

The Current Evolution of the Alchemical Fire Circle

I attended my first intentional all-night fire circle at Firedance in the year 2000. The event had been described to me as being a cutting edge example of the fusion of the drum circle with ritual elements from the pagan community. Since then, I have been both participant and organizer in upwards of 100 circles. I have witnessed with particular interest the on-going development of one particular expression of the all-night fire circle that I will be referring to as the Alchemical Fire Circle.

This article is an attempt to provide definition towards clarification of what constitutes an Alchemical Fire Circle. My thanks to three of the most recognizable architects and proponents of the Alchemical Fire Circle model for their input: Jeff McBride, Abigail Spinner McBride, and Joshua Levin, my partner in the development of Alchemical Rhythmatism, an approach to music making specifically designed for the Alchemical Circle.

In the broad spectrum of all-night fire circles there are many unique experiments currently in process. A number of events have appeared on the festival circuit, including (but not limited to) Spiritfire, Sacred Soul Fire, Phoenix Fire, Forestdance,, the Bohemian Fire Circle, EarthFire, Fire Tribe Hawaii, Fires Rising, SoCal Sacred Fire Circle Wisconsin, and more. Each of these events has its' own unique flavor and intentions, often with different metaphors and guidelines designed to nurture specific kinds of experiences. I consider the wonderful diversity of what is evolving as being part of a rainbow continuum of possibilities – all refractions of the same Sun (the fire in the center of the Circle).

My intention here is to clarify and highlight some of the unique elements and new combinations that have emerged in the evolution of the Alchemical Fire Circle model over the last three years. When I state that a given conceptual or architectural element is part of the Alchemical Fire Circle model, I also understand that there are other forms of the intentional all-night fire circle that utilize many of the elements outlined below. My goal here is to point towards the *collection* of elements that are generally agreed to be present at a circle organized around alchemical metaphors.

At this time I consider the Fires Rising, Vegas Vortex May Fire, and Hawaii Fire Tribe Winter Solstice events to be examples of the Alchemical Fire Circle. My hope is that the reader will look with interest at what is brewing in the alchemical paradigm; both at what has changed in the last few years, and into what is new. My desire is to continue the process of distilling and nurturing the growth of the Alchemical Fire Circle, and to share the lessons that result with others who may be interested.

I encourage those of you who are running Fire Circle experiments that use unique metaphors and approaches to share the results from your laboratory as well. May we all continue to grow in varied and wondrous ways – and cross-pollinate occasionally!

The following eight elements seem most significant in terms of being marked shifts or new approaches to the nature and objectives of the Alchemical Fire Circle. In addition, there are two more that are in the early stages of experimentation. I have provided a brief section on each. (*Please note: The metaphor of “refinement” as used in Alchemical circles points to a set of processes being explored in the circle, and is not meant to imply that an Alchemical Fire Circle is “more refined.”*)

Personal and Collective Refinement The broad paradigm of the Alchemical Fire Circle is informed by the fact that Alchemy is essentially a transformational model that focuses on growth and refinement. This is illustrated by the core metaphor, known to almost everyone: “Turning Lead into Gold.” In other words, Alchemy is a set of self initiated and managed processes designed to induce change from a less desirable state (lead) into one that is more highly valued and refined (gold). The various stages of Alchemy describe psychological processes that all have the effect of moving one towards more resourceful and empowered states of consciousness or ability. The typical social fire is usually focused on partying and revelry. Intentional all-night fire circles generally revolve around trance work and sacred celebration. The process of the Alchemical Fire Circle nurtures artful play, the development of new abilities and skills, and encourages the active use of the Circle as a laboratory for personal experimentation. This gives people the opportunity to stretch their beliefs about what is possible elsewhere in life through risk taking and self-expression in a highly supportive environment.

Expression Focus, Emphasis On Connection and Collaboration In the early stages of the blossoming of the Alchemical Fire Circle, some of its proponents were referred to critically as “performers.” Interestingly, the ability to “perform” effectively in the world is central to surviving and thriving in most human cultures. This generally means performing, or functioning well as a student, parent, employee or business person. The Alchemical Fire Circle invites, challenges, and entices one to engage in performing - *but not as an entertainer*. Instead celebrants can discover new pathways to fulfillment through deep play and engagement with each other within a variety of artful expressions. There are at least two reasons for this: first, music making, singing, dancing, speaking out in public and other forms of art making are inherently fun and exciting; second, most of us have been conditioned to believe that these activities belong to those in the community who are “professionals.” As a result, we often feel insecure about expressing ourselves in these ways. The Alchemical Fire Circle is intended to be a nurturing container where we can practice the internal processes required to push beyond our comfort zones and fears. Dancing in public, leading a chant, reciting a poem, singing loudly (and perhaps out of tune!), or playing a musical instrument for the first time, can reveal much about our attitudes, behaviors, and ways of thinking. These lessons can then be generalized and applied to future goals and dreams. The Alchemical Fire Circle seeks to create a safe and supportive crucible within which new skills and abilities are grown by engaging creatively with others, collaborating on bringing new offerings around the Fire, and encouraging each other to take creative risks. The gains in confidence and competence that result from this work become the foundation for making positive changes elsewhere in life.

Drug and Alcohol Free As Alchemical Fire Circles emphasize refinement, risk taking, stepping out, participation, collaboration and “bringing it on,” the organizers stress that these events are places to explore states of consciousness such as deep creativity, intense focus, and mindful engagement. The sacraments that may be in use at a given all-night fire circle are often ingested with the intention to magnify the effects of trance, or to assist in deepening one’s internal focus for subjective or emotional work. These substances have dramatic effects on the content and structure of the experience. Depending on one’s perspective, this is either liberating or limiting to the interactive opportunities available in the Fire Circle. The Alchemical Circle is better served by a crystal clear, attentive and open witnessing that is unaffected by chemical influences. This allows celebrants to be more responsive to new opportunities in which they can engage with others, and collaborate through music, song, movement or service. The drug and alcohol free environment also encourages people to confront challenging real-life emotions such as shyness, fear, or hesitation without chemical intervention.

Transformational Approach / Methodology Some intentional all-night fire circles attract people who attend for healing, or to serve as healers. The Alchemical Fire Circle model has been moving toward a different position along the Wounded-Healing-Wellness continuum. The Alchemical Circle is similar in approach to the principles of Behavioral Psychology, which focus on practicing the actions and behaviors of a new desired state of being within a framework of consistent encouragement and positive reinforcement. This is in contrast to classical psychology in the West, which aims to uncover, understand or release past traumatic events.

Common transformational practices in the broader all-night fire circle paradigm are sometimes aligned with cathartic or Shamanic approaches involving individual healers who conduct various energetic operations. For example, healers may perform extractions that are intended to remove negative energy bodies or other unseen elements that are painful, heavy, stuck, or poisonous to the individual. Also common in these circles, is a cathartic release in which individuals collapse to the ground, are rendered functionally immobile, and are aided back to their feet and consciousness through various combinations of touching, energetic work, sonic holding with rattles, and verbal guidance. Fundamental to this approach is the view that illness and other limits on personal growth are the result of unresolved past trauma or foreign contaminants and influences. Consequently, health and healing arise from the interventions of skilled practitioners who possess expert knowledge of how to cope with these unseen forces.

Within the Alchemical Fire Circle, the emotional and cognitive challenges of life are referred to as “lead.” This metaphor embraces the opportunities that exist within our struggles and suffering. Alchemical Lead is the unformed beginning matter of one’s neutral, as yet unrefined potential or possibility. This dense heavy substance contains seeds of positive transformation, but the opportunities for growth are inhibited when others attempt to remove or resolve the issues for us. Wellness practice in the Alchemical Fire Circle is therefore self-directed towards the invention, evolution, and refinement of thoughts and behaviors that are focused on present and future goals. While understanding the dynamics of past experiences can be helpful or even essential, Alchemical resolution and life changes come from creating healthier relationships with self and others in the present moment. This perspective inspires a variety of self initiated techniques for practicing Wellness that do not require other people to actively facilitate or manage the process. Ultimately, we can heal ourselves. And having healed from past pains, there is a whole world of ever more vibrant Wellness to be explored through artful expression and collaborative creativity.

Chanting, Spoken Word, and Silence Although chanting and singing certainly play a significant role throughout the various forms of all-night fire circle, the predominance of loud sustained drumming results in significant limitations on these and other forms of expression. In the Alchemical Fire Circle, there is a clear intention that vocal magic is equally as important as both dancing and drumming, and that periods of silence are expected in order to invite and welcome spoken word offerings or chants. Silence is especially valued in the context of a Circle organized around growth through artful expression, as there are many new, unfamiliar chants being offered and the words must be easy to hear in order to be learned and embraced by the group. In addition, the music makers understand that there is a high likelihood that a chant may have two or more layers, and that the magic of a cappella is deeply powerful in its own unique ways. This means that those people playing musical instruments usually join in singing along with the rest of the celebrants for a while, before layering in with rhythmic or melodic enhancements. Engaging in singing generally results in more musical variation as the rhythms unfold as inspired by the songs, in contrast to the songs being required to fit into a rhythm already being played. Many chants are in triplet meter, and singing along with these songs helps those making music to explore rhythmic structures and possibilities that may be new to them. Silence is deeply valued in the Alchemical Circle as it also invites magickal speaking to the Fire and to the group, opportunities to make public commitments or declarations, to speak visions or to call in the manifestation of goals or dreams. Sometime the sound of the crackling fire is the only sonic accompaniment required to guide and sustain the group in rich, mindful moments.

Alchemical Rhythmatism The shift in focus from a trance environment to one organized around expression and collaboration calls for more variety and flexibility from the music-makers in order to support the broad range of offerings in the Circle. In addition to enhancing interpersonal connections through rhythm, there is also a desire to make music in such a way that playing together will grow celebrants' skills and contribute to the development of an ever-deepening musical legacy. Like the Circle itself, the challenges initiated by Alchemical Rhythmatism encourage celebrants to refine the "lead" of their emotional, psychological, and technical limitations through crafting music together. Alchemical Rhythmatism is a music making experiment that continues to evolve in both its form and intentions to accommodate: 1) Giving first time, "never played an instrument before" celebrants easy parts to play, including a supportive framework within which they can also be guided lovingly when needed; 2) Providing for the changing needs of the broader Circle through unstructured and structured periods of musical activity; 3) Introducing rhythmic and musical forms or meters outside the typical West African derived rhythms that are most familiar in the Fire Circle scene; 4) Skilled musicians having opportunities to be of service to other drummers, both through a shared language understood by all, and by using the approach as a way to take the rest of the music makers on new and unique rhythmic journeys – much like the whole group experiences when a new chant is introduced for everyone to sing together; 5) Participation of drummers at almost any skill level. Anyone can be the person who offers a rhythmic seed that all the other percussionists can match and embellish; 6) The inclusion of melodic instruments, sacred or ambient sounds, vocal jams, throat singing and more as discreet offerings, with or without percussion as desired; 7) Providing skilled accompaniment for opening, or "during the night" rituals that have specific and often rapidly changing musical needs; 8) The celebrants who are dancing or chanting in being able to easily cue the music makers to change tempo, volume, and even compositional elements in order to empower expressions emerging in the dance tracks.

Alchemical Metaphors The Alchemical Fire Circle has its own unique set of metaphors. Many of these are drawn from the lexicon of alchemical lore such as "Lead into Gold," "It Takes Gold To Make Gold," "The Marriage of Soul and Spirit," "Solve Et Coagula," "Separate the Subtle From The Gross," "Salt, Sulfur, Mercury," "Chaos and Cosmos," and the processes contained within the 3, 4 or 7 stage models. Alchemical Fire Circles also associate Planetary and Elemental Mythologies with the dance tracks and the 4 directional portals. In addition, there are a number of other conceptual frames from sources beyond traditional alchemy. These are often used in the orientations, literature, or rituals that shape an Alchemical Fire Circle. Some examples include: "The Circle is a Microcosm of the Macrocosm," "Ordeal of Creativity," "Sacred Arts Circle," "Separate Yourself From That Which Separates You From Others," "A Spiritual Path Based on Mileage," and "Evolution Through Revolution." These metaphors help transmit the mystery and meaning of the alchemical process. Celebrants are encouraged to learn more about them both during workshops at the events, and through online resources.

House Rules For many years, the idea of "rules" at a fire circle was avoided, largely due to a desire to be inclusive and welcoming to everyone. Over time, as the Alchemical Circle has moved further into exploring the processes of refinement, it has become clear that although, "all are welcome, all are one" ... not all behaviors are embraced in the work or play that this particular type of Circle is designed to nurture. Historically, most event organizers – including me - have referred to the guiding principles of their Circle with "soft" terminology like "considerations" or "agreements" in hopes that everyone present would be interested enough to consider and agree with the logic of what was being suggested. Organizers of Alchemical Fire Circles have come to believe that clear guidelines or even "rules" are important elements in the "container"

which holds the magical working. Although some people may not attend an event with rules, the use of clearly defined guidelines has resulted in a marked decrease in drama and distraction, and a stronger, richer experience for the people who are “on the same page.” Ultimately, any Fire Circle is a reflection of the people who put in the time and energy required to create it. New celebrants are empowered by clear guidelines to either dive into “this is how we do it here,” or to choose to attend one of the many other all-night fire circles flourishing around the world.

**** New Experiments ****

During-The-Night Rituals Most intentional all-night fire circles have some form of opening ceremony or ritual. This part of the night is used to create and consecrate the Circle as a holy space for sacred work and play, or for shaping group focus or intention. Some Circles have ceremonies at dawn to greet the Sun, bringing closure to the group and individual work for the night, and grounding or releasing the energies present. The Alchemical Fire Circle usually incorporates both Opening and Dawn rituals, and is also in the early stages of exploring the use of whole group rituals or ceremonies that take place during the long flow of the night. It is of particular note that – in contrast to the performance orientation of “ritual theatre” - these types of offerings are designed to be inclusive and highly interactive for everyone in the Circle when they take place. A brief introduction to the intentions and activities of the ritual may be given during or after the evening meal, along with information about the likely duration (usually under ½ hour), and suggestions about how to best engage when the moment arrives. Examples of these types of Fire Circle elements include a ritual utilizing dance and movement in order to embody empowering archetypes, moon rituals, initiations, and a series of 5 to 10 minute rituals which recur through the night to mark transitions from one alchemical stage to the next, or perhaps toward another stage in a prayer cycle that frames and guides the overall direction of the Circle. Longer offerings occur when a group of celebrants with a vision for a “during the night ritual” collaborate with the event organizers. In such situations, attention is given to ensuring that people who might choose not to be a part of the group ritual still have a way to orbit and stay connected with the fire.

The Four Stage Temples In some Alchemical Fire Circles four small temples are constructed within the perimeter that provide places in the Circle to do specific kinds of un-facilitated personal or interpersonal work. The temples correspond to four major Alchemical stages; Nigredo, Albedo, Citrinus and Rubedo. Temple Nigredo is in the Southeast area of the Circle, between the Smudge Gate and the Furnace (the music making area). In this temple people meditate on what they are ready to release or transform, write it on a stick or piece of paper, and then offer it to the Fire. Temple Albedo is in the Southwest, between the Furnace and the Water Altar. Here celebrants find a basin of scented water, with which they can wash, cleanse or purify themselves. Temple Citrinus is in the Northwest between the Water Altar and the Ancestor's Shrine or Temple of Light. This is a place to go for eye gazing, energy exchanges, or heart-to heart connections with one other person or with your self, moving in or through processes of relating. Temple Rubedo in the Northeast is between the Temple of Light and the Smudge Gate. This temple contains a number of mysteries relating to the final stage of the Work, including rosewater and sacred oil for anointing. Rubedo is a place for completion, integration, gratitude and giving thanks.

The Alchemical Fire Circle is, and will continue to be, a work in progress.

The Alchemical model itself teaches that the process of attaining The Gold is usually long and arduous, and that just when one thinks they have attained the Philosopher's Stone of Enlightenment... certain elements suddenly begin to decay, dropping away and revealing new possibilities. This article is merely a snapshot taken at a moment in time, in order to capture and reflect the perceived present state of this version of what alchemists refer to as The Great Work. If you are interested in more information relating to Alchemical Fire Circles please visit – live, or via the Web:

The Re-Sourcery: A Library of Possibilities
Fires Rising
Vegas Vortex
Fire Tribe Hawaii
Sacred Arts Circles
A Sampling of Alchemical Fire Circle (video)

http://www.4qf.org/_FiresRising/_res_index.htm
http://www.4qf.org/_FiresRising
<http://vegasvortex.com/>
<http://www.firetribehawaii.org/>
<http://www.mythfits.com/sac.html>
youtube.com/watch?v=aSjnq_ALNVY

Thank you for your interest! Michael Wall 4/11/08

THE ALCHEMICAL VESSEL

