

SOCIAL ALCHEMY PODS: FRACTAL COMMUNITIES CATALYZING CHANGE

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Let's begin with the obvious: here at the dawn of the second millennium's third decade, we have found ourselves in a time of unravelling. As our challenges - inequality, climate chaos, the erosion of democracy - have grown to existential levels, the public discourse has become untethered from common sense. Any pretense that our future will be more prosperous than our present seems to be slipping away with each manipulated election, each dire scientific report. And, month by month, we wade ever deeper into what you might call "comfortigo"¹: the cognitive dissonance created by living our day-to-day lives - paying the bills, running errands - against the backdrop of a society in collapse.

There are many ways to negotiate comfortigo. Most of us have become well acquainted with denial, suppressing our anxieties about the future and hoping they don't resurface later. When those anxieties inevitably *do* resurface, we find ourselves thrust into spirals of worry or depression, lost in a self-reinforcing narrative that we're too small to make any difference. Some of us with the time and courage are called to travel down well-worn activist paths: pressuring institutions for reform, starting new organizations, engaging in direct action and the like. For all its vital importance, though, the wins of this public activism feel few and short-lived these days, and the institutions on "our side" sometimes feel just as toxic as the ones we're trying to dismantle.

On a separate front, self-care has emerged an art of anti-comfortigo resistance, with many folks sensing opportunities for activism in daily ritual, diet, relationship dynamics, and more. In the process, we've brought a long-overdue recentering of the soul to the work of building a better world. And yet this personal scale of activism isn't sufficient, either: focus too much on self-care and we enter the realm of spiritual bypass, cocooning ourselves in a soothing bubble bath while the world burns around us.

Each of these modes of working with comfortigo has its place. But what I want to focus on in this essay is another mode of activism, one that I've noticed more and more of my peers drawn to over the last couple years. It exists between the two poles of public and private, in what I call the "zone of intimacy". Practically, it consists of **small, semi-structured groups that get together on a regular basis** - not just to design change, but to process, to get creative, and to play, as well. What are these groups called? Depending on the context, I've heard the names affinity groups, caucuses or communities of practice. For this essay, I'm going to use a term inspired by my friend and fellow group leader Kris Drickey: the **social alchemy pod**.

¹ Thanks to Ashley Harris for the evocative portmanteau!

Social alchemy pods, or SAPs for short, can be based around a cultural identity (LGBTQIA, Latinx, working-class), a profession (organizers, healers, educators) or a shared activist goal (veganism, reparations), or a social regeneration community of practice across different participant aims. They can be as small as a handful of folks or as large as fifteen. They can exist online or in-person. Regardless of the circumstances, a well-run SAP, supported with the tools of regenerative design, can become an essential community of practice and accountability for change makers seeking to amplify their impact or redesign their personal lives. They give their members a space to work through difficult challenges in the presence of peers. They combat the epidemic of isolation and burnout by nurturing authentic, vulnerable relationships. They help us grow as humans by challenging us to find our voice and by providing a platform for accountability. They can lead to collaborations, material support, even romance. In short, social alchemy pods can serve as the connective tissue of our social change efforts, linking our public-facing activism with our self-care activism while providing key structures of support not afforded by either one on their own.

Of course, social change at the zone of intimacy isn't new. Professional guilds and activist cells have been meeting in small groups for centuries; in more recent generations, self-organized twelve step programs have helped millions find their way out of addiction through a very alchemy-pod-esque approach. Still, something about social alchemy pods feels especially exciting right now. Perhaps it's the desire for models that can scale to meet our challenges. Perhaps it's a collective yearning for spaces where we can be our authentic, complicated selves - free from the perfectionist pull of social media and the watchful gaze of the woke police. Or perhaps it's just coincidence.

Whatever the reason, social alchemy pods are having a moment, and in the last couple years I've seen them pop up all over the place. In the strategic planning process I facilitated for Chinook Fund - a radical justice-oriented foundation in Colorado - the group's leadership agreed on a core strategy to foster alchemy pods for their grantees. At the end of 2018, Richard Bartlett's essay [Courage Before Hope](#) elegantly framed our time of disintegration as "metacrisis of relationship", and proposed a global network of alchemy pods as the solution. And just this fall, I participated in a "Fierce Vulnerability" training by a group of climate activists aimed at catalyzing new forms of direct action across the country. Their theory of change rests squarely on forming - you guessed it - alchemy pods.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I've caught the bug myself: eager to understand what makes this whole pod thing so compelling, I've joined a few that I've been invited to, and helped start a couple myself. One group is comprised of creatives that met biweekly for four months to compare notes on our daily rituals and artistic processes. Another is a men's group that meets monthly to explore the elusive idea of sacred masculinity. When time allows, I participate in a monthly call of Jews across the country working through issues of settler colonialism and Indigenous rights. And I just became part of a new pod of white people in my community figuring out how to be better antiracists.

If that sounds like a lot... well, it is. It's probably not a good idea, for me or anyone else, to spread oneself among so many groups in the long term. But in going off the SAP deep end for the past year, I've gotten to explore them from a number of different angles, witnessed the good, the bad and the ugly, and begun to discern a pattern language of what makes successful alchemy

Pods work. Here are my preliminary thoughts; I'd welcome feedback from anyone participating in a thriving pod to help me refine the list:

- **Social Alchemy Pods are the right size.** Healthy pods are large enough to feel like there's a useful mix of voices, and small enough that each voice can be heard. Practically, this looks like something between 5 and 9 in a meeting. Depending on how likely members are to show up for a given meeting, that might mean having a total group size of 6 to 12. Membership should be relatively stable, with clear agreements about the criteria and process for joining.
- **Social Alchemy Pods convene regularly.** This could look like anything from weekly to every few months; what matters is that there's a rhythm that participants can count on. Even better if participants can agree on a standing day and time and avoid repeat doodle polls.
- **Social Alchemy Pods rotate leadership.** A defining feature of alchemy pods is the lack of a single "leader," and a commitment to reawakening the magic of shared leadership. To that end, it's critical that meetings aren't facilitated by any one person too frequently, and that pod members support each other in building facilitation skills. Other rotating roles can be assigned, as well - my men's group, for example, has a different "ritualmaster" each time that leads opening and closing ceremonies.
- **Social Alchemy Pods have co-conveners.** In my experience with pods, it seems to be the case that logistics are the opposite of facilitation: things work better when the role is held by designated stewards. Co-conveners ensure that pod convening times and locations are nailed down, conversation topics are identified, and the facilitator and other necessary roles are assigned. Ideally, they're delegating some of this work to others, while creating the conditions for the group to self-manage them over time. If the co-conveners aren't engaging in their role as part of a salaried position, it's not a bad idea for participants to pitch in and support them financially for their efforts.
- **Social Alchemy Pods are vulnerable.** We all wear masks to make it through the day, and as our era of comfort goes deepens, maintaining these masks is getting even more exhausting. Effective pods are places where we can build the courage to take off these masks and be held in our confusion, our frustration, our grief - or even just our beautiful weirdness. As with any group, nurturing vulnerability in a pod can take time, but the process can be accelerated by the thoughtful application of what I call "patterns that bind": activities that tend to deepen emotional attachments between members. I detailed several of these patterns in my book, including *RITUAL AND CEREMONY*, *BREAKING BREAD*, *INTIMACY THROUGH ADVENTURE*, *COLLECTIVE ACTION*, *LETTING GO*, and *WITNESSING GRIEF*.
- **Social Alchemy Pods are committed to shared action.** This one is tricky. I've seen alchemy pods hum along fine for years, serving as powerful spaces for witnessing, bonding and vulnerability, without any expectation of collective action in the outside world. But if we're talking here about pods as a vehicle for activism and movement-building, I'd argue that they need to be more than that. After all, the structure of alchemy pods makes them ideally suited to taking group actions like volunteering and pooling donations. And even if group action doesn't make sense, pods are a perfect space for members to be witnessed and supported around their personal commitments to action in some kind of organized way.

Again, this list is just a start, and it's likely somewhat skewed by my own circumstances and the pods I've been able to participate in. Already, though, I can tell that if we're to overcome

comfortigo, alchemy pods will be at least part of the story. At Regenerate Change, we're developing a framework to seed and support social alchemy pods as one of our core strategies for 2020. [Sign up here](#) if you're interested in starting a SAP!