inhabitants of a room to feel able to penetrate the solidity of the walls. Likewise, architectural forms determine how the light of insight and wisdom may shine within a building or ray out of the building into the community. We may begin to understand that a non-material element such as light considerably modifies the effect of the denser elements. Through the element of light, the wisdom of Waldorf pedagogy is made visible. This source of wisdom is nurtured and strengthened by the working of the faculty to deepen their knowledge and continue their research into the essence of what is human.

The Element of Sound and Number Relationships

This element is even more elusive than light. It stands in polarity to the watery/fluid element, and some of its effects are quite mysterious.

The *inner music* of an organization or school demonstrates the working together of colleagues, co-workers, and administration. The pattern of communal working for the greater good and the shared vision resounds in the symphony of an organism's inner music. Its harmony, or disharmony, is heard and perceived by the greater community, and provides a potent tool for judging the organization's health and well-being.

Sound reverberates and echoes in the physical elements and sets them in motion. The internal working of the faculty of a school or of the management of a company is heard by all who are connected to the institution, not with physical ears, but with the ears of the soul and mind. Is there a rousing song, or a repetitious, boring, tune? Is there a tune at all or only confusing noise? Is there complete silence or an enthralling harmony, an orchestra, or a chorus? It is Elvis Presley, The Rolling Stones, reggae or rap, Bach or Mozart?

The signature tune of a school or organization is one of its vital components, but one most often ignored. It can be transformed. An instrument may be tuned, an orchestra may learn to play together in the same key and measure, and individualistic loners or prima donnas may in time learn to make music in harmony with others.

The character of a school's music will greatly determine its ability to attract money. A great and rousing symphony will be heard far and wide in the greater community, and attract attention and approval. Disharmony will annoy those who hear it and will cause the flow of money to diminish to a trickle. A pure but harmonious tune will be heard, like a songbird's mellifluous tune transcending the roar of traffic, but it may only reach the immediate neighborhood.

As the water element has a strongly periodic and seasonal flow and ebb, so does the inner music. Different tunes are appropriate for different seasons. Different forms of income are also appropriate for different seasons, for different objectives. Sound and liquids are inherently related to each other.

It is important to determine the character of an organization's music; it is also essential to determine the character of its audience, for playing Mozart at a rock concert may not induce much listening or enthusiasm. The music of the environment, of the audience, is as important as that of the internal social relationship.

Who creates this internal music? Primarily the individuals fundamentally involved and responsible for the organization's mission, management, and operation. If these individuals recognize each other's humanity, especially recognizing each other as spiritual beings striving to manifest their best and most honest work, overcoming personal prejudices and difficulties for the benefit of the whole, then appropriate harmony and music will arise. Rudolf Steiner has given many indications about how to develop one's inner, spiritual capacities, not only for oneself, but also for the benefit of the social organism. If these indications are truly worked with on a regular basis, and—in the case of a school—if they live in the souls of the faculty, board, and parents, then a school's inner music is enhanced and members of the community will begin to be in tune with each other.

The Element of Life

A living organism shows its viability when all the essential elements of life are ordered and

integrated to form a self-sustaining, healthy organism. The life of an organization such as a school depends on the spiritual striving of its members. If teachers take their commitment to Rudolf Steiner and anthroposophy seriously enough and work on their inner development, if they are also members of a college of teachers, of the School of Spiritual Science and its Pedagogical Section, then they infuse life and the potential of organic order into a school. Correspondingly, the spiritual striving of the directors and managers of a company whose goals extend beyond economic success to serve social ideals will also act as a spiritual core of their organization.

In the larger community there are also those individuals who are striving spiritually, who support the impulse and initiative of an organism with spiritual goals such as a Waldorf school by recognizing that service is done there to the true image of the human being. Then their contributions will strengthen the existence of the school and help its impulse to be rooted in fertile ground.

It thus becomes apparent that there is a reciprocal relationship between idealistic and spiritual initiatives and practical rootedness in physical manifestation—namely in the physical plant, housing, building, or property the organization owns or hopes to own. The stronger the spiritual impulse and commitment, the better the opportunities for physical expression.

The Element of Time in its Organ-forming Capacity

When dealing with a living organism such as a plant, we need to consider its life and organs in the context of its time signature.

Growth, one may realize, occurs in spurts, not in constant graduated increases, and is characterized by expansive as well as contractive processes. Just as one may see in a plant nodes of contraction at crucial points such as the location from which expansion into leaves and blossoms begins, one may also recognize such nodes in an organization. These organizational nodes represent a concentration of energies created through the work of individuals to serve the organism as a whole and to help it develop harmoniously and productively. Before expansion is possible, a phase of contractive, concentrated, and focused deliberate planning and imagining activity has to occur. A seed is the ultimate contractive form, for it contains the potential for the entire future plant or organism. As the proverb says, “Out of small acorns mighty oaks do grow.”

It is important to be clear about what is needed for a precious seed of intention to grow into reality and what physical, soul, and spiritual conditions are fostered by the attention of the individuals involved in the process.

The organs in an organization such as a school are the groups that meet regularly, occasionally, sporadically, or just once for a specific purpose. If we honor the time signature of a living organism, we shall be careful not to endow groups with perpetuity, for then no development can take place. We shall also not fix individuals semi-permanently as carriers of such group activity, for we would defeat the principle of development, which needs to be open-ended. If we do so, we also deprive individuals of their own freedom to develop themselves.

Moreover, we should beware of viewing the time signature of organizations in terms of human life phases because we would create a pattern that does not correspond to the life principle of

organizations. For example, while Rudolf Steiner pointed repeatedly to the law of seven-year cycles in human lives, he also pointed to a 33-year cycle of social and historical life, and to a much larger 350-year cycle of paradigm shifts in historical development. The 33-year cycle, for instance, is repeated three times in a century, with a phase of impulse and intention which then becomes manifest and finally inserts itself in society if the impulse was forceful enough. I am inclined to regard the life cycles of organizations as much longer than those of individual men and women.

Let us consider an organization that wants to be alive by manifesting the seven elements described above and that has a healthy succession of expansion and contraction in the formation of its organs. Such an organization would not fix individuals into any set positions because individuals need to be free to be active in one of the organs of the organization for a time but not forever.

It is important to have a clear purpose and mandate for each organ of the organization. Further, the smallest possible number of persons is usually the most efficient group or committee. Rotation of duties, too, is a good idea, so that everyone is engaged actively, and the load is evenly distributed. Time limits for meetings need to be kept. If the group is a special-purpose group, dissolve it after its purpose is achieved. If it is a permanent group with a clear purpose, the application of Waldorf classroom dynamics—such as changes of tempo and activity within the meeting time—will ensure that members remain fresh and focused on the tasks.

Above all, consider the reciprocity of the seven life elements, and how they can enhance each other. They can also interfere and hinder the healthy development of an organization if no attention is paid to their inherent character and their relationship to time.

In this essay I have attempted to indicate a diagnostic process. The picture of an organization such a process helps us develop will allows us to visualize this organization's particular challenges and strengths.

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1 It may be helpful to consider here Rudolf Steiner's ideas of the way that human beings are involved in the three arenas of the "Threefold Social Order." While a person's main life work may be in the cultural or spiritual arena, each person is also part of the social-legal structure of a country and participates in the economy as a consumer. All human beings are therefore involved in all arenas of society.