

## Fire and Ice: Flaming Passion, Reified Structure, and the Organizing Body

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Poulos, C. (2003). Fire and ice: Flaming passion, reified structure, and the organizing body. *American Communication Journal* Vol. 6:2 (Winter).

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### Abstract:

In this paper, I engage methods of critical phenomenology and personal narrative in the investigation of a commercial organization. My aim is to come to a richer understanding of embodied organizing, through exploration of some key metaphors that might guide us in our understandings of life at work. With this aim in mind, I will probe the possibilities inherent in two new metaphors related to organizing praxis: fire and ice. Thus, the essay deals with the central role of passion (fire) and of the countervailing energy of reified structures of command-and-control (ice). My interest is in the dialectical interplay of these forces in the ongoing life of an organization.

### Article:

#### *Introduction*

As we humans move outward from and beyond the world of play in childhood, into the world of work in our adulthood, we engage certain patterns of knowing and communicating, developed according to certain well-known, well-worn paths of routine. Much of this living praxis takes the form of the training or disciplining of bodies who perform routine practical accomplishments at the simplest of levels: Getting out of bed, washing and grooming ourselves, showing up at prescribed places at prescribed times, and performing routine tasks. Beyond the simple performances of the trained body, there are times of transcendence, wherein the fire of passion leaps forth in a creative burst of flame. These moments are in a kind of conversation with the overarching resources and rules—the enablements and constraints—of the sometimes icy organizational structure that operates as the background context of our accomplishments in the arena of (embodied) working.

This essay develops a case study of organizing in a U.S. financial services corporation, with a special focus on communicative practices in all-company meetings, daily encounters and training sessions, and the documentation associated with these practices. Organizing praxis in these contexts is interpreted through application of two metaphorical variations, with *fire* blazing forth as a metaphor for (flaming) creative passion, and the *ice* of control freezing out the energy sparked in our moments of passion.

#### **(Metaphorical) Variations: Fire and Ice (Passion and Torpor)**

Once ignited, fire is a powerful force, a form of energy that leaps to life, consuming everything in its path, but, in the end, creating something new. For example, forest managers have known for a long time: Fire leads to rejuvenation. To continue burning, fire has two basic requirements: fuel and air. To feed it, we fuel it and give it access to air. Once ignited and fed, fire is the opening to a universe of possibility. Fire is a leaping toward infinity. Everything is destroyed; everything is new. To kill fire, we either starve it, depriving it of fuel, or smother it, eliminating its access to air. Water, in all its forms, can do this.

Similarly, a human body—this body who I am—has two primary requirements: fuel and air. To destroy its ability to move, to grow, to thrive, we simply deprive the body of one or the other, starving it or smothering it.

*There is a fire burning in me. It is deep in this body who I am. It burns. It is the fire of play, the play of fire. It is passion. It is energy. It is a leaping, flickering, growing, lapsing, living-dying fire. It is the joy of spontaneity, the joy of play, the passion that erupts as I engage in the core activity of my life: play. The fire needs fuel. It needs air. I need air. I feel it, the fire, when I am in motion, taking in air. I feel it in this body who I am. I feel it when I play. I'm on fire! I've got the fire!*

In organizational life, we gather to sustain the fire. The fire inside us lives because we feed it, with fuel and air. Here fire leaps forth, as Rollo May has pointed out, in the form of the courage to create. It is a process of consuming and rejuvenating, of creating anew a world wherein the fire can continue to thrive. The air is the air of exchange, of interaction, of joint action. Communicating, we leap toward those others in our presence, and, together, we create whole new worlds! Together, we feed and fan the fire!

*The fire is in me. I feel it. Here, now. We work together, my colleagues and I, creating a new team building program. We make something new. We make something out of nothing. Well, not nothing, really: We create from our knowing, from our ongoing praxis of discovery, from our passion, bodied forth as the playful acts of creation that erupt as we move about the room, trying things out. We create, together, with the words we send between us, with gestures and responses, with listenings and re-creations. We are, today, here and now, really jamming (see [Eisenberg](#)). We are in motion, creating something new. We feed each other, in our fiery-creative bursts. The energy here is good. Really good. We are on fire! These bodies are on fire. We've got fire!*

The breakthrough, the leaping fire, rises up, leaps forth, as courage erupts from the body. Courage—from the French *coeur*, or heart—is the fuel that feeds the fire. Courage is of the body; courage leaps forth as heartfelt movement in the moment of creation. Courage, igniting heartfelt passion, is the motive force that allows us to engage in joint action. In *The Courage to Create*, Rollo May writes that courage, the source of our fire,

involves ... the use of the body ... for the cultivation of sensitivity. This will mean the development of the capacity to listen with the body. It will be, as Nietzsche remarked, a learning to think with the body. It will be a valuing of the body as the means of empathy with others, as expression of the self as a thing of beauty and a rich source of pleasure (6).

Courage, as the engagement of the listening-thinking-knowing body, as the leaping spark that lights the fire of the empathetic body, as the source of our reaching-leaping movement toward others, is the pounding heart of organizational life. Courage, wherein our bodies are fully engaged in joint action, is what allows an organization to thrive. Courage is the heartfelt, passionate power behind organizing. Courage is daring engagement, *contra* despair.

Yet, at other times, as courage falls away, we lapse into the everydayness of it all. At these times, a malaise descends upon us. We are apathetic; the fire begins to flicker and die. We cannot sustain it. Shut off from fuel and air, we lapse into routine, going about our business, performing tasks, steeped in the mundane, lost in the malaise of everydayness. Slowly, gradually, the passion begins to die. We are frozen in place. We are no longer on fire. We are trapped in the icy grip of life-as-death. Stuck. The slow drowse—hypothermia of the soul—takes us. We live in torpor. We are "on ice."

Fire, in human terms known as passion, or the courage to create, is central to the instantiation and maintenance of our organizational life-world as a living, breathing crucible of creative activity. Creativity, or passion, which is fire-leaping-to-life, is the transformative energy that re-creates the organization anew each day. Without it, the organization dies. Without it, we are dead.

*Today, the malaise is upon me. Ice. It is especially heavy today. I felt it as I walked in, a thick fog of despair. Nothing to do. The fire is unavailable, gone to ash, covered with ice. Cold. I feel so cold! So much to do. All so ordinary. Nothing to do. It's all so routine. Does it mean anything? Does this work have any meaning? Frozen. I am frozen. Frozen in routine. Stuck. I cannot breathe. I cannot feel a thing. The malaise descends upon me like*

*a fog freezing into ice. I am sunk in everydayness. Nothing to do. I am cut off: Dead, dead, dead. Maybe I'll take a walk...*

### **Daily Organizing**

*This building is tall: Twenty-nine stories. It houses thousands of life-stories. So much has happened here. So many days have passed. In the fourteen years of my life I have lived as part of this corporate body, people who have worked here have excelled and thrived or lost interest and disappeared. People have grown up, or gone back to school, or gotten married, or had kids, or left to pursue other possibilities. People have died. So many stories...*

The daily performances of organization members, past and present, are written, spoken, enacted in the daily praxis, in the memories, in the computer records, in the paper documents, in the company policies, on the desktops and the walls, in the meeting rooms, and in the hallways. The primary story—the company's "central narrative"—is a story of change, of slow evolution over thirty-seven years, from a small startup company with four members to a large corporation with over six hundred employees. It is a story of organizing, of the gradual but inevitable instantiation of structured systems of doing and thinking, of listening and speaking and being and acting. It is a story couched most often in terms of financial success or growth, in the language of revenues and profits.

Because this organization happens to sit in the shadow of the Rockies, a commonly-heard metaphor that serves to organize the corporate body in its story of slow, steady progress is this: We are "climbing the next mountain." Yet anyone who knows anything about the actual mountains in whose shadow we stand knows that, on any given day, even on the hottest August afternoon, a climber might encounter... ice. Cold, slippery, treacherous ice. It turns out the climbing metaphor is apt: There is ice here, in these hallways and offices and cubicles. And thus the company's story is also a story of stiffening, of development and instantiation of progressively more oppressive rules and policies and artificial hierarchies. It is the story of a dying organization, of the settling in of a kind of *rigor mortis* of organizational spirit.

Organization members also, in their daily organizing praxis, from time to time enact a story of brief escapes, of individuals and teams leaping forth from the ashes of this slow corporate death, as they engage in brief moments of leaping, joyful, creative transcendence. This is a story of momentary creative bursts of courage-as-transcendence, enacted as organization members find short breaths of respite in those increasingly rare bursts of "jamming" that erupt, from time to time, in the course of "doing business." In these moments, when creative activity and flashes of insight, sometimes even of brilliance, emerge through collaborative joint action, there is a feeling of well-being that descends upon the participants. But that feeling is fleeting and soon lost, as we return to the routines of daily life, to the monotony of repetitive work bereft of meaning or impact. In moments of despair, we all wonder: Does what I do make a difference?

*As I enter the building this Monday morning, I am struck by how routine it has all become. We move en masse toward the elevator. And we wait, some of us patiently, some fidgeting impatiently, for the next car to arrive. We step aboard, push our buttons, face forward quietly. Some exchange nods of recognition, or a brief word of greeting. Bodies in elevators are largely predictable. These bodies are well trained. Mostly they look toward the front of the elevator, avoiding eye contact, quietly shifting feet. Only when the rules are violated—when the routine is disrupted, for example, by some smart aleck who faces the wrong way just to get a reaction—only then do we notice how routine it all has become. As I exit, I reach for my access card, slide it across the reader. I walk quickly to my office, greeting colleagues if necessary along the way. I turn on my computer, reach for my telephone to check messages. After checking voice-mail and e-mail, I begin to tackle today's tasks. It is a day like any other day. So much to do. So little to do...*

### **Communicating <—> Organizing**

So, as we go about our business in everyday life, we find ourselves organizing—coordinating our efforts with those others we encounter in our worlds—ostensibly to accomplish certain ends. This form of communicative

activity—so-called organizational communication—has long been viewed as an important sub-discipline in the field of communication studies. Historically, organizations—the concrete manifestations of the activities associated with organizing that appear to survive across time and beyond changes in particular players—have been studied as structures that supersede and, indeed, come (somehow) to dictate the actions of particular actors within organizational contexts. Early work in the field offers a view of organizational communication as a study of behavioral instrumentality, wherein specified communication channels are ordered, mapped, utilized, and (sometimes) improved to accomplish joint action, and wherein human agency is released (or excused) into the so-called chain of command.

However, in the last decade or so, in a move away from structuralist analyses of reified hierarchies and theoretical modeling aimed at mapping the instrumentalist instantiations of communication-as-transmission-of-information that seem to flow from these structures, scholars in organizational communication studies have begun to focus attention on *organizing* rather than on organizations. Viewing organizing as a set of day-to-day practices and performances taken up by knowledgeable agents within the context of attempts to accomplish joint action, these scholars of organizational communication have initiated a critical turn in organizational communication studies, in which communication is centered as the constitutive force in and through which all joint action/organizing is accomplished, and in which the power relations that infuse organizing are both foregrounded and actively critiqued.

From this critical perspective, organization members are seen as knowledgeable agents who, in and through their physical actions and communicative performances, serve as active, engaged authors of new daily realities in the context of organizing (see [Shotter](#)). But these authored realities are not arbitrary creations, nor are they fictional histories; they are dynamic instantiations of joint performative action, flowing into and from the richly layered, active, vibrant intersubjective space of communicative praxis.

And all joint action is grounded in a context, flowing from the structured systems of practice engaged over time. In organizations and institutions, the weight and force of history is powerful and ever present. The realities constituted in communicative praxis-as-organizing include certain rules and resources governing the forms and frames of appropriate group action that appear to emerge as governing principles of organizational life. These organizational realities, then, are not created in a separate space outside the stream of speaking and listening, moving and responding to movement. Rather, they are grounded in the formative power of speaking and listening, of listening and responding, of acting and reacting. And, of course, they flow forth from the movements of bodies-in-action, bodies who move and lift and shuffle and walk and gesture and respond to the demands of daily organizing. Organizing becomes a project of bodies co-authoring change through the movements of routine praxis and joint communicative action in the intersubjective-interactive space of daily life in the organizational context.

### **Participation <—> Observation: The All-Company Meeting**

“The company’s growth has been largely accomplished through the acquisitions of complementary businesses. Management believes that a number of acquisition candidates are available that would further enhance its competitive position and plans to pursue them vigorously. Management is engaged in an ongoing program to reduce expenses related to acquisitions by eliminating operating redundancies” (X\$\$TECH Website).

*The alarm blares loudly from the dresser. It sounds like one of those warning horns on a garbage truck as it backs into an alley: BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! BEEP! I roll out of bed, far too early in the morning. The morning routine: Coffee, paper, quiet time, a run in the park, breakfast. Then, it starts. The all-too familiar routine of showering, grooming, dressing myself for yet another day at the office. The tie, it seems to me, signifies control. I am trained, maybe even owned. I wear a noose (or is it a leash?) about my neck, in case I need to be controlled. Eventually, I make my way to my car and thread my way downtown in heavy traffic. We all line up, waiting impatiently at the redlights, each one of thousands of workers just a bit late and very much in a hurry. We have things to do, important fish to fry.*

We carry out most of these practices automatically, without noticing much of what is going on around us. I have driven to work countless times without noticing anything in my surroundings. One day, I spotted a building and wondered to myself, "How long has that been there?" Another day, driving to the park with my friend-wife Sue, I pointed it out. "How long has that been there?" I asked. "Only since about 1950," she replied. We drive to work, and we only seem to take note of things that strike us as out of the ordinary. Mostly, we follow the rules of traffic. When someone violates those rules as we perceive them—goes too fast or too slow, or weaves dangerously through traffic—we take note. We curse and we gesture.

*Today, I am on my way to an all-company meeting, an annual ritual called the "Kick-Off Meeting," usually scheduled in January or February. It's the start of yet another "season" of corporate life. We all gather, three hundred employees at a time, to witness the start of another year of coordinated activity aimed at pre-determined goals.*

*The scene is familiar: a large auditorium in an American hotel in the central business district of a large city. As we file in, milling about, we seek food. There! Semi-stale pastries! Burnt coffee. Let's go!*

Andy: "I wonder what's to eat this time."

Bill: "Rah. Rah."

Andy: "Yum."

Bill: "Mmm-hmm."

Jolene: "Cool. Food. I hope this thing doesn't last too long."

Sandra: "I hope the muffins aren't stale."

Eric: "Yeah, but what about the speeches?"

These comments might be read as the nudging movements of employees who don't, generally, like lining up for these events. Here we are, gently pushing back, with our sarcasm, against being told what to do, against being lined up and told to listen ... But then we stand in line anyway, making our way in a more or less orderly fashion toward our seats. Eventually, several hundred people sit in rows of chairs facing a raised platform. To the audience's left is a podium. Center stage is a very large screen for projection of slides and video. A woman walks to the podium—the Vice President of Human Resources. Intriguingly, she is known in the hallways as "The Ice Queen," a moniker she obtained when someone realized that a sort of grim-dangerous smile appeared to have been frozen into her face. Local lore has it that this expression has not changed since 1979. She announces the first order of business: A video presentation by our "parent" company (this word is actually used). The lights are lowered. Larger than life, on the screen, is the company logo, followed by the tag-line: "Where Money and Technology Meet."

What follows is a half-hour narrative, performed by two talking heads: Bill, the founder and Chief Executive Officer, and Sam, the President. Their talk is conducted as a mock interview, but unfolds as a financial narrative grounded in the phrase, "where money and technology meet." This company is, essentially, about those two things. It is a financial services company that is very, very interested in money. The central narrative is clearly a financial narrative. Technology is secondary.

*Like the text from the website, I notice that they often speak of themselves in the third person: "Management believes..." I wonder, as I listen, what to make of this.*

What they don't tell the customers who read that tag line is this: The money they are talking about is their own. Bill and Sam are as rich as Croesus. The strategy for making money is simple: X\$\$TECH is in the business of acquiring other companies—so-called "complementary businesses" and potential or actual competitors. Thus, they "grow" the company, and the stock market loves growth. Investors—including Bill and Sam—get rich. They acquire companies at a rate of about one every three or four weeks.

Interestingly, as the talk about the preceding year's exploits in this arena unfolds, it becomes increasingly a language of the corporate warrior. We "conquer" the competition. We "hunt" for good acquisitions. We have some good prospects "in our sights." We "aim" high and we "shoot" high. We "take" other companies. Notice: These are words of embodiment; specifically, they are the words of the hunt. The hunter is the one who, employing the powers of his body—with a little help from technology, of course—conquers other embodied beings. These (metaphorical but quite serious) exhortations, couched in the language of the warrior-hunter, are capped off, in the end, by Bill turning to face the camera and saying, "Happy hunting." This man is the proud father of our financially prosperous, aggressive company. We are called to the hunt!

*Does this call bring me to the fire? No, it freezes my blood. Corporate ice.*

All the while, we, the body of corporate employees, these corporate bodies, sit upright in our chairs, attentive and serious, nodding our heads, appearing to agree. We are trained bodies. We know just what to do.

A man walks up the stairs to the podium, taps the microphone, turns on the slide projector, and says, "O.K. Let's look at the numbers..." He is the president of the smaller child of the parent corporation, the company we all work for, and the assumption is that the audience knows who he is. No introductions, no fanfare—just a matter-of-fact beginning of a standardized speech about the financial situation of the organization. Here is a speech that occurs every year, year after year, and it begins in this same way every time it is produced.

The president's talk is all numbers; clearly, his expression engenders a form of discursive closure, wherein official talk is financial talk. Thus, the president's official signification of the organization is a reductionistic formula that fits nicely within the formula laid out by the parent company: What matters is the money. There is no organization without or beyond the money. All is reduced to a monetary scale. Further, we (the organization) are "good" if we are profitable, and we (the organization) are "disappointing" if not (note the language of the parent here). The central narrative—performed ritualistically in this setting at least once each year, and repeated throughout the year in the language used in the hallways and meeting rooms, in the memos issued, and in the regular written reports of the company's financial health—is a financial narrative. The financial narrative takes on an icy tone.

*These are the numbers; the numbers do not lie. The numbers speak, but they are not uttered with the fiery breath of innovation. The numbers constrain. The mood of the audience is constrained. Icy torpor sets in. The monotonous numerical monologue does not awaken passion. What happened to our fire?*

In the middle of the president's speech, a fire alarm begins to ring loudly, all but drowning out his speech. There is a moment of hesitation. No one moves. The president continues speaking, increasing his volume so he can be heard. The hotel's management then chimes in, over the public address system: "Ladies and gentlemen, the fire department has been dispatched to check the status of this alarm. Please stand by for further instructions." Well-trained bodies, we sit attentively in our chairs. "I wonder if the building is actually on fire," the woman sitting next to me says nervously. I look around for the nearest exit. But we sit, still listening to the speech mingled with the alarm. It is difficult to concentrate, but, somehow, we all manage.

Amazingly, as the president finishes his speech five minutes later, the alarm is still ringing, but the next speaker advances to the podium and begins! In fact, the president's financial speech is followed by a succession of reports from executives and others from the major departments and project teams within the organization, offering updates on goals and projects and activities. Many of these speeches are delivered with a little more

animation and enthusiasm than the president's financial speech; perhaps the speakers see themselves as competing with the alarm. And, all the while, we sit attentively, nodding our heads, pretending there *IS* no fire alarm!

*Fire? Of course there is no need to be alarmed. There is no fire here!*

Finally, the alarm stops, and the announcement comes: "Ladies and gentlemen, the fire department has cleared the alarm. Thank you for your patience." A loud sigh of relief, and a wave of nervous laughter, flows from the crowd. And the speeches continue. We are well-trained bodies. We sit upright in our chairs, eyes to the front, paying attention—always at attention.

*Frozen. At attention... iced.*

This event is a ritualized enactment of the organizational chart. The "top" layers of the chart stand on the platform, delivering the message, enacting the official version of communication-as-downward-transmission-of-information in perhaps its clearest and most obvious manifestation. The stated purpose of the all-company meeting is to "share information" in a forum where all members of the organization will hear a "uniform message." An underlying theme of the meeting is the attempt to generate enthusiasm for the mission and activities of the organization. The unstated assumption is that the uniformity of the message, the auspiciousness of the occasion, and the rallying of the troops will somehow combine in this auditorium (as crucible) to transmit the desired enthusiasm—a year's worth of enthusiasm—to the masses. And, all the while, we sit and attend to what is being said as if it is the most serious and important message we have ever heard.

*I pick up a muffin: Stale. Dead. Damn. These muffins are stale. So is this talk. Blah. Blah. Blah. Cold. NO FIRE here. Say something, dammit! Say something to help me care! I can't see it. I just can't see it. Why should I care about this? What does it mean? Somebody made a lot of money. That somebody wasn't me. So what? I feel stale. Cold. Put out. Dead. Bored. Ho hum. Auggggh! Why am I here? Dead, dead, dead. Nothing here. Nothing. This is nothing. It is no thing. Cold as ice. Cold, cold, cold. Inspire me, dammit! Give me something to hold on to! Whatever happened to Patton? JFK? Martin Luther King? Now they had fire! Sunk. I am sunk. Sunk in the routine of it all. Sunk in everydayness. Despair! What can I do? I can't stand it! Get me outta here. This is so boring, I might as well go back to work! Lead! Say something meaningful. Speak with us, not at us! Give us a spark, sir, even just a spark...I don't get it. I just don't get it. I'm supposed to care. How did this help? NO FIRE. Cold. Ice. Death.*

In the "Kick Off Meeting," the attempt at transmission of enthusiasm is employed as transmission of a form of power—the power to engage fully in activities aimed at enhancing the financial situation of the company. The meeting is structured as though there are those who hold that power and therefore can give it to those who are there to receive it. There is no attempt to engage in dialogue. Instead, good news is delivered in a palatable form, accompanied by somewhat less palatable food, with the intent of spreading the good news into the hearts and minds and daily activities of all these willing children of the company. Finally, we are left with a charge: Go forth and hunt for ways to make profit! Hunt! Here we have ritualized thought-and-action control at its best. These are our corporate parents, offering firm, well-intentioned, guidance in a well-orchestrated manipulation; in fact, they are telling us what to think, say, and do.

*Ice.*

Eventually, we file out in a more or less orderly way, making our way to the escalators, heading back to the daily routine. I overhear the following conversation, publicly performed, again, as a gentle nudging back against the overarching message we've just been subjected to:

John: "Did you see Jen? I thought she was gonna snap her neck passing out in there."

Jen:(Elbowing her co-worker) "Yeah, well at least I don't snore."

Pete: "Hey!"

Jen: "That one was so boring!"

Pete: "But the alarm ... now, *that* was cool."

So, daily conversations frame a response to the ritually enacted central narrative. This interaction between command and counter-movement, or rhetoric and response, is what Giddens has called the dialectic of control. Like fencers, we move strategically. The dialectical play of power consists of firm lunges and thrusts, countered by soft, even playful parries and ripostes (counter-thrusts). Sometimes it's attack-thrust and parry; at other times, it is parental thrust as harsh control, countered by the sharp, cynical, rebellious counter-thrust. Every address is open to a multitude of interpretations and responses. Every claim made opens up the possibility of consent, or, alternatively, a dissenting counter-thrust, or, perhaps, a creative response. Often the counter-thrust is against the reductionistic reification of all organizational activity into a financial balance sheet. The counter-thrusts say, in their own cryptic code and standardized form, that we (the people) are more than just numbers. The central narrative is, in fact, open-ended, moving, changeable, participatory.

### Daily Encounters

Yet, in more ordinary daily gatherings, such as chance encounters at the coffee pot or copy machine, team and project group meetings, training and teambuilding sessions, and so on, the talk—once it goes beyond the weather, beyond the exchange of pleasantries or banter or sports-talk—is framed, constrained, and enabled by the central financial narrative offered up by the President. Talk is often formed in response to the narrative. The narrative's focus on finances has taken on a negative tone, since, for the past five years or so, the company has been in a continuous belt-tightening mode, as profitability has dipped but the "parent" company's investment return expectations have not. This story is, by now, a familiar one in our broader culture and one that is well embedded in this particular organization. Spoken reactions to the narrative range all over the board—from alignment with the narrative to anger to disgust to resignation to cheerful "make the best of a bad situation" kinds of talk. This talk, repeated over and over, has a chilling effect.

*The kingdom is frozen; the hunt is suspended. We have entered a new ice age.*

A fellow employee plops down in one of the chairs in my office, sighs. He is a "client service representative"—one of those whose main charge is to take the incoming calls from the organization's clients. "You look tired," I offer. Hesitation, then: "Yeah. Tired." So I ask: "Do you like what you do?" And he says: "Like? I don't think 'like' is a word that applies. Tolerate. I tolerate it." We both smile, wryly. "Then why do you do it?" I ask. He just sighs. We go on to talk about what is going on in his team, and about his frustrations at the lack of resources to get the job done. "We're all doing the jobs of two people," he says, "maybe two and a half."

Once, not long ago, I observed a brainstorming meeting. The meeting was called to explore how to keep the customers in times of dwindling resources, despite the malaise we all share with them. Suddenly, unexpectedly, the talk turned to ideas. The people were quickly on fire. Ideas leapt forth like flames. There was a burst of energy. But these ideas ... they were... well... expensive. The participants knew this—and even openly acknowledged it, at times turning to smaller and cheaper ideas to even out the list, but inevitably returning to talk of grandiose plans and expensive propositions. "If only management would cooperate..." was spoken more than once in the hour.

*Fire. Fire needs fuel. We need to keep the fire alive.*

Of course, the organizational system embodies checks and balances for this sort of thing. The steering committee that initiated the original brainstorming session met a week later and, using cost as the primary



criterion for decision-making, promptly eliminated all expensive ideas from the list! Thus the central narrative holds its place—at least for now.

*Ice-as-response, frozen ideas...*

Meanwhile, the underlying communicative structures—the officially condoned corporate forms and functions of talk—are, generally, situated in highly structured methodologies aimed at maintaining a model of communication-as-transmission-of-information. The model is a model of communications—as though each time one communicates there is an identifiable object or product which is produced, a communication. So communications take the form of carefully crafted messages, with little or no opportunity for input or response from those who are intended to receive the message. This model of communications has been so heartily embraced by the corporate hierarchy that their daily talk often sounds like a reproduction of the same methodological model displayed in the all-company meeting: Presentations (of/about rules and resources) are given to audiences (children) by the holders of power and information (parents).

Thus, in the official and effective business meeting, there is a meeting manager—called a facilitator to offer a more democratic veneer, but often serving as traffic cop—who maintains an orderly, rational flow of information, and whose job is to keep to the pre-arranged (highly structured and controlled) agenda. In a recent meeting of this sort, a presentation about the next year's budget was given by the Senior Vice President of the Accounting Department—a presentation about the rules and resources to be allocated for operations the next year. The rules and resources are non-negotiable. This meeting was a "how to" presentation—that is, the accountant offered guidelines for how to build the online versions of pre-determined departmental budgets. At the end of the session, a few questions were entertained, but no substantive changes were made; there was no dialogue.

After the meeting, however, talk in small groups centered around how onerous this annual task is, how silly the accountants and their rules are, how the rules might be circumvented, how the budget might be padded, how something not quite official might be masked so as to sneak it into the budget, and so on. This kind of talk is engaged in openly. It serves as a small counter-thrusting counter-narrative to the ruling budget narrative. These practices are repeated year after year.

Meanwhile, in a close-knit management team I observed recently, power seems to be fused with equality. To take control of a meeting would, indeed, be taboo, unless officially sanctioned in advance by a majority of the group. This group appears to constitute itself as a highly participatory democratic group, a rarity in this organization. Power, when exercised, emerges dialectically as equality of participation. However, the group clearly does not trust that other groups operate in the same way. In this same discussion, they insisted on getting an agreement made with an outside group in writing. Still, the patterns of talk within the group consist largely of free, open discussion, confirmation, and active, engaged attentiveness (as seen through almost studious maintenance of eye contact and nodding and other verbal and nonverbal cues). There is also room for civil disagreement and correction (e.g., of assertion accuracy), questioning, and so on.

Also interestingly, the entire discussion in this particular meeting was still framed and constrained by the corporation's central narrative. Much of the discussion centered on two strangely juxtaposed and apparently opposing initiatives: How to cut a certain number of employees from the ranks as of January 1 of the coming year, on the one hand, and how to retain good employees over the long term, on the other. Pushing against the dominance of the central narrative (of financial strain and tight budgets) was much talk of ideas to motivate and retain employees, most of which would cost money.

*Fire melting ice?*

Finally, in many teams, daily real (unofficial, in-"effective"?) meetings at the team level are often chaotic affairs where tangents are the norm and the flow of communication is rapid, stimulating, fun, humorous, offbeat,

participatory, and non-directed. At their best, these meetings constitute creative jam sessions, where great ideas are flying about like ping-pong balls in a tornado; some are caught and engaged; others are left to the wind.

*And, at times like this, we sing in our hearts: We are on fire! These bodies are on fire. We've got fire!*

### **Participation <—> Observation: "Training"**

Often in corporate training and teambuilding sessions, what is called education is, as Stanley Deetz has pointed out, modeled on a competency or skill-acquisition framework: "Students are led to master the subject matter, rather than to encounter or surrender to (properly to understand) subject matter that draws students out of and beyond themselves to new insights and new relations to the world" ([Democracy 22](#)). In the corporate world, we receive *training* (notably from the vulgar Latin root *trahinâre*, "to drag along; unattested following"), rather than engage in *education* (from the Latin root *educâre*—"to draw out"). Training is intended by the corporate hierarchy to meet specified instrumental ends.

Its value is determined by the expected increase in productivity and efficiency that comes as a result of its utilization. This smaller narrative, of course, fits nicely into the central financial narrative: Increased productivity means increased profitability.

Further, learning itself should be fast and furious. Why take two hours when you can do it in thirty minutes? Constant pressure is applied to deliver training faster and more succinctly, while maintaining high standards of content applicability to the jobs of the participants in training. Again, Deetz notes: "Learning' hence often becomes an inconvenience to quickly moving ahead. The lesson is clear. Learning should be quick and easy. Careful learning is costly and to be avoided" ([Democracy 30](#)).

Much of this corporate training activity is conducted in tightly controlled, tightly scheduled conditions. The typical trainer "does" power by designing limited topical presentations of information, standing at the front of the room, controlling visual and auditory inputs, controlling classroom interaction, limiting talk to the topic at hand, and so on. Even interactions are pre-designed and formulaic, ice-bound.

Running against this stream in the corporation examined in this study is a team of people that, despite being officially called "The Training Department" by the accountants and vice presidents, names itself "The Education and Development Team." This team is constantly battling the forces of efficiency at all costs and the attributed productivity-driven meaning of their activities by attempting to stimulate critical thinking, innovation, and questioning of the *status quo*. "Drawing out" (*educâre*) is consciously engaged as the dance of learning. Student talk during class and even during breaks centers on substantive issues related to the topic of the educational experience. Students are engaged in learning, in and through dialogue.

*In this room the fire burns brightly.*

And students are encouraged to move, to embody their learning. In-class exercises often require participants to engage in movement. In a recent session on teamwork, participants gather in a large group, standing in the center of the room. Each holds an inflated balloon. "This balloon represents your workload," the trainer declares. "The object is to keep your work in the air, by bouncing it like this." He demonstrates by gently bouncing the balloon in the air. "Whatever you do, don't let your work fall through the cracks. Keep it in the air at all costs. Go!"

So the participants begin bouncing the balloons in the air. Perhaps inevitably, some begin to get out of control; balloons hit the ground. Before too long chaos emerges. The instructor then stops the exercise and says, "Each of the balloons I have in my hand represents additional workload you will have to handle. When I am sending you extra work, I will holler 'Incoming!' and bounce another balloon into your air space. O.K. Let's go." The chaos rapidly increases.

The participants then decide to have some dialogue about how to handle this problem. They call a "time out." They begin brainstorming, and within minutes develop a strategy. The bodies of half the group are deployed as a shield, to keep the balloons from hitting the floor. They lie side by side on the floor, on their backs. The other half of the group bounces balloons in the air. The group is successful in meeting its goal.

So learning is engaged in the body. And bodies move toward organizing, when the circumstances call for it. Movement and speaking and listening intertwine in a complex matrix of embodied learning praxis. And, sometimes, this room is on fire. The people here—as they body forth ideas, as they move about and open up and talk about life, about meaning, about what matters to them—catch the spark. Passion is engaged. Courage leaps forth. Creativity erupts: Fire!

### **Reflection: The Documented Structures of Power-in-action**

Many of the documented structures of organization within this corporate environment are designed as reminders to the corporate body of employees that all activity is constrained by certain procedural/policy directives. They also serve as statements of power, with the underlying assumption being based on the traditional view of power—that managers hold power, and employees consent to that power—or else. These directives are always formulated and issued as one-way transmissions of information. They are not subject to dialogue or debate or dissent—at least not officially. Instead, they are intended to be accepted by the vast majority, though in reality they are ignored by some, and blatantly counter-acted by others. Thus, the day after the (third) memo was issued directing employees to use electronic mail only for business purposes, employees began constructing cryptic codes similar to those employed on the Internet to relay non-business messages. Others used the organization structures to construct (with management approval) e-mail bulletin boards and official channels for electronic chat. Still others send e-mail jokes to lists of other employees on a daily basis. The boundaries of the realm of "legitimate business purposes" are thus renegotiated by the participant-shapers of the culture.

*Another day, another memo. This time it's about the "drug policy." No drugs allowed. Nope. Can't do drugs here. They'll make you pee in a cup. Yes. They'll even check your pee, without warning. The fire is doused. Doused by suspicion. Doused by pee. Soaked, I begin to shiver. I've been iced. Frozen.*

In general, then, the important documents and practices designed and produced by management—the policy manual, the official memo, the performance appraisal system, and the "progressive discipline" system, to name but a few—are instruments or tools of power. These matters are not subject to negotiation. But, intriguingly, they are not generally claimed as the constructions of individuals or groups of humans. Rather, they are supposed to have been authored by the *organization*, conceived as some sort of *a priori* structure—a sort of disembodied, pre-existing, transcendent structure that pre-exists and supersedes the individual organization members. These missives carry all of the power of the collective organizational hierarchy behind them. And, when such directives are authored by an individual, that authorship is always from the point of view of the powerful role occupied by that individual. Thus we do not receive a memo from Jackie the human agent, but a memo from the Senior Vice President of Human Resources (who happens to be named Jackie).

There are those—many, indeed—who respond to these structures by consenting, without question, to their authority. However, others within the organization carve out spaces and places of control—either ignoring the rules or creating new ones. Thus, for example, although there is an official attendance policy, with a certain number of days missed equaling a serious violation of the rules, several teams have crafted their own response to this policy: silence. Because the rule requires a reporting of the violation in order for a violation to exist, the lack of a report results in the lack of a violation!

Further, there is an official way to conduct a performance appraisal, in which the (powerful) manager passes judgment on the effectiveness of the (less powerful) employee and determines monetary and positional remuneration for that performance. In actual practice, however, several groups within the organization have employees appraising their own performance, and determining, via dialogue, their own raises.

*Fire melts ice.*

Finally, there is an official system for "progressive" (i.e., measured, deliberate, structured) discipline of employees who stray from the path of productivity or fail to follow the rules. It is a linear path with a lot of disciplinary force behind it; once someone is on this path, that person generally will find it very difficult to extricate herself or himself from it. It seems to lead, almost always, to termination. Even the corporate workshop designed to teach managers how to engage in the process lumps the two concepts together, as though they are inevitably linked; its title: "The Progressive Discipline and Termination Workshop." The outcome is almost pre-determined, the message clear: *Find another job before we force you out.* Thus, rather than a disciplinary (training) system designed to re-impose the corporate order onto an individual's life, the system almost always serves as an early warning system for the eventual firing of that employee. It should hardly be surprising then to find that there are two common responses by the employee put in this awkward position: Most tender their resignation during the probationary period; others call in sick!

### **Comment: A Practical Theory of Organizing Praxis**

To understand the world of organizing praxis, we must carefully examine the lived experience of the embodied agents involved in all this joint action. As we have seen, the agents who initiate performative acts in the context of organizing are present in the (physical) world by virtue of (physical) embodiment. They are available to the performance of organizing acts because they are present; there is a "peculiar texture of presence that pervades" the lives of human agents ([Schrug, Communicative Praxis 144](#)); this presence is a *bodily* presence. There is no ontological separation between the human who acts and the body who he/she is; human agents are embodied agents. All actions, then, flow outward from the physically embodied being-as-becoming-in-the-world of human agents in all our "bodily involvements and activities" ([Schrug, Self 19](#)).

It is not possible to accomplish joint action without the bodily presence of human agents. In the absence of particular agents, the organization, of course, may survive. But without some present human bodies—without the organizing agents who aim to perform the physical/communicative acts that instantiate both the forms and the outcomes of organizing—the organization will surely die. The life of organizing force or potentiality, then, is dependent upon—indeed, it flows outward directly from—the bodily involvements of particular agents attempting to coordinate joint action.

All this action is, of course, more often than not situated in particular physical locales—the gathering places that serve as the sites for organizing. Although in theory organizations can occur without such gathering places—say, for example, through electronic forms of communication whereby we develop and enact the so-called "virtual organization"—organizing itself is still dependent upon the bodily involvements (e.g., typing at a keyboard or talking on the telephone) of agents—embodied *communicative* involvements.

Thus, together, we form the corporate—from the Latin *corpus*, meaning body—collectives wherein we co-author the daily realities that enable and constrain our joint action. The day-to-day activities of agents in these corporate organizations flow out of the dynamics of lived and living, embodied and engaged, agency. And the agents who exercise and resist power emerge as co-authors of the (sometimes hierarchical, sometimes more democratic) structures that become embedded over time—and thus seem to take on a structured form (and even a life!) of their own.

This structuration of the particular appropriate forms of praxis exercised in the context of organizing is accomplished in and through the daily repetition of structured—even, at times, ritualized—performances within the flow of daily interaction in the particular organizational context. Further, the agents themselves are co-constructed as organizational agents in and through the daily communicative praxis that comprises organizing agency.

For Giddens, the structured systems (of interaction) in and through which we organize ourselves both enable and constrain social action. Organizational structure is both the medium—the particular way(s) in which praxis

is formulated and accomplished—and the outcome or the product(s) of joint action-as-praxis. Thus, the commonly held notion of an organization or structure as a naturally-occurring taken-for-granted external order, existing *a priori*, somehow prior to and beyond the actions of individual agents who navigate these social systems, is misguided. "Organizations" are socially constructed via organizing. These structures both instantiate and grow out of "the contingently accomplished activities of situated actors" ([Giddens 191](#)).

This duality of structure, or structure as both medium (constitutive realm) and outcome (processual product) of situated joint action, is crucial to our understanding of organizing as a dynamically enacted, engaged, performative praxis. From this perspective, joint action leads to the development of particular social systems (e.g., organizational systems), which in turn leads to further action within those contexts. All this action occurs across time and space as part of a shared organizational history-in-the-making.

Critical to our engagement in the making of history is our knowing praxis, which includes both the ways in which we come to know and the ways in which we use that knowing to engage and influence others—and therefore become capable of organizing joint action to accomplish particular ends. In undertaking joint action, agents draw upon "the mutual knowledge incorporated in encounters" ([Giddens 4](#)), whereby those agents know what to do as they perform the actions necessary to meet organizational ends. This is the kind of knowing required in order to develop and navigate the meaning-worlds that make joint action possible. This, as John Shotter has pointed out, is knowing *from within* a situation. Knowing from within is intertwined, in organizing praxis, with bodily-communicative knowing, and erupts (is bodied forth) as both routine and creative movement, and as speaking-listening-responding, into our dialogically constructed joint action in daily life. And "...such knowledge is practical in character: it is inherent in the capability to 'go on' within the routines of social life" ([Giddens 4](#)).

Further, the connection between knowledgeable agency and power is crucial, for, indeed, it is primarily through the knowledge we construct that we both cooperate with and influence the others in our presence. In examining our knowledgeable agency and how it is constructed and used communicatively, then, we are moved directly into an examination of power relations, for "Any attempt to theorize normative communication must contend with the contemporary recognition that knowledge—whether of things, others, or oneself—is inextricably linked with systems of power" ([Langsdorf 321](#)).

For those who would 'manage' organizational life, embodied agency can erupt as an uncontrollable, unmanageable opening to possibility. This fact often leads organizations to develop strict rules of engagement entrenched in hierarchical, information-based forms of "managing" communicative activity. But, as we have seen, the process, the praxis, of communicating, is often quite unruly. It can lead anywhere; communication is an opening to infinite possibility! So the so-called "managers" of the process attempt to develop policies that will guide and govern—in other words, control—all this daily joint action.

What they encounter, as they go about the business of attempting to instantiate these systems of control, is the *unmanageable* agency of the bodies (agents, actors) whose doings they are trying to keep in check. They encounter infinity! As Deetz has pointed out, these misguided attempts to control employee action fail because they are based upon "parentalist" rather than "stakeholder" models of organizing ([Stakeholders 153](#)). The parentalist model fails because its practitioners misunderstand the dynamics and the praxis of organizing.

Corporate managers operate as if power were an instrument they use to enforce the organization's mission and goals through the proper transmission of messages and the control of workers' (bodily) actions which they see as their purview and privilege in the context of their assumed (management) responsibility for getting things done. Routine organizational practices such as dress codes, direct supervision of work, delegation of work, surveillance of workers by electronic and other means, performance appraisals, career ladders, progressive discipline systems, promotions, and managed meetings serve to entrench this hierarchical world-view and the practice of power as a downward transmission of information, processes, and rules.

*A memo this time: They now record all phone calls, incoming and outgoing. Supervisors have speakers on their desks and can listen in at any time. "Personal" calls should be conducted from the pay phone next door. As I talk to my wife, I wonder: Are they listening? Big Brother? Are you there? Listen to this!*

These parentalistic forms of organizing are intended to limit genuine participation by agents within the organizational life-world. Boundaries are set and adhered to; creative courage (fire) is dampened if not frozen (ice). But this kind of structured praxis leading toward embedded hierarchies is not limited to capitalist corporations; it occurs regularly in other institutions as well. The modern academy, for example, instantiates these same sorts of structural properties that reflect a linear-causal hierarchical world view. The primary structural properties of this kind of organization emerge as deeply embedded (institutionalized) practices. As Foucault has demonstrated, for example, the processes of grading and examination practiced in the academy are instantiations of disciplinary power aimed at training and correction of the body/mind of the "pupil." And further:

The distribution according to ranks or grade has a double role: it marks the gaps, hierarchizes qualities, skills, and aptitudes; but it also punishes and rewards ... the perpetual penalty that traverses all points and supervises every instant in the disciplinary institutions compares, differentiates, hierarchizes, homogenizes, excludes. In short, it normalizes [\(181-183\)](#).

This normalizing feature of certain forms of enacted power is critical to understanding the *why* behind the development of these progress-oriented hierarchical practices. This normalizing (initiating and excluding) set of practices serves to institutionalize the well-worn and easily-recognized paths that agents, over time, begin to follow at a level of practical consciousness—which is "What actors know (believe) about social conditions, including especially the conditions of their own action, but cannot express discursively" [\(Giddens 375\)](#). Practical consciousness is "what is simply done" [\(Giddens 7\)](#), without question, without reflexivity. It is automatic, routine. And when things become routine, unquestioned, simply done, organizing becomes easier.

Indeed, consent often appears to be much less thorny and difficult than dissent. We seem to be drawn toward conformity and consensus, whether the means and ends of getting things done in this way allow better or more satisfying organizational lives—or create preferred outcomes, for that matter—or not. The problem, of course, is that these practices often serve to freeze out the creative fire that leads to courageous innovation.

Once these practices become routine they begin, it seems, to take on a life of their own. They are both bound and infused by the force of history and tradition, and become difficult, without some kind of active, purposive countermoves, to overcome. Once they enter the stream of stories we tell, as Dennis Mumby, in his cogent analyses of the political function of narratives in organizations, has pointed out, these realities become embedded in the consciousness of agents and in the institutional structures that instantiate and re-instantiate them. Because we are story telling and story-responsive creatures, the organization of consent through the ongoing construction of narratives can become a powerful force in manipulating the lives and actions of actors in the context of organizing to get things accomplished.

The so-called central narratives offered up by organizations "privilege a certain reading of the world" [\(Mumby 126\)](#) and "often articulate an organizational reality that is accepted as 'the natural order of things'" [\(113-114\)](#). In other words, power is expressed and exercised through the production and reproduction of narratives that offer up a particular version of the reality of the organization.

Narratives serve as both accounts of organizing and organizing accounts; they are the medium and the outcome of the narrative organizing of daily institutional life. That is, they both tell actors how to organize, and, at the same time, serve to move actors toward those specified forms of organization. As hearers of the narrative, as with any story, the corporate body of employees responds. Through such powerful central narratives, developed as tools or instruments of (subtle but overarching) domination, the organization of consent—absent the application of a courageous, creative, critical eye and ear of those being so organized—becomes much easier.

So the "parent" organization examined in this study places forward its metaphoric narrative of the "hunt" for financial success.

But, from the creative-critical perspective of an active agent claiming and enacting his/her full agency, a multitude of possibilities arises: consent, dissent, creative re-direction, disregard, parry, counter-thrust, rejection, evasion, engagement, negotiation, collaboration, rebellion, dismissal, and so on. Power is both rhetorical and responsive. Thus the narrative is re-written as the response is engaged. So the passionate, creative artists in the organization under study here resist the "hunting" metaphor, seeking instead to "fire up" a new passion of engagement. They focus their daily energies not on the "hunt" for money but on sparking the fire of innovation. Fire melts ice.

The dialectic of control at play here is a dynamic engagement. It is a participatory fire-and-ice dance in which power is mutually enacted and co-constructed. This engagement is made possible through the active co-involvement, as Giddens has stressed, between knowledgeable agents exercising their power/agency; it is not a matter of purely passive reception of the implementation of power by others, although that is certainly one possibility. Passive consent is only one of an infinite number of possibilities offered up by the dynamic emergence of the dialectic of control.

In the dialectic of control, a new space is created in which both organizing and power may emerge as both the interactive media and the enacted outcomes of communication actively and freely engaged. Indeed, the dialectic of control lies at the foundation of organizing and is itself the creative force we call power. The dialectic of control is a radical, tense, strained, dynamic that plays out in the expression/assertion of control and the free response to that assertion. From this radical tension between opposites—a creative clash, fire melting ice, ice opposing fire—possibility emerges!

In other words, organizational life is not orderly; not everything falls out of a neat consensual process; the dialectic, again, is characterized by a radical tension; there is a clash of force and counter-force, of control and resistance; from the conflict, something new emerges. To put it another way, there is a force, which is met by a counter-force. Fire meets ice.

So—fending off the slow, freezing malaise that sets in as we succumb to hypothermia-inducing organizational ice—instead of following rules we, the people, create and negotiate our own. Fully engaged in the dialectic of control, the corporate body carves out new fire-paths. We engage responsively with the words of our "parents," transforming them into flash points for an ongoing, creative conversation about what it means to work in this organization, and about how we can make that work existence our own. Thus we create new ways of being, new ways of organizing, though sometimes these ways of being do not serve anyone very well. Studied apathy—embracing the malaise—is the current trend in this particular organization, and it results in, well, more apathy. But all of this action is accomplished in and through dialogue.

*A memo today: The President says we are not to exchange Christmas gifts with each other. Even if we do actually like each other, no gifts allowed. But wait! Who gave him this power—the power to determine our gift-giving? What is he talking about? No fire here. Dead, dead, dead. Ice-cold dead. I think I'll go shopping.*

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