

Transforming and Managing Anxiety: I. The Nature of Containment

William Bergquist, Ph.D.

In a previous essay, I have identified the multiple challenges that face us in the mid-21st Century. I have also noted the nature of anxiety that is generated by these challenges and the processes engaged to transform (metabolize) this anxiety and allow members of a society to manage and often even reduce the anxiety. This is being done so that the challenges can be addressed in a successful manner. While all of this makes sense in a straightforward manner, the process of metabolism is not easy to engage.

Throughout this series of essays on the nature of true freedom I have identified ways in which metabolism can be derailed and true freedom can be derailed. In this essay, I look specifically at this derailment into authoritarianism and at the multiple ways in which this derailment can be avoided—in favor of the construction and engagement of a wide variety of containers that enable the transformation to take place. It is in the identification of viable containers that we begin to find the pathway toward true freedom.

Authoritarian Settings for Metabolism

The fundamental question is: how then do we metabolize? How do we move as Bion (1995) suggests from alpha to beta? Put in a different framework, what do we do with the charging (though imaginary) lions. The typical response is to fight back. We want to tell off our bullying boss, and let that regulatory agency know what we really think of them and their stupid bureaucratic ways. This is a primitive (and often ineffective and even counter-productive) way in which to manage stress. It might provide a temporary release for our accumulated adrenaline, but this release is only temporary. We soon find that other lions are attacking us or the same lion is still attacking (often with greater strength and resolve).

It is hard to turn down the fight—especially if we are a male living in the Western World. We are socialized to take up the sword (or gun) and engage in battle. The remarkable social observer, Riane Eisler (1995), writes about this predisposition as a turn to the Blade. She notes the extent to which this turning to and reliance on the blade has dominated most of Western history for the past twenty

centuries—and used the term “dominator” when describing this predisposition (Eisler, 1995, p. xvii). The blade, in turn, usually means that the battle is being guided (and controlled) by a single authority. There is no room for democracy or careful, deliberative discussions when the enemy is at our gate!

Authoritarianism and the blade belong together. One can’t really exist for long without the other.

What if fight is not an option? The lion is too ferocious or is too elusive (coming and going from our imagination). This being the case, then we can always run away. Flight is an option and is engaged through escape into another world. This world might be found in the television or cable programs we watch many hours a day—be its “reality TV”, soap operas or sci-fi series.

It might instead be an addictive consumption of goods (clothes, sports cards, automobiles) or obsession with the “alternative reality” to be found on some media outlets. The central point is that we have turned from a firm grasp on the “real” world and have allowed other people (media executives, advertisers, movie producers) to dictate what we are to see and believe. This is an escape from true freedom to a false freedom and abdication to what might be called a “soft authoritarianism” – or what xxx calls “friendly fascism.”

There is yet another “what if” to be addressed. What if neither fight nor flight are an option – or at least not an option that we wish to acknowledge. Then there is a third “F”. This is Freeze. We simply give up. We shrink into a state of helplessness and hopelessness. In this state, we do nothing but look bleakly on a world that will never get any better. Putin is probably right: democracy will fail and authoritarian rule is inevitable in the 21st Century. Why go to the rally if nothing will ever change—and frankly why even vote. For that matter, why write an essay such as this if no one will read it and nothing will have an impact? Such an acknowledgement leads to depression and often substance abuse. If widely engaged, then freeze will inevitably lead to the success of authoritarian rule that Putin predicted—a self-fulfilling dynamic is in effect. Freeze and authoritarian rule go hand-in-hand just as do fight, flight and dictatorial rule.

The Nature of Containment

What are the alternative ways in which to transform and manage anxiety? Just as Eisler offers us a description of the authoritarian mode of transformation, she offers us a description of a quite different mode. She writes about the Chalice as a form of social relationship that is based not on domination, but instead on partnership. Linking rather than ranking is the founding principle (Eisler, 1995, p. xvii). I propose that Eisler’s image and model of the Chalice aligns directly with Bion’s idea of the container.

Anxiety is contained in Eisler's Chalice. Anxiety is successfully contained in a world filled with linking and relating.

Psychological containers come in many forms. I turn now to a brief exploration of five types of containers. They are personal psychic containers and containers existing within relationships. Containers can also be defined by temporary boundaries: events can serve as containers. Special locations are noteworthy as containers and sanctuaries. Finally—and most directly relevant to this set of essays-- certain leadership functions can provide containment of anxiety. Leadership, in turn, often works alongside one other container (that might be the most important within an organizational setting). This final type of container is the culture of the organizations. In turn first to the most personal type of container.

Personal Imagery as a Container of Anxiety

In a beautifully poignant song ("And So It Goes", 1983), written by the popular singer, Billy Joel, a sanctuary is described that exists in every person's heart. This part of our heart will always be "safe and strong." It is where we "heal the wounds from lovers past/Until a new one comes along." Sanctuaries of a similar nature exist in our heart and hopefully are supported by our organizations and society as a means of healing other wounds and providing space and time for needed reflection and inquiry. We live in a 21st Century world in which there is an abundance of volatility (V), uncertainty (U), complexity (C), and ambiguity (A) – as well as turbulence and contradiction (VUCA-Plus) (Bergquist, 2020), In this world of VUCA-PLUS, there is great need for Billy Joel's "safe and strong" sanctuary.

In one of his gentle stories from the Prairie Home companion radio program about life in a small Minnesota town ("Lake Wobegon"), Garrison Keiller (1997) speaks about the "storm home" that was assigned to him by his school when he was a small boy. Keiller lived in the country and had to get to school by bus. Consequently, to prepare for the possibility that he might be stranded in town as a result of a snow blizzard, the school gave him (and the other children living in the country) an alternative home to go to that is located in town.

Keeler never had to go to this home; however, he often walked by his "storm home" and reflected on the loving, supportive nature of the couple who were his "storm parents." He often thought of this man and woman and their house when things were going bad or when he was discouraged. He fantasized that this couple had specifically picked him out as their "storm child" and that they would welcome him with open arms during difficult times.

We may have similar need for a "storm home" as adults working in a VUCA-Plus world. The "storm home" of the mind may be created through use of a technique or ritual that provides internal support and encouragement for our difficult decisions and risk taking behavior. In essence, we pat ourselves on the back or find a way (through meditation, daydreaming or quiet reflection) to calm ourselves down and gain a sense of reassurance.

A colleague of mine who presides over an educational institution found that he could gently touch his forehead when under stress and evoke with this touch a sense of personal calmness. These moments of personal sanctuary during the day may be essential components in any postmodern survival kit. Another colleague ensures that she set aside one day each week for her writing. A third friend insists on swimming in the San Francisco Bay every day during lunchtime. In each instance, an internal sanctuary that is "safe and strong" has been created for both healing and reflection.

Ultimately, we create containers within our own head and heart. This is where the true sanctuaries in our life reside – and where we not only find refuge from anxiety and real or imagined lions, but also find restoration, renewal and new knowledge and insights. As Bion noted, the metabolism is ultimately an internal psychic process.

Relationships as Containers of Anxiety

There is a second important way in which a container can be truly psychological—and truly designed to contain anxiety. These special forms of containment might be found in long-term accepting and supportive relationship with a family member or friend. They might also be found in our moments of play with a child or cherished pet. We return home, hopefully, to an environment of warmth and love—a remarkably important sanctuary for many of us.

The container can also be found in the caring attitude of a special teacher, coach, mentor or trainer. If we are fortunately, we can reflect back on a special person in our life who provided guidance, understanding and perhaps a gentle kick in the pants – all elements of effective containment (and central to the metabolism process).

Then there are the important temporary relationships in our life: the therapeutic relationship established with a skillful psychotherapist or counsellor, the wise retreat facilitator and workshop leader. During the 20th Century, Warren Bennis and Phillip Slater (1968) prophetically suggested that we (in the West) are creating "temporary societies". –moving from a world in which most of the people

with whom we affiliate have been a part of our life for many years to a world in which we are often interacting for a few moments with people we just met. While, on the one hand, these temporary relationships can be part and parcel of a VUCA-Plus world, they can also be the source of short-term, important containers. We often can speak more candidly and take greater risks with “strangers” than with the people we must live with and work with every day.

Finally, we can look to the special relationships that are formed within organizational settings. These are the “play spaces” that are created when an organization sets up a “skunk work” task force or sets aside a weekend each year for a retreat in which all members of an organization (regardless of formal status) get to share their ideas and dreams regarding the future of the organization. A setting is created. Facilitation processes are put in place that enable management and union leaders to share perspectives and seek to identify mutually satisfactory solutions to shared problems. *Collateral organization* is one term that has been used to label these unique relations-based containers. The collateral organization is established on a short-term basis. It is set up a way that enables members of the organization to relate to one another in a new manner—hopefully reducing the anxiety associated with the issues being addressed and creating conditions for metabolism of these issues.

Special Events as Containers of Anxiety

Psychological containers can be engaged through the structuring of time intervals. There is a temporal demarcation. Now is the time for . . . something different. The 50-minute hour in psychotherapy, for instance, is an important container (especially in the containment of anxiety aroused during a therapy session). During much of the 20th Century we lived with the temporal container called the 9 to 5 workday, the 5-day work week, and the non-working weekend and vacation. With the introduction of the computer, internet and home office, this temporary container has often been eliminated.

Many years ago, Matthew Miles (1964) identified the important role played by temporary systems in 20th Century society – these temporary systems might be particularly important to engage in our VUCA-Plus world. Miles suggested that temporary systems are to be found throughout our society. However, they are often given very little attention. Examples of temporary organizational systems that Miles offered include carnivals, theater, celebrations, games, retreats, workshops, conferences, task forces, project teams, coffee breaks, and office parties. At a more personal level, Miles identified love affairs and psychotherapeutic sessions as temporary systems.

The time-delineated container can thus be a specific event (such as Mardi Gras or New Years Eve at Time Square). This often is an event that allows us to act in new ways—ways that defuse our anxiety or at

least provide us with the opportunity for a short period of time to escape from our imagined lions. The event can actually be a ceremony or ritual that takes us to another plane – what Victor Turner (1969) described as a threshold experience (a state of “liminality”). This can be a graduation ceremony, a wedding, a Bar Mitzvah or a birthday party. The real lions in our life are set aside for a short while—so that we might celebrate our success in defeating past lions or moving into a new life stage that will enable us to do a better job of confronting lions.

Building on the work of Victor Turner, Mihali Csikszentmihaly (1990) identifies temporary settings that provide the unique threshold between boredom (lack of challenge), on the one hand, an anxiety (too much challenge) on the other hand. He identified this threshold experience as “flow.” He suggests that flow can be found in the many enthralling moments we have all experienced as rock climbers, jazz musicians or chess players. We can even experience a “micro-flow” when twirling a pencil or paper clip in our hand during a particularly boring meeting. If we were to blend Csikszentmihalyi with Bion, the outcome might be a suggestion that flow is found in a contained experience and that flow provides a metabolism for the person living temporarily in this threshold between boredom and anxiety.

Location as a Container of Anxiety

A psychological container can be a sanctuary located in physical space. These containers have physical boundaries. We enter a safe space – such as a walled garden or therapy office and feel safe. Donald Winnicott (2005) identified something he called *play space* in which we safely search for a new and clearer sense of self. This is the place where (as children) we built forts or constructed family narratives (often in a doll house) as children. Play space is created in therapeutic settings where art, dance or drama are engaged – or where children (or adults) manipulate various objects and create stories in a sand tray. These settings serve as play space containers and create conditions for effective metabolism of anxiety-saturated issues in our lives (or the lives of our children).

Containers can be structures—ranging in size from trunk in which memorable objects are kept, to a special room in our home (such as a “man/woman cave), to a majestic, sacred cathedral. The location-based container often serves as a retreat—a “safe place” within or outside the organization. Some Japanese firms, for instance, provide private rooms where employees can go to let loose their frustrations and anger. However, sanctuaries (almost by definition) usually exist outside of an organizational context. They are found in remote locations, hallowed grounds, beautiful settings or formally constructed retreat centers, spas and health resorts.

Leadership as a Container of Anxiety

The fifth way in which metabolism takes place in an organization can be traced directly to the leadership of the organization. This fifth type of container begins to move us into the realm of metabolism—for the leader (like the parent), according to Bion, often plays a key role in the metabolism of anxiety. It is the leader who must personally hold onto the organization's anxiety and not allow it to leak out and infect the entire organization. This often means that the leader holds back information about what is happening outside the organization (especially potential or impending threats or shifts in the marketplace). A very careful discernment must take place at this point: the leader must not be in the business of lying or spend too much time in denial.

Obviously, no member of the organization will appreciate being left out in the dark about the fate of their organization – or their job. Even if it means being anxious for a while, the news must be delivered—but the leader can pause for a moment (or a short period of time) to not only determine how best to deliver the troubling news, but also determine the most appropriate time and the best setting in which to communicate the critical information. This is critical metabolism.

The challenge of containment for the leader of an organization is either reduced or amplified by the way in which the organization's anxiety is addressed through the culture of the organization. It is to this final, critical, mode of containment that I now turn.

Organizational Culture as a Container of Anxiety

There is this one other type of container that I wish to identify. It is particularly important when considering the role played by leaders in the containment and metabolization of anxiety. This container is the culture of an organization. It is through the culture of an organization that anxiety can be either accentuated or contained. It is through the culture of an organization, that the bonding of its members can be engaged in the constructive reframing and redirecting of anxiety (the metabolism) or in the fearful destruction of the organization's capacity to better understand, overcome or adapt to the real (or imagined) threats inherent in the anxiety. In other words, metabolism occurs when members of an organization collectively (culturally) create a narrative about the source of the anxiety, the current impact of the anxiety on the organization, and the way(s) in which the anxiety will be reduced and/or the sources of the anxiety will be addressed.

As Edgar Schein (1992, 1999) noted, this often means creating, maintaining or modifying existing organizational narratives. This is a critical and quite tangible form of metabolism, for organizations are,

in a very real sense, nothing more (or less) than sustained narratives. As the founders of appreciative inquiry (AI) (Cooperrider, 1990; Copperrider and Whitney, 2005) have noted, the shift in an organization's narrative might be one of the most powerful ways in which to bring about change and improvement in the functioning of an organization. Schon suggests that an organizational culture should be built on the narratives of past successes. The AI practitioners would agree to the narrative and I would suggest that this focus on an organization's real (not imagined) strengths and successes can be a highly effective mode of metabolism.

The fundamental interplay between the containment of anxiety and the formation of organizational cultures was carefully and persuasively documented by Isabel Menzies Lyth (1988). She describes ways in which nurses in an English hospital cope with the anxiety that is inevitably associated with issues of health, life and death. Menzies Lyth notes how the hospital in which nurses work help to ameliorate or at least protect the nurses from anxiety. She suggests that a health care organization is primarily in the business of reducing this anxiety. On a daily basis, all other functions of the organization are secondary to this anxiety-reduction function.

It is specifically the culture of the organization that serves as the primary vehicle for addressing anxiety and stress. The culture of an organization is highly resistant to change precisely because change directly threatens the informal system that has been established in the organization to help those working in it to confront and make sense of the anxiety inherent in the operations of the organization. Menzies Lyth's observations have been reaffirmed in many other organizational settings. Anxiety is to be found in most contemporary organizations and efforts to reduce this anxiety are of prominent importance. Somehow an organization that is inclined to evoke anxiety among its employees must discover or construct a buffer that both isolates (contains) the anxiety and addresses the realistic, daily needs of its employees.

Containing the Anxiety

In our brief reflection on the diverse containers of anxiety, we begin to discover the answer to my first question: how is anxiety contained? My identification of sanctuaries as containers of anxiety suggests that a protective function is critical. A sanctuary isolated or protects us for at least a short period of time from the anxiety (or perhaps even the source of the anxiety). As I shall note soon, in this protected state we can do something with the anxiety while it is not engulfing us. We can for a specific period of time not be anxious about our anxiety – and can metabolize it (as I will describe in the next essay in this series).

Our reflection on the role played by culture as a container takes us to a somewhat different place. The culture of our organization (or family or clan) provides a structure and process for finding meaning and purpose in the anxiety. We find out why we are anxious and can better identify the source of the anxiety. This assignment of meaning and etiology (cause/source) might not be accurate. Culture does a great job of imagining the size and shape of the imagined lion and shows us, like Tarzan in the 1940s movies, how we are going to defeat the lion with our own bare hands. What culture does do is reduce our anxiety about anxiety (such as a sanctuary accomplishes). This reassurance can, in turn, lead us to a constructive metabolism of the anxiety. It can, on the other hand, lead us astray. We believe that we really have identified the lion and its true intent. And we have identified the Tarzanian person, group or policy that will defeat or at least adequately defend us against the attacking lion.

This first set of proposals regarding how anxiety is contained can be supplemented by many other side-strategies of containment – such as keeping the anxiety from spreading to other factions inside or outside the organization and recognizing that specific anxiety-reducing services should be provided to members of the organization (such as provision of employee assistance programs) or to the entire organization (such as an organization-wide picnic or award ceremony). More generally, containers provide direction for how anxiety will get addressed on a daily basis in the organization. This is where culture plays a key role.

Menzies Lyth (1988) suggested that anxiety gets addressed on a daily basis through the “social defense system”—that is, the patterns of interpersonal and group relationships that exist in the organization. Other organizational theorists and researchers, for example Deal and Kennedy (2000) and Schein (1992), similarly suggest that the rituals, routines, stories, and norms (implicit values) of the organization help members of the organization manage anxiety inside the organization. Yet, these rituals, routines, stories and norms are not a random assortment of activities. Rather, they cluster together and form a single, coherent dimension of the organization—they create meaning as well as contain anxiety. This single, coherent dimension resides at the heart of the organization’s culture.

As Edgar Schein (1999) has noted, the culture of an organization is the residue of the organization’s success in confronting varying anxiety-producing conditions in the world. To the extent that an organization is adaptive in responding to and reducing pervasive anxiety associated with the processes of organizational learning and related functions of the enterprise, the existing cultures of this organization will be reinforced, deepen and become increasingly resistant to challenge or change. It is in this way that organizational culture and organizational containers produce the most effective solutions

for addressing the anxiety and sources of anxiety facing the organization. And it is the organization's leader who plays the critical role of creating and maintaining the container and providing the metabolism of the anxiety—and it is to this remarkable and perhaps mysterious metabolism that I will first turn—but first a personal note.

I find Menzies Lyth insights to be particularly helpful in my own work with organizations that tend to generate considerable anxiety—either because of the nature of the work being performed or clients being served, or because of the challenges being faced by the organization in our VUCA-Plus environment. I find that anxiety is likely to high in educational organizations, prisons, asylums and medical facilities. It is anxiety-provoking to be a student, prisoner, mental patient or medical patient. It is equally anxiety-provoking to be someone who is serving these men, women and children. I also find high levels of anxiety in organizations such as churches, high tech organizations and human service agencies that confront VUCA-Plus related matters on a daily basis.

I am often called to work with anxiety-filled organizations as an organizational consultant or leadership coach. I find that organizational culture plays a very powerful role in each of these organizations. I have written frequently about the cultures being formed (e.g. Bergquist, 1993; Bergquist, Guest and Rooney, 2003; Bergquist and Brock, 2008; Bergquist and Pawlak, 2008) and have prepared many reports describing the nature and dynamics of these cultures for use by the leaders of these organizations.

It is clear to me that organizational culture and leadership go hand and glove in seeking to contain anxiety and that the metabolism that often takes place (or doesn't take place) is strongly influenced by organizational culture. With this final, personal observation in place, I turn to a more specific description of the wide diversity of containers that are available and to the equally wide diversity of temporary settings that can be established. These containers and settings serve not only as a venue for the transformation of anxiety but also serve as a venue for experimenting with and gaining a sense of true freedom.

Conclusions: Containers as Sanctuaries

Fundamentally, I would suggest that containers operate as Sanctuaries. Bion's container and Eilser' Chalice are safe places in which to not only find renewal, but also new learning. Furthermore, as I am about to note, sanctuaries have played important roles throughout human history.. Vulnerability, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, turbulence and contradiction are not new to us living in the mid-21st Century. We need only go back to the 1930s with World War II looming in the near future and the world

limping its way out of a major recession. And we are not the first people to yearn for sanctuary. There was a strong need for sanctuary during the VUCA-Plus times of the 1930s-- as captured in the popular film, *Lost Horizons*. Ronald Colman played the role of a very successful British statesman who is kidnapped and taken to a remote land called "Shangri-La."

For Colman, as for many of us, this location held great attraction. It was free of pain and strife. Shangri-La also provided an opportunity for reflection on the complex and turbulent world outside, while giving those who entered its cloistered walls (in this case, a hidden valley) the opportunity for personal growth and renewal. Colman, like many of us who have created or stumbled into "Shangri-La," found that the hardest part is leaving and returning to a world that he no longer appreciated. However, "Shangri-La" like all sanctuaries exists precisely because of our need to remain engaged in an active life in which we address the critical needs and concerns of our family, our organization and our community—and in which we continue our journey to true freedom.

References

Bennis, Warren and Phillip Slater (1968) *The Temporary Society*. New York: HarperCollins.

Bergquist, W. *The Four Cultures of the Academy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1993.

Bergquist, William (2020) "Leadership and Anxiety: Containment and Metabolism I: Anxiety in a VUCA Plus Environment. Library of Professional Psychology. <https://library.psychology.edu/leadership-and-anxiety-containment-and-metabolism-i-anxiety-in-a-vuca-plus-environment/>

Bergquist, William and Vikki Brock (2008) "Coaching Leadership in the Six Cultures of Contemporary Organizations" in D. Drake, D. Brennan and K. Gørtz (eds), *The Philosophy and Practice of Coaching: Insights and Issues for a New Era*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bergquist, W., Guest, S and Rooney, T. *Who is Wounding the Healers?* Sacramento, CA: Pacific Soundings Press, 2003.

Bergquist, William and Ken Pawlak (2008) *Engaging the Six Cultures of the Academy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Bion, Wilfred (1995). *Attention and Interpretation* (Rev. Ed.). Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers.

Cooperrider, David (1990) "Positive Images, Positive Action: The Affirmative Basis of Organizing," in Suresh Srivastva, David Cooperrider and Associates, *Appreciative Management and Leadership: The Power of Positive Thought and Actions in Organizations*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Cooperrider, David and Diana Whitney (2005) *Appreciative Inquiry: A Positive Revolution in Change*. San Francisco: Berrrett-Koehler.

Csikszentmihalyi, Mihalyi (1990), *Flow*. New York: HarperCollins.

Deal, Terrence and Allan Kennedy (1982) *Corporate Cultures: The Rites and Rituals of Corporate Life*. Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1982.

Eisler, Riane (1987). *The Chalice and The Blade*. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1987.

Keillor, Garrison (1997) *News from Lake Wobegon: Winter*. HighBridge Audio.

Menzies Lyth, Isabel. "The Functioning of Social Systems as a Defence against Anxiety", in *Containing Anxiety in Institutions*, London: Free Associations, 1988. pp 43-85.

Miles, Matthew (1964) "On Temporary Systems" In M. Miles (Ed.), *Innovation in Education*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Schein, Edgar (1992) *Organizational Culture and Leadership*. (2nd Ed.) San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Schein, Edgar (1999) *The Corporate Culture Survival Guide*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass. 1999.

Turner, Victor (1969) *The Ritual Process*. Hawthorne, NY: Aldine, 1969.

Winnicott, Donald (2005) *Playing and Reality*. New York: Routledge.