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# The voice of the shuttle

## Mythical and organizational transformations

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**Abstract** *While the literature has emphasized the literal and the narrative within organizations, this article will consider the visual and the imaginal. Organizations are known and experienced through images, and these images must be considered if organizational culture is to be understood or changed. We look at the imaginal inventory provided by classical mythology, with special reference to Ovid's Metamorphoses, and explore the potency and persistence of myth in imaginal terms and introduce the concept of the "voice of the shuttle", which imprints events within the metaphorical weave of the mythical narrative. This "voice", always present in organizations, leaves significant and revealing images on the cultural fabric. We try to understand these images through the experiences of an organizational participant and of students trying to make sense of their college culture.*

If metaphors as well as plots or myths could be archetypal, I would nominate Sophocles' [phrase] "the voice of the shuttle" for that distinction (Hartman, 1970).

This paper developed out of a series of discussions with Y, a manager who had a long and successful career in an ivy-league university. Y, a US citizen, emigrated to Israel two years ago and was hired by a software development company in Jerusalem. He soon found himself confronted by what at first seemed to be a severe and dysfunctional clash of culture. Initially, Y found it difficult to determine the exact cause of the conflict, but as time went by he concluded that his core problems stemmed from his micro-culture of the organization that he worked in, not from the culture of his new country.

### Troubled landscapes

Y describes his work environment as constantly abrasive and potentially explosive. While senior management demands unwavering loyalty from employees, the employees recognize that this position is contrived and hollow: management is perceived as treacherous and is inconsistent in rewarding loyalty. Y feels unsupported by senior management, describing the CEO as having a leadership style that is aggressive and transactional. As with many larger Israeli corporations, the CEO is a former high-ranking military officer and Y has little confidence in the transferability of military skills to the

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workplace. Y does not really regard himself as a soldier even although he refers to his workday as "entering a war zone".

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When Y enters his workplace, he reports seeing a landscape that is dark and treacherous. He waits for the next skirmish. Research, production, and sales are falling behind target and there is a palpable anger in the air. There is also confusion, frustration, mistrust, and a sense of pain. According to the organization team efforts are expected and favored but there is a high degree of cynicism, opportunism and suspicion. Y and many of his co-workers are looking for alternative employment. He characterizes his workplace as unpleasant and tense. He does not regard these as simply thoughts or observations about his workplace; they can more correctly be considered part of his experience of organizational reality. When we suggested the vocabulary and imagery of mythical transformations, Y thought that his work organization was similar to the myth of Arachne, the spider. He has a deep loathing for spiders: they frighten, repulse and unsettle him.

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Y reveals a surface image beneath which are multiple realities, meanings and ways of understanding. The spider is an image that Y has neither fully considered nor consciously created. By looking at the deeper stillness of the organization, in particular the deep stillness that is shared with all other participants, we believe that Y might come to see a richer and more complex series of images associated with and connected to his spontaneous surface image. These images are not simply personal fantasies. Instead, they represent a way of knowing the organization and of translating its cultural past and present. For Y and his colleagues, the reflection and consideration of these revealed images may provide a way of reconsidering the organizational environment and perhaps even a way of imagining organizational transformation.

In this paper we explore some of the elements of an imaginal psychology from a perspective that considers reality, and experiences of reality, in terms of images – images that are essentially archetypal. We consider that these powerful images are preserved and perpetuated through a shared mythology. In attempting to consider such images we evoke a wider mythology – that of Ovid's *Metamorphoses* – to demonstrate that the pictures held captive in these narratives have the power to shape the experience of the present. We suggest that change and transformation inevitably produce, metaphorically that is, images within the very fabric of the organization and that these images can be made accessible to participants through the shared culture and mythology of the workplace. In the final section, we look at images accessed and reported by an individual working in a troubled organization and look for imaginal indicators that might suggest organizational transmutations.

### **Imagined events**

We experience the world through a perpetual flow of images and attempt to make sense of a world that apparently lies beyond them. When we sleep, many of the images that we have encountered and stored are recovered and

represented in dreams. The ways in which we experience and reconstitute reality are bound up with the innumerable images that we encounter, retain and recall. From such a perspective, sensemaking can be regarded as fundamentally and crucially "imaginal" rather than verbal. Within the Jungian and post-Jungian psychological traditions, the images used to make sense of reality have often been understood as archetypal, being both elemental and recurring. Henry Corbin adopted the expression "imaginal psychology" and developed this concept convincingly through studies of Sufi mysticism (Corbin, 1998). Similarly, James Hillman (1997) argued that individuals endow archetypal images with personal value and significance, and by so doing they provide new insights and revisions of what may have been predominately understood as a literal and literalized reality. Imaginal psychology argues that a preoccupation with the literal has often reduced a "multiple ambiguity of meanings to one definition" (Hillman, 1975).

Mythology has been characterized as a literalized reality: it is regarded primarily as narrative. Thus myth has been defined:

A dramatic narrative of imagined events, usually used to explain origins or transformations of something. Also, an unquestioned belief about the practical benefits of certain techniques and behaviors that are not supported by facts (Trice and Beyer, 1984).

This definition contains several points of interest. First, the seemingly intuitively inclusion of the word "imagined" in the definition highlights that myth is the presentation of a sequence of images. Imagined events are not flimsy, idiosyncratic fabrications but rather the recollection and reconstruction of significant experiences with the world. Second, the cited definition points to the constant possibility that myth is susceptible to trivialization in a world that prefers logic, literalism, and a "factual" realism (Casey, 1976). From such a worldview, myth lacks substance and objective verification, and therefore lacks legitimacy. However, from a perspective that sees reality as a negotiated construction, myth is not susceptible to a "questioning belief" any more than it requires the "support of facts". Just as it has been asserted that "imagination is reality" (Avens, 1991), so we suggest that myth is equally real. Seen in this way, myths persist and exert their potency precisely because they operate at other-than-logical and other-than-literal levels. In order to explore these levels of meaning, we will next examine the mythological world of Ovid and develop a tentative theory of myth.

### **A picture held us captive**

In his *Metamorphoses*, Ovid set out to construct a universal history of change and transformation, starting with the creation of the universe and stretching to the edge of his own contemporary world. His transformations represent changes that are initiated by the gods, changes that often seem as whimsical and capricious as they do extraordinary. For example, consider the mulberry tree that grows in the garden in front of my office. This tree can be described in

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physical, aesthetic, and botanical terms; however, Ovid's mythology provides an alternative way of understanding it.

Pyramus and Thisbe (Ovid, Book IV) are engaged in a love affair that is doomed from the outset. Despite parental censure, they arrange an assignation behind a mausoleum, not perhaps the most propitious place for such a meeting. Pyramus is late, and while waiting for him Thisbe sees a lion and flees, dropping her shawl. The lion finds the garment and rips it with bloodied claws. Pyramus arrives and cannot find his lover. He discovers her bloodstained shawl and, believing that the lion has fatally savaged Thisbe, falls on his sword. His blood splashes on a nearby tree that is laden with "snow-white fruit". Thisbe, finding her lover dead beside her bloody shawl, realizes with horror what must have happened and uses his sword to take her own life (Ovid, Book IV, pp. 125-7):

The berries of the tree, spattered with blood,  
Assumed a sable hue; the blood-soaked roots  
Tinged with a purple dye the hanging fruits.

Reconciled, the grieving parents symbolically mix the cremated remains of the lovers in the same funereal urn. But this is not the end of the story. The tragic events (later to be parodied by Shakespeare) are imbued with such a degree of traumatic anguish that they persist in our individual and collective consciousness. To imagine the fated lovers is to bring to mind a series of images that, while personal and unique, contain archetypal elements that can be verbally labeled as "irrational love", "fatal error", "profoundity of personal loss", "suicidal despair", etc. These persistent images remain with us and change the way in which we now "understand" the mulberry. The mulberry tree, which originally produced exclusively snow-white fruits, had its fruit color permanently changed by the passion of these fated lovers. Their love and despair are, in a metaphoric and imaginal way, permanently fixed in the altered fruit color of the tree. The archetypal pain and despair of these events – whether historically validated or imaginarily shared – alter the world, and these changes are preserved in the actual objects of the world, their associated mythologies, and our contemporary reflection.

Does this myth tell us why mulberries have dark fruits? Is the purpose of myth to explain present forms? Is myth designed to suggest that what is presently recognized with certainty has its origins in a much deeper, equivocal past? Rather than provide superficial explanations, mythical metamorphoses allow us to retain levels of awareness and reconstitute experienced realities that are hauntingly present. We are not provided with a reason but with an insight into a lingering set of archetypal images: the pain of loss, the wrench of distress, the flurry of rashness, the commitment of faithfulness, and the inevitability of fate.

Mythical transformations provided us with a narrative, which unfolds from a series of images. Wittgenstein (1958, p. 115) considers imagery, not narrative, to be primal: "A picture held us captive. It lay in our language and our language repeated it to us inexorably". It is not words that conjure up pictures; rather, it is that words are formed, sustained, and given life by images. The myth has a narrative pattern but it is not verbal; that is simply the way in which it has been

transcribed. Myth remains essentially in the mind – or perhaps more correctly in the mind's eye – not on the page.

### **Stamped with new design**

While mythological narratives can capture time within their constantly accessible imagery, what types of images do they offer and of what use are these images in a consideration of the present? We now examine the structure of transformation myths and the dynamics of their formation. Having done this we will be in a better position to appreciate mythical contributions to organizational development and transformations.

- First, while mythical metamorphoses seem at first sight to indicate change, they are better seen as the arrestment rather than conclusion of a change process. It is because of this arrestment that the original object is still present: captured, as it were, like a fly in a block of amber.
- Second, transmutations are normally associated with overpowering passions that have ripped through the superficial fabric that equally binds people together socially and obscures the actions of the “gods”. In our mythological world “gods” are not deities so much as the personification of elemental forces, passions and all too human characteristics. Metamorphoses are not tame affairs, but are instead centered on events and feelings that are passionate, willful, precocious, and violent.
- Third, Ovid's characters live in a world where the presence of the gods is more evident and predictable. It is a magical world, where transformation is possible, even inevitable. Yet, while this world is close to the gods, it is not particularly helpful to see the metamorphoses as divine rewards and punishments. Transformations are more a product of consternation, concern, and celestial confusion: a godlike solution that freezes the disruptive tangle that threatens to rip the web of status quo. The gods can obliterate memory of the object but the associated human emotions cannot be so easily erased. This emotional residue belongs to men and not the gods, and this residue is an essential element in mythology.

The death of Pyramus and Thisbe suspends the fiery, passionate and familial conflict of the rebellious lovers. The emotions arising from these passions are not eliminated: they still survive in the dark color of the mulberry. These primordial passions have been cooled, but still remain embedded in, and accessible through, the mythology and in the objects identified. Captured in their metamorphosed states, the original actors present us with a dangerous set of images that are still charged with emotions which, if released, might bring about a wider disruption and breakdown in the sustaining presumption of stability. Ovid's metamorphoses are quintessentially changes of shapes and form of the actors, not of their intentions. The form is new but the old tension remains, indeed it remains in a more heightened and explosive way because of the inherent trauma that always accompanied metamorphosis. It is this

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unchanged electrifying core, rather than the altered peripheral form, which constitutes the magic, potency and persistency of mythical metamorphoses. As Ovid makes clear (Book XV, pp. 170-74):

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As yielding wax is stamped with new designs  
And changes shape and seems not still the same  
But is indeed the same, even so our souls  
Are still the same for ever but adopt,  
In their migration, ever changing forms.

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### **Philomela's fabric and the voice of the shuttle**

We have suggested that Ovid's *Metamorphoses* capture a rich imaginal repertoire and allow us to access these perpetually preserved states. The transformations depicted retain the enduring remnants and resonance of primordial emotional engagement. The centrality of the imaginal aspect of mythical transformation is particularly transparent and immediate in the events that surrounded Procne and Philomela. We consider this myth because it provides a clear and unambiguous demonstration of the traces of emotional turmoil and trauma that are left as residual images.

King Tereus (Ovid, Book VI, pp. 412-677) marries Procne but has a lustful infatuation with her sister Philomela. After arranging for Philomela to be isolated from her father and sister, he subjects her to a sadistic and violent rape. Distraught, she tries to escape and expose the outrage but is overpowered and her tongue severed. Tereus leaves her imprisoned in his villa and tells Procne that she has died. Philomela, voiceless but driven to communicate her horrific experiences, weaves a roll of cloth. Through subtle and ingenious craft, she is able to weave a subliminal story of her rape, maiming, and imprisonment into the fabric. It is unclear how she accomplishes this: Ovid considered it to be in a written form, Sophocles thought that the story was portrayed as an image.

The artfully woven fabric is sent to Procne, who is able to decipher the message. She liberates her sister, and plots a suitable revenge for her husband. She murders her own son and serves his flesh to his unsuspecting father. When he eventually realizes what has happened, Tereus draws his sword and rushes at the sisters. They flee but he catches up with them and, as he is about to strike, they are transformed into birds by the watchful and concerned gods. Again there are variants in the myth, with the Greeks recognizing Philomela as the nightingale and Procne as the swallow, while the Romans saw it the other way round. Everyone recognizes Tereus was transformed to a hoopoe, with his crown-like crest and bloodstained breast.

The series of images that constitute this myth are complex, intense, painful and disturbing. The myth contains two levels of transformation. The first, deals with the metamorphosis of the king and the two sisters into birds. The second, deals with the transformation of an intense personal experience into a woven cloth. Aristotle (*Poetics*, 16.4) refers to a non-extant play of Sophocles that deals with the drama of Tereus and Philomela. In that play, Sophocles coined the phrase "the voice of the shuttle". The shuttle is voiceless, as is

Philomela, and yet in her hands the shuttle can be used to give her a powerful way of expressing and recording her agony and shame. Her trauma and history are accessible through and within this voiceless stillness of the fabric, when that stillness is considered and reflected upon. Within the weave is recorded not simply a visual image but an emotional experience that we can enter into as we spread out the fabric and examine it (Hartman, 1970).

In a sense, all myths are like Philomela's fabric. To engage in myth is to look for the latent images that have been placed there by the silent and artful shuttle. Language is limited in conveying the emotional richness and vibrancy in these events, and so mythology is perpetuated through images that are as voiceless, but nevertheless as potent, as potent as Philomela's woven cloth. Within the image – or perhaps through and beyond that image – there is the possibility of reaching a meaning that is different from the one that we presently possess. To endure, and to still maintain its power, myth must be a "clever fabric" that holds within it an ancient imaginal record and yet still leaves room for contemporary re-imagination. Myth is a silence in which there is always perpetual movement; in T.S. Eliot's phrase, where "all is always now".

David Miller (1999) has asked us whether we presently live in a world where myth and gods are too much with us, or whether we inhabit a mythless and godless sphere. Provocatively, he concludes that we move in and out of both realms. While there is no shortage of mythological journeys to engage in, many of these journeys are superficial, skimming the surface of experience and offering no opportunity for revision. In order to be sustaining and therapeutic, the myth must be allowed to connect with a deeper unconscious level, beyond the self and beyond the ego. Myths, simply seen as narratives and fictions, cannot provide even superficial reasons for present states and future changes. The psychology, image and myth that survives and continues to provide engagement, must be "rhetorical and poetic, its reasoning not critical" (Hilman, 1997). Myth is not an ultimate end or solution in its self; rather, as Miller (1999) acknowledges, myth inevitably challenges us "to see everything mythologically, and to learn a different way of thinking, a mythopoetic way, a different insight of the present world".

### **Beyond the spider, beyond the shimmering sea**

Since the seminal work of Gareth Morgan (1986, 1993), images and ways of imagining have provided significant direction in understanding and changing organizational contexts. At times, organizational reality (ontology) has been considered as separate and distinct from the knowledge that we can have of the organization (epistemology). Similarly, we have come to think of organizational process and content as separate and distinct. However, Morgan's work has drawn attention to the usefulness of images in the construction of organizational reality.

For instance, metaphor has emerged as a powerful tool because it confronts us with parallel images of the organization, through which we can explore and

recognize aspects in ways that were neither obvious nor possible (Judge, 1991). Metaphor changes what we see and how we see; in doing so, as Arthur Rimbaud reminds us, it can literally "change the world". Similarly other linguistic turns such as metonym, paradox, totemic systems, symbolism, and mythology give us the possibility of using different, contrasting, and often disturbing images to test the structures and linkages in organizational ontology and epistemology. Michael Lissack (1997) suggests that if organizational change is to be influenced and guided then "word choice and language interventions may be a fruitful strategy". To this we would add that, at a fundamental level of analysis, image choice and imaginative intervention underpin and sustain word- and language-based strategies.

Returning to our unhappy organizational participant Y, we recall that when asked to assign a mythical symbol to his company he thought of a spider. Since his organization is not in actuality a spider, we must consider what prompted him to make such a comparison. At a superficial level, he may have associated the fear, panic, and anxiety that the creature induces in him as equivalent to the unpleasantness that he finds within the organization. However, at a deep level, Y might be able to re-imagine his workplace by re-imagining the association.

Spiders also have their mythical transformations. Ovid (Book VI) tells us that the spider is the metamorphosed Arachne, an exceptionally gifted weaver who creates exquisite fabrics that capture every detail of scenes and legends. Her artistry is unrivalled and she is told that her gifts must come from the goddess Athene. However Arachne, as well as being exceptionally talented, is outrageously conceited and she rejects this idea outright, claiming that her talents have nothing to do with the gods. Angered, Athene appears in the form of an old woman, questions Arachne about her presumptuousness, and assures her that the gods will be forgiving if she only acknowledges their gift. Arachne, who persists in viewing her talent as a uniquely personal skill, rejects the idea.

Infuriated, Athene reveals herself. They set up their looms and begin to weave. The resulting fabrics are magnificent although they differ in content. While Athene's depicts conventional pastoral imagery, Arachne has pointedly depicted the "crimes of heaven", the indiscretions committed by the pantheon of gods. Outraged at the offense that has been given to the gods, and perhaps just as infuriated by the obviously superior weaving that Arachne has produced, Athene rips up her rival's weaving, delivers a series of near-fatal blows with her shuttle and then suspends the broken Arachne from a branch. As her passion subsides, Athene transforms Arachne into a spider that will perpetually hang in the air and spin webs that will in no way rival the woven mysteries of the gods.

Myth takes us beyond the object in search of the images that lie deep within it. It is at this deep level that Y might find a way of re-imagining his organizational context. We are not suggesting that he translate mythology into corporate reality in some point-to-point fashion. Rather, he might find within the imagery of the myth deeper levels of sense that correspond to the shallower experiences and discomfort that he is experiencing:



- Can he see beyond his panic and terror of the dreaded spider?
- Can he discover an organizational history running parallel to the mythological presentation of Arachne?
- Rather than focus on the black, dangling fear of the presence, might he be able to see the brilliant, flamboyant and fatally arrogant Arachne?
- How might this image match with the presentation and performance of Y's CEO and associates?
- Can he imagine what Arachne's original weaving may have been like?
- What constituted the "crime of heaven", and which gods have been violated or offended?
- Who, within his organizational context, is Athene and why is that person so angry?

Y's efforts to make sense of his organizational context might also compare with the attempts of students in a recent strategic management course to understand something of their own college culture. We provided students with images taken from mythology, giving them a series of brief synopses of metamorphoses presented by Ovid. Then we asked them to decide which one of these myths most closely resembled their college culture. More than half of the course participants independently selected the myth of Icarus (Ovid, Book VIII, pp. 182-239).

In this myth, Daedalus and his son Icarus have been exiled on Crete. The father tries to set his son free by constructing for him a pair of wings made from feathers set in wax. Icarus practices and is able to fly. His father gives him instructions on how to navigate and warns him to fly midway between waves and heaven, neither too low nor too high. Icarus ignores the warning, flies too high. The wax of his wings melts, and he falls to his death. The broad and shining sea into which he fell is named for him.

We asked students collectively for reactions on the Icarus imagery and its parallel with institutional culture in the college. It seems that this imagery, which was neither self-evident nor previously considered by students, was clearly associated with the cultural context of the college. In our terms, students looking at the cultural fabric created by their school were able to see clear, imprinted images that had been fixed there by a voice-less shuttle. But what did they see? Was it the image of a dynamic and energetic founder, who had tried to build a learning environment that placed value on personal integrity, entrepreneurial behavior, and individuals flying high? Was it a picture of daring, courage and impetuosity? Was there also the melting of the institutional and administrative wax, and the subsequent fall? As a group, they were undecided as to exactly what the parallels were between recognized image and contemporary operations. However, they agreed that these imaginal elements, while not an overt history of the school, were imprinted as residual visions, frustrations, disappointments and ambiguities in the academic and administrative culture.

When the Icarus myth is laid out beside the organizational history, points of similarity and metaphorical correspondence may be revealed. When the myth of Arachne is compared with the organizational context that Y finds himself in, there may also be a parallel. However, these correspondences and similarities extend well beyond the surface; they point to a deep culture, rather than a superficial one. As we have noted, the enterprise is not to describe the organization in novel terms but to look beyond the spider and the shining sea to a new, re-imaged organization. The object is not to fit a pre-existing narrative to a pre-existing organizational map but to use the imaginal inventory provided by the myth to develop a new vision of organizational past, present, and possibility.

### Conclusion

Edgar Schein (1990) has pointed out that a flaw of studying organizational symbols, stories, myths, and other artifacts is that we may make incorrect inferences if we do not connect them to underlying assumptions. Certainly, for those not immersed in the culture of the organization, it is likely that organizational artifacts might be given values, significance, and importance that are not supported by the "reality" of the organization. However, we believe that the demarcation between organizational epistemology and ontology has been over-stressed. Rather than an objective reality built on equally real assumptions, perhaps the organization might be more productively viewed as an ongoing construction of notions of what the organization is and how participants understand it.

While participants in the organization may have a deeper insight into the fundamental assumptions that shape the enterprise, it may well turn out that this insight is actually shallow and superficial. Indeed, familiarity undoubtedly limits and restricts the vision that participants can have. In order to obtain a deeper insight, and certainly in order to facilitate change and measure change within the organization, participants must be willing to re-imagine their involvement and context. Thus re-visioned, specific patterns of organizational change might be indicated. In this task, archetypal imagery has a significant place. Indeed, imagery from science fiction has permitted organizational revision (Parker *et al.*, 1999; Case, 1999). Imagined encounters with robots and androids (Srinivas, 1999) and monsters (Bloomfield and Vurdubakis, 1999) have been put forward as ways in which participants can come to see organizations and organizational theory in different ways.

Mythological stories persist because of the intensity of their imagery. Myth allows us to access these images and to incorporate them into our constructions of reality. As a corollary we suggest that powerful experiences, emotions, and trauma – through the stillness and voice of the inevitable shuttle – leave imaginal traces on the organizational fabric that surrounds them. This fabric is accessible to all organizational participants, and a fuller, more imagined reading of that fabric may produce new understandings and suggest possible change. The mythological formulations that we have considered have their origin in a specific time, place, and world-view. Yet, these formulations have captured images that transcend these

restraints and reach back into a distant pool of collective thought, feeling, and awareness. These images hint to an archetypal and trans-cultural residue. As formulated, classical mythologies undoubtedly have a place in examining organizational culture and measuring change management; however, it is likely that the emerging mythologies of the organizations themselves will be the more valuable locus of investigation. The appreciation and imaginative changing of organizational culture may be guided by exemplars from sources such as Ovid. As previously noted (Miller, 1999), the study of mythology is not to recognize mythology but to see events in a mythological way and thereby gain a different insight of the present, possibilities, and change.

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