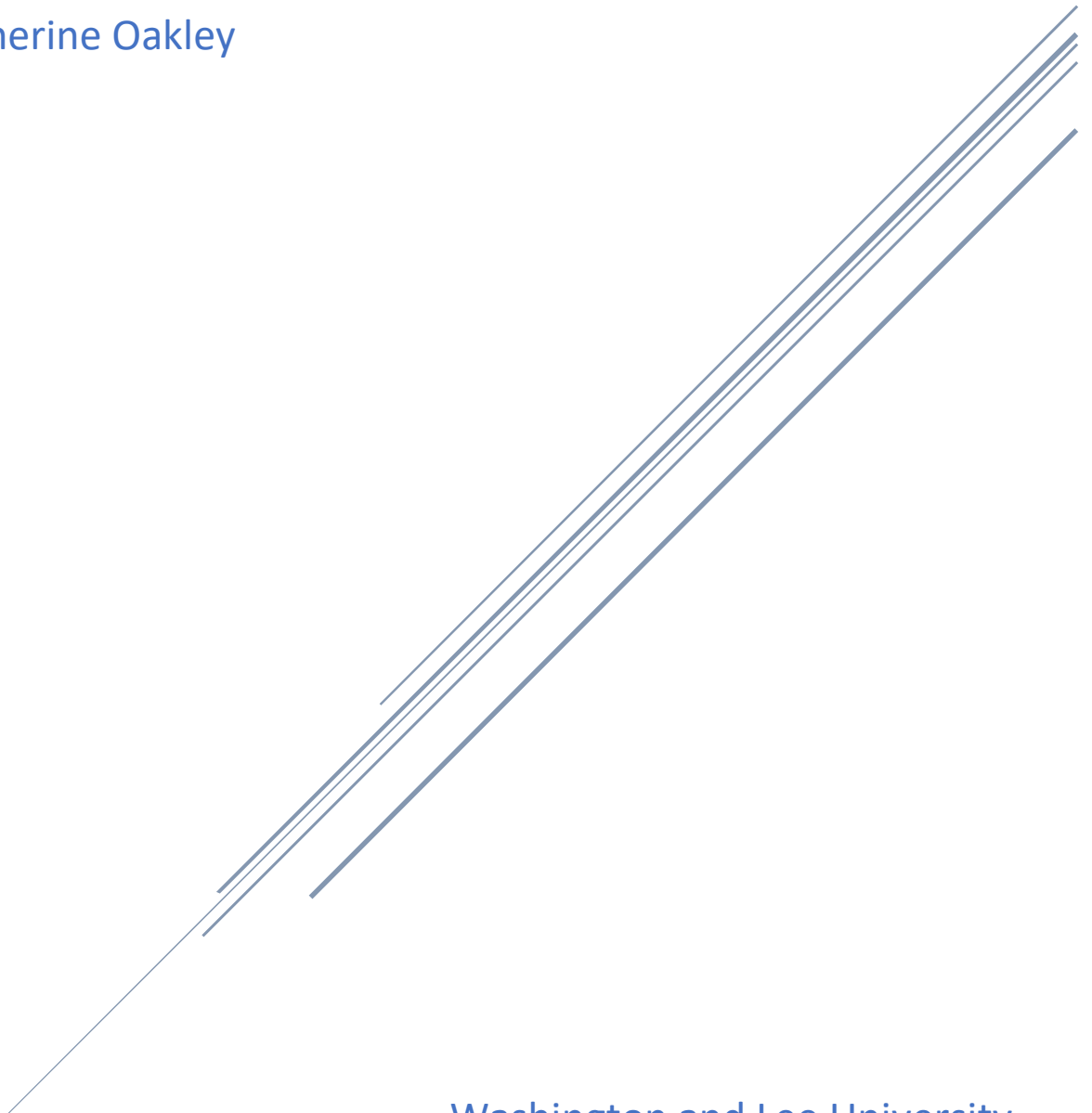


ALCHEMIZING CAPITALISM: OCCUPATIONAL TRIBALISM AND THE PURSUIT OF THE AUTHENTIC SELF

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Abstract

Alchemist Movement—a spiritual group in Reno, Nevada—formed around the idea of combining church and theater. While the Alchemists explicitly focus on helping people on their spiritual paths, they also maintain a “tribal” and anti-capitalist identity while paradoxically constructing a business model based on the commodification of the spiritual to provide for their livelihoods. Thus, different parts of the Alchemist’s identities are in constant conflict with the world and, often, themselves. This project will investigate how they are able to maintain an anti-capitalistic tribal identity through social mechanisms from rituals, cult-like social organization, charisma, performance, and experiencing an active God in their own lives. Ultimately, studying the Alchemists reveals more about the inescapable nature of capitalism and the successes and challenges of maintaining an anti-capitalist bubble.

Chapter I: Introduction

A couple minutes before 7:30 a song starts playing over the speaker, it’s accompanying lyrics projected on the screen that hangs from the sanctuary ceiling. The room is large, with many rows of chairs facing a stage in the front. The walls show little to no ornamentation as they extend to the vaulted ceiling. On stage, however, there are plants, instruments, microphones, and a multicolored wood panel placed near the back wall, center stage. Though most would not know, it is there to cover up the Center for Spiritual Living (CSL) logo, because even though this is in their church, it is not CSL service. To the right of the wood, a man in jeans and a black t-shirt has started to paint, covering a canvas in white and blue. At his feet are many different open paint cans of other colors. As the last stragglers are sitting down and the

song ends, the lights go down and a young girl stands center stage. After the piano plays a couple notes, she starts to sing: "Birds flying high, you know how I feel. Sun in the sky, you know how I feel. Breeze drifting on by, you know how I feel. It's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life for me, and I'm feeling good" (Newley and Bricusse 1964). As she finishes the last note, the rest of the band comes in and the crowd cheers. With the full band, they play to the end of the song, ending it with vocal runs and high piano keys.

As the singer moves back behind the band, Jessica comes center stage, wearing a long brightly patterned skirt and sporting short blonde hair. She stands confidently, microphone in hand. Speaking loudly over the applause, she says "Brothers and sisters, welcome to Alchemist Theatre, where we know that energy cannot be created nor destroyed, it's just gotta be transformed. Are you guys feeling good?" The crowd cheers in response and she continues, "Yeah good. Well tonight's theme is Bliss, and that's what we're gonna be exploring tonight...we perform every last Wednesday of the month, and we always like to go just big for Art Town [an annual Reno arts celebration], and so on stage right now our visual artist is going to be painting the whole show, which he's never done before. Matt, what are you painting?"

"I don't know," Matt replies, moving for more paint.

"Alright," says Jessica and the audience laughs. After a bit more banter about Matt to the audience, Jessica begins to address them directly: "So, something brought you here tonight. Whether you have something on your heart, a direction that you're needing, a healing, energy that is just repeating in your life over and over again and it's keeping you down, depressed, anxious, and you're here tonight because some higher power brought you in here, ready to move that energy from your life. Or maybe your life is perfect, you're right on track, and you are

here to celebrate your Bliss, either way all we ask is that no matter what higher power you worship, that you open your heart tonight to receive the message that is meant for you. Maybe it comes through a part of the talk, maybe it comes through lyrics, maybe it comes a moment of silence during meditation, or maybe it comes through Matt's painting here. Whatever it is there's something for you here tonight and I thank you for answering that invitation."

Every Alchemist Theatre show starts more or less the same as this one. A song, sometimes a piece of poetry, and then an introduction by Jessica that makes new audience members realize they are not about to have a typical theater or church experience. The Alchemists are many things: performers, shamanic practitioners, artists, musicians, Christians, family, and more. And some of them are none of the above. They are a collection of very different people who have come together in the pursuit of one goal: to transform society. To "alchemize" it. Their method is spiritually healing the world and helping all people down their spiritual paths, partially through putting on shows that combine church and theater. In shows such as the one above, music is combined with art and "sermons" or "talks" that drive home a message around a pre-selected theme—in this case, bliss. In their pursuit of societal transformation, they have reached back in time and pulled forward spiritual and social traditions. One tradition, however, binds them together and connects to every other facet of their existence: the tribe.

The "tribe" has a complex and fundamentally colonial history within anthropology, which makes nailing down a single definition a difficult exercise. The Encyclopedia Britannica defines it as "a notional form of human social organization based on a set of smaller groups

(known as bands), having temporary or permanent political integration, and defined by traditions of common descent, language, culture, and ideology,” but that only captures one piece of the term’s history (2011). The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Anthropology provides a more thorough perspective, tracing the evolution of the term from its original use in the 19th century to describe an “early” stage of human organization based on kinship to its modern life in popular culture (Sneath 2016). Early anthropologists and sociologists such as Durkheim used tribe as a catch-all term to categorize the societies viewed as more primitive than the western world. That use made it a political term that ultimately came to be viewed as describing societal organization based on kinship (Sneath 2016).

As anthropology grew to be a more self-reflective discipline in the 20th century, the term fell out of favor in the field both for its imprecise nature as an academic term and its teleological and colonialist connotations (Sneath 2016). In the latter half of the century, anthropologists also realized that the two biggest assumptions attached to tribes—that they are non-hierarchical and formed by kinship groups—were untrue, and thus the use of the term as a genuine social category largely ceased (Sneath 2016). Even though many anthropologists do not view the term as having any fixed and consistent definition and characteristics, its use continues influentially outside of academia. One popular author, Daniel Quinn, has propagated the term of “occupational tribalism” and advocated for a neo-tribal movement

Quinn became well known after publishing *New York Times* bestselling book *Ishmael* in 1992, a philosophical novel that investigates the forces behind society through a dialogue between a man and a talking gorilla. In *Beyond Civilization: Humanity’s Next Great Adventure*, one of the sequels to that book, he defines a tribe generally as “a coalition of people working

together as equals to make a living” (Quinn 1999, 65). An occupational tribe is exactly that, but redefined for the modern era as a group that is connected by their business ties rather than their ethnic ones (Quinn 1999, 106). The benefit of occupational tribalism, as Quinn describes it, is that it can exist within society as it is now, challenging that society’s structure by creating a different one within it. As he puts it, people can just “walk away from the pyramid” and decide to not participate as a cog in the wealth making endeavors of those in the upper echelons of a capitalistic society (Quinn 1999, 53). Instead, people can turn to occupational tribalism, which puts value in the mutual success and “cradle-to-grave security” of all its members instead of abstract capital gains (Quinn 1999, 150).

The Alchemists also describe themselves as a “modern” tribe, with four “chiefs”— Jessica Daylover, Chris Daniels, Matthew McDowell, and Joe Daylover—and many other members (for all of whom pseudonyms are used throughout the paper), including four band members, two crew members, two healers, about six big financial and/or volunteer supporters, the infant son of Joe and Jessica, and most recently me. In total, the group is about 20 strong. Within each of the named subgroups there are varying levels of involvement, ranging from people who work on Alchemist every day to those who only think about it a couple days a month. The four chiefs are all college educated; Joe has a masters and currently works as a teacher at the University of Nevada, Reno. Chris and Jessica both met in college, where they studied gender and sexuality together. In composition and characteristics, they are similar to many groups from the New Age religious movement: the members are predominantly white and middle class, they pull from many different spiritual traditions, and they ultimately pursue personal and global transformation (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 202).

Like most spiritual groups, they have an origin story: Jessica moved from Madison, Wisconsin to Reno and started a small comedy troop, the Utility Players. A year after, Chris moved out to join her. It was a slow start, but soon they grew to be the most popular and well known comedy troop in Reno. Jessica got involved in radio and Chris got involved in theater, and along the way Jessica met Joe, who she ultimately married. Joe had gotten his bachelors at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas, and moved up to Reno with friends for a change of scenery. All the while, Jessica, Chris, and another one of their original business partners were separately thinking about the same idea: there is something special and important about how church meets theater. After Chris put on a one woman show as his drag persona Ginger Divine, in which he gave a sermon as a drag queen, the broad notion turned into an idea. Jessica reached out to her two future business partners and asked if they wanted to try to make a church-theater hybrid. They both said yes. Later, Matthew and Jessica were working a DJ gig together, and Matthew brought how he also had been thinking about the church-theater intersection. Soon, he was coming to the budding Alchemist Theatre shows and eventually became the fourth business partner.

Though I already knew Jessica—who had previously been my boss at a radio station—I got to know the rest of the group through three months of participant observation. In those months I attended all meetings and rehearsals, including weekly business meetings with the four chiefs, band rehearsals, technical rehearsals, theater shows, ceremonies, and social events. I started primarily as an observer, but eventually I became more incorporated into the group and contributed to shows through running the lights system and performing music. There is a monthly cycle of meetings and rehearsals that end with a show the last Wednesday of the

month, and I experienced four shows and three full cycles. In addition to participant observation, I conducted a total of 17 interviews, including 13 individual interviews, three life history interviews, and one group interview. All willing tribe members were interviewed, with a particular focus on the chiefs, who were interviewed two or three times each.

Though the Alchemists were not influenced by Quinn, his form of occupational tribalism provides many insights into the Alchemists and is a way in which the Alchemist's identity—specifically the tribal part of it—directly impacts the functioning of their business. In a tribe, everyone is valued, everyone is essential, and everyone contributes. Occupational tribalism is the overlying structure with which Alchemists can integrate their tribal identity and values into the functioning of their business. Chris defines tribe very similarly to Quinn, saying “a tribe is a collective of people with shared goals, shared responsibilities that are for the proliferation and success of the tribe as a whole and not about any one individual person in that tribe.” Both Quinn and Chris have very similar definitions that invoke—among other things—prioritizing the good of the whole to support the good of individuals.

Part of the Alchemist definition of tribe aligns with Quinn's definition, but theirs includes many additional dimensions that influence their everyday functioning. Tribe has a constructed family aspect, for example, Jessica defining it as “chosen family. United by nothing but the choice to be together.” Chris' definition, the first part of which matches Quinn's, also includes a number of other elements:

I think the tribe has set customs, rituals, practices, traditions, systems that inform and define how to orient life and handle situations. I think a tribe is built by unique individuals that have a specific role within that tribe, and I think a tribe is most successful when those individuals know their higher purpose and calling and how they benefit the tribe, and they do it, and they do it well, and they only do that.

Chris highlights the numerous ways in which the tribe can infiltrate the functioning and habits of individuals in the group, and those sides of the “tribe” definition are also important to the Alchemists’ functioning.

The Alchemists, similarly to many groups from the New Age movement, incorporate not just the social structure of indigenous tribes, but also many of their spiritual practices (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 201). In trying to create a business that financially supports all of its members, they consume a diverse array of religions and create products out of those traditions, whether it be a show, ceremony, healing session, or eBook. Those products supply all of the income for the business. Between their spiritual practices, social structure, and begrudging engagement in capitalism, the Alchemists are inherently embroiled in contradictions. They pursue a tribal lifestyle and spirituality—which focuses inward on the group (Deloria 1973, 217)—but also participate in capitalism and thus look outward into a local and global economy. Their business model necessitates the seeking or attraction of more religious followers, but the tribal religious traditions they follow are often intentionally kept within the tribe without “pretense as to their universality or exclusiveness” (Deloria 1973, pg. 217). The Alchemists therefore, by the nature of their pursuit, could be described as “good people bound up in contradictions” (Deloria 1998, 172).

Even as the Alchemists challenge capitalism and subscribe to many non-Western cultural and religious ideals, they are in many ways a product of the dominant culture. Their approach to religion is individualistic, with each individual on their own path with God. The tribe exists not to relate to God, but rather to help each person on their own journey towards

defragmentation and on their spiritual path. Therefore, while the tribe is anti-capitalist, it is also functionally individualistic.

The Alchemist's use of a tribal social structure, as they and Quinn describe it, is essential to their functioning as a business. Tribalism fundamentally contradicts capitalism, because the latter is hierarchical and translates all value to a single form of capital. Quinn's tribalism does not. An aspect of an occupational tribe, according to Quinn, is that it can exist in capitalistic and industrialized society as it is now, but the paradoxes involved in doing that both enable and challenge the Alchemists' success. This research will investigate how their tribal structure affects all parts of their functioning and identity, ultimately exposing the challenges and successes of the Alchemists as they try to live in an entirely different way from the world around them while maintaining integration with that world. Throughout this paper, the many inherent contradictions of Alchemist life will be explored. Ultimately, a thorough investigation of the Alchemists shows the social effects of intentionally employing a tribe-like social model and practices on the group itself and also on society as a whole.

Chapter II: Church or Theater?

Having been standing near center stage, Jessica now starts to pace as she invites people to participate in the meditation portion of the show. The meditation is a shared prayer that comes near the beginning of each performance. After telling everyone to uncross themselves, Jessica says "we're gonna head in relaxation... start to become fully present in the room because alchemy is about total presence. And I invite you to just sit back, relax, and tune into this song." Jessica moves to the side of the stage and the lights dim as the band once again begins to play.

While Feeling Good was a big opener with a full band and loud vocals, this time three singers all stand near each other—one strumming a guitar—and start gently singing. “When the world seems bleak and cold, when your bones feel tired and old, when wind is howling through the trees...” The song stays soft, rife with pleasing harmonies until the second chorus ends and Jessica moves back to center stage while the band continues in the background.

“If you haven’t already closed your eyes, please do so,” she says. “As we just come totally into our bodies to lay this blessing upon this experience tonight. Oh divine and Holy Spirit, You with a thousand names, the light and the dark, the inside and the out. There is nothing outside of You because You are the infinite and You are infinite in your blissful nature.” Like most of the near 70 people in the room, Jessica has her eyes closed and sways slightly side to side as she speaks. “We invite that blissful nature to lay itself onto this house tonight.” She continues with the prayer, asking God to help everyone become better people and thanking Him for leading people there with diverse faiths and paths. She asks that everyone receive what is meant for them. Ending the prayer with an amen, she moves off the stage, leaving the band to continue the song. They play one more verse and chorus, ending with three voices singing a Capella, “Oh the bliss is gonna set you free” (Romer 2018).

The Alchemists are a tribe, but their occupation rather than their social structure primarily draws them together. The chiefs all have backgrounds in theater, and the original synthesis of the project was as a way to combine church and theater. As Jessica describes it, “I would go [to New Thought church] and I was like aw man the philosophy, the metaphysics, is on point, but the delivery’s fucking boring. And like how much more would people love church

importance of the distinction between those two things emerges when comparing the Alchemists to outdoor shrine film screenings in Bangkok.

In Bangkok, individual benefactors sponsor outdoor film screenings to certain deities as part of negotiating receiving help from those spirits (MacDonald 2017, 156). MacDonald argues that the film screenings—as an unintentional side effect—create a shared public space in which attendees are “not so much active participants in a ritual action as incidental beneficiaries” (2017, 159). While the Alchemist shows are certainly intended for the audience and considers them participants, it is similar to the film screenings in that creating the show is “part a personal rather than collective transaction with a spiritual personality initiated by an individual devotee” (MacDonald 2017, 158). Chris highlights that the Alchemist show is a personal cocreation with Spirit when he describes a point in the evolution of his involvement with Alchemist Theatre:

Suddenly the themes took on more prevalence and more drastic revelations in my life. So suddenly I was having direct connections with Spirit, I was asking Spirit to inform my talks, I was asking Spirit to move in my month [influence his life] and... suddenly I noticed that my life did change in really drastic ways, almost like you were manifesting it and calling it into your world...

Each talk Chris gives is co-created with Spirit and a tool of Spirit to communicate with people.

While an explicit part of Alchemist’s purpose is sharing a spiritual message with the collective, this personal interaction with Spirit is also an important part of what makes the show a shared public space rather than just a normal church service. Alchemists believe that—in the words of one of their healers— “you can go anywhere and take a piece of a message that changes and enhances your life, even if you don’t have the same belief system” and so their shows are less a shared experience and more a space shared by people all on their own spiritual paths. The

shows, therefore, are a way Alchemists can continue on their own unique spiritual paths while creating a united group. Thus, a spiritually-based tribe composed of people with different religious beliefs can exist. As Matt puts it, “I don’t have the answer but I know the place.”

Chapter III: Walking Your Path, Separate but Together

The crowd applauds as the meditation song ends, and the band moves back to the side of the stage. Holding her microphone, Jessica returns to the center. After praising with band and some banter with the audience, Jessica jumps into her “talk,” which she says “will be about two kinds of blisses. Blissi?” She calls upon Professor Daylover (Joe), her husband and the piano player, to tell her which one it is. He says blisses, and Jessica turns to the audience and says “I don’t like it,” earning a laugh from many people in the room. “I’m changing it. Blissi, boom, alchemy. Yes.” The audience laughs again, and she continues. “Okay, two different kinds of blisses. The first kind of bliss is the bliss that you feel when a pain is suddenly released or removed. And the second kind of bliss is the bliss that you feel when you are walking the path that the divine Spirit has for you, even when it’s hard.”

The Alchemist tribe is full of contradictions within and between their cosmology and social values. The first such potential contradiction that appears in the Bliss show is between walking God’s path as an individual and prioritizing the good as the tribe as a whole. A theme that quickly emerges when spending time with the Alchemists—and in their performances—is the idea of an authentic divine self. In their eyes, God has a path for them, and it is their goal to move further down that path which eventually arrives at the divinely ordained version of

themselves. Joe (who's stage name is Professor Daylover) even included the idea of self-actualization and self-improvement in his description of the mission of Alchemist:

And even someone who doesn't identify spiritually, we like to be inclusive, because, you know, as long as you're interested in finding a better version of yourself, then that's what we're about. I mean, you know for us that's very much connected to God and to a deity, but we're not attached to what that looks like for others.

While they are open to other people having their own experiences, to the Alchemists, self-actualization is fundamentally divine. That connection is exemplified in the idea of a "path," which the Alchemists often employ when describe their personal trajectories, the lives of others, and the general evolution of Alchemist.

Paths are also used to explain the development of Alchemist as a group, bringing in the divine to explain the group itself. For example, when Chris describes a stage manager they lost in 2016, he says, "...we had one of the best stage managers in Nevada at our beck and call, who was also a shaman, who, it's one of the great travesties of our journey that we lost her. She's on her journey and she's on her path..." Everyone is on their own path, even if it sometimes brings them away from Alchemist. Additionally, Alchemist is on its own "journey," and even the unsavory parts of it are just steps towards Spirit's vision. Chris reiterates this in the group interview, where he states that the many people they lost during 2016 when one of the original business partners struggled with addiction "were all on their own path, and they all left to do their own things which is what they were meant to do." Spirit has a path for each individual, and whether it is good or bad for the group, people are on that path. Alchemist itself has a path that is influenced by Spirit in the paths of individuals, thus the Alchemists as an entity are divinely explained, just as each individual is.

Inherent in “path” is also the idea of an authentic divine self. The path is individualized, connected to Spirit, and essential to becoming the “highest you you can be,” as highlighted by an Alchemist patron. Jess, in her piece for the Bliss show, even talks about how being on one’s path leads to the Bliss of self-actualization. While people can derive personal joy from self-actualization, it is still fundamentally divine. As the Alchemists put it in their e-book, *New Thought* (the religious branch to which they are associated) is about “embracing the Oneness of God within” (Alchemist Theatre 2018, 32). That statement exposes an important aspect of the Alchemists’ God: He exists both inside and outside of the individual. Pursuing the authentic self means finding God within one’s self, but it also means looking outside of one’s self for information on what the right path is. Pursuing self-actualization really means “tuning into” a divine force that exists in every part of the world, internal or external. Thus, God exists in multiple seemingly-contradictory ways that can be reconciled through the authentic divine self.

The authentic self is divine, but it is also singular. Alchemists describe their experiences outside of the group as fragmented, with all the different sides of themselves, their personalities, and their interests confined to particular social spaces. However, in the Alchemist tribe they are made whole, and that is why the group has a greater power. The theme of defragmentation came up particularly when I asked whether Alchemist provides something in people’s lives that they do not get other places. Joe, for example, answered, “I think, it’s really a beautiful synthesis of all of the things I like to do creatively, play music and write. And I always thought that those two spheres were separate things, but they’ve come together in a really beautiful way.” Alchemist is not special just because it is an artistic pursuit; every member fills that need in other parts of their lives. Rather, it is that people have a space in which they can be

their full, true selves. Chris most explicitly connected the idea of defragmentation to Alchemist when he said

I get to be entertaining, write original works, talk about God, and transform people's lives. So none of my other facets or groups that I'm a part of synergistically combines all of them together. So it's great because I feel like I get to be this whole person. I'm not, you know, I don't have to think about things being off limits... So I feel like there's an acceptance for all of me that's refreshing and great.

Being part of Alchemist is fundamentally about being your entire self, which sets it apart in members' lives.

Alchemist is the meeting place of people on different spiritual paths and ultimately helps them along those paths, but at the same time members contradictorily become involved in a network of close social relationships that are not self-focused. John, one of the musicians who is involved in other musical pursuits, states that the Alchemists are unique in his life because "it's a more personal and deep experience with them." The theme of personal connection often comes up, Ethan describing the group as "like a little family." The idea of "family" is often invoked, sometimes casually to refer to the Alchemist group. Jessica even uses the term in her definition of tribe, describing it as a "chosen family."

The intrinsically valuable affective bonds are clearly important to the Alchemists and can be incredibly significant to the functioning of the group. Those implications become especially apparent when comparing Alchemists to New Religious Movements (NRM's), which are colloquially known as cults. The Alchemists are different from cults in a couple of important ways—namely, that people are always free to leave without sanction and the authority of their charismatic leaders is not "relatively unrestricted" (Dawson 2006, 29). The "conversion" process of Alchemist also differs, because they never try to "reduce or eliminate extra-cult

attachments” (Dawson 2006, 76). In fact, doing so would be antithetical to the goal of Alchemist, which is to create people who can catalyze change in broader society. Despite these differences, the Alchemists have separated themselves from the society around them to create a group with different goals and values and thus have developed cult-like mechanisms to maintain their culture.

An important mechanism that maintains group cohesion in cults is the centralization of “expressive” relationships, an idea of Parsons that Lorne L. Dawson employs in his book *Comprehending Cults*. Many scholars argue that the recent separation of public and private life has led to an identity crisis in young people, rooted in the separations between expressive and instrumental relationships (Dawson 2006, 50). Expressive relationships are “(1) ends in themselves, (2) diffuse, (3) idiosyncratic, (4) particularistic (i.e. they involve exclusive devotion), and (5) emotional in nature” (Dawson 2006, 50). Instrumental relationships are, in short, the opposite. Members feel that Alchemist is unique in providing a space where people can be their authentic selves and, in doing so, connect to the people around them. Those sorts of affective bonds—which in cults serve as the glue that pull and hold the group together—serve a similar function with the Alchemists (Dawson 2006, 78). Chris, when talking about being his whole self, emphasized being accepted for it, putting a premium on how being that self allows him to interact with his fellow Alchemists. All relationships help Alchemists towards self-actualization, but they are not merely instrumental. Thus, while focus on developing the authentic self and following God’s path could preclude a similarly-strong focus on a network of expressive relationships, the Alchemists have instead tied the two pursuits together. The expressive relationships are connected to the overall goal of self-actualization, and thus lead to the

internal affirmation that all the Alchemists are on Spirit's path. Therefore, even when confronted with contradictions as they navigate the world, they are always able to use each other and a divine narrative to reconcile their own selves with the ways they must interact with the capitalistic, non-tribal society in which they are embedded.

Chapter IV: Communicating with God

Jessica starts to explain the bliss of following God's path by asking the audience a question: "Have you ever done something in your life that you, normally you would've never done, but your intuition called you to do it, and when you did it you were like wow, that was for me? Yes? Clap if you've done that." The audience claps loudly. Jessica asks them to shout out words that describe how they felt when they chose to follow a path that they were called to follow by some higher power. They do, and as Jessica hears the words she repeats them into the microphone. She commends them for giving her almost entirely synonyms to bliss, and continues to describe her own recent alchemical process of getting rid of all the things she thought she was supposed to do and doing the things that she is called to do. By doing that, she says, her life becomes better than anything she could have designed.

Using her business' slogan "Find your art, follow your bliss," as a reference, she tells people that "all of us have an art. And maybe that art isn't what we think of like high school art class, but it's something that you can do. A gift and a talent that you have that the Holy Spirit seems to have put in you. And you'll know it because it will make you blissful when you do it."

To the Alchemists, everyone has a path ordained by God, and divine forces will actively keep you there. As Jessica describes it in her own life, “my path is protected and it’s very guided. And I would consider those things like, supernatural, little miracles of like, I have to get somewhere.” Implied by Jessica’s words here—and often explicitly stated—is that she has a specific purpose that she must fulfill. Additionally, Spirit is actively influencing the world to keep her on that path. Thus, everything that she does is divinely explained, so long as she is listening to the signs around her. The direct influence of Spirit on the Alchemists staying on their paths is an important part of their self-narrative, as revealed by Jessica’s observation about a friend of hers outside of Alchemist:

I would say Nina is God’s favorite, ‘cause she’s like, that girl. Psh. If she even takes one step off her path, some fucking miracle will come out of nowhere and put her right back on... And like, the girl can do no wrong. And so, I just think, she’s not just more important than other people. That doesn’t make sense. But it is—it is more important for the blueprint of humanity that she stays... On her path than say, like, my redneck hillbilly family who are just kind of living their life.

The evidence of Nina’s influence in the grand scheme of humanity comes from Spirit’s activeness in her life. Ways in which Spirit manifests in Alchemists’ lives offers divine meaning to their lives, and the Alchemists do that for themselves and others by incorporating the idea of divine paths into their self-narratives.

As Jessica says, there are ways for Alchemists to know that they are on the right path and thus communicate in some capacity with God. They can do that socially through their relationships, as previously discussed, or through their emotions, as Jessica briefly explains during the Bliss show. However, another important and so far unmentioned pathway the Alchemists have to affirm their path is through the material. To explore how the material world

impacts Alchemist's experiences, I pull from a paper by Alex V. Barnard on a similarly anti-capitalistic group: a radical environmental group called the Freegans who live almost entirely off other people's waste in New York City. While the Freegans—a secular group with an environmental focus—are different than the Alchemists in many ways, they are similar in that they are both anti-capitalistic groups that exist in and depend on a capitalistic society. While the Freegans disavow capitalism, their model of survival does not work without collecting waste from a capitalistic and consumeristic system (Barnard 2016, 1019). Similarly, the Alchemists are anti-capitalist, but their business model is necessarily consumeristic. Thus, both groups have the same need to decrease dissonance from the paradox between their identity and the world in which they must live. It follows that some of the mechanisms the Freegans use in that pursuit might also be used by the Alchemists.

Barnard identifies that material objects can be used to affirm the Freegan's moral identity as proofs of moral labor (Barnard 2016). The moral identities of groups such as the Freegans and Alchemists are very difficult to maintain, and so materials can be proofs not only to others but to themselves of the maintenance of that morality. Investigating how Alchemists use objects as proofs of moral labors shows in part how they, like the Freegans, are able to maintain a seemingly-contradictory identity and affirm that they are on the right path without constantly engaging in conscious mental processes. It is easiest to recognize potentially morally-salient objects for the Alchemists by looking to see when they act beyond what would be "moral" for no reason more than the symbolic value of the action. This takes a different shape with the Alchemists than with the Freegans, because for the Alchemists the moral proof comes directly from Spirit. Spirit is to them what nature is to the Freegans; they view the world as

constant proof of the divine, just as the Freegans view the city as natural when many would not (Barnard 2016, 1019). The Freegans find objects that are moral proofs of labor through their nature value, but the Alchemists do so with divine value. The divine can appear materially through three different pathways: “signs,” manifestation, and “downloads.”

Signs are seen by the Alchemists everywhere as proof that they are on God’s path. The signs are not rewards for that path, but rather divine confirmation of Alchemist’s own lifestyles and identities. A sign, of course, can manifest in material and non-material ways, like a bottle of ketchup from a stranger or a particular song coming on the radio. For example, one Alchemist told a story once of a time in a cemetery her father had died. She had been feeling lost and asking God for explanations, and in the cemetery she found a small pin that said “Daddy’s little girl.” To her, this was no coincidence; they were reassuring words straight from God, direct proof that she was being watched over on her “path.” She picked up the pin and took it home with her. My data is too limited to demonstrate whether or not that object is used dialectically to maintain a moral identity as Barnard suggests the Freegans do, but it certainly holds symbolic value and could be proof of the moral labor of living a divine life.

The second pathway, manifestation, comes from communication with the inner divine. The Alchemists believe they have personal divine power, and through using that power are able to exert influence over the world around them and “manifest” certain things they desire. While they do not always manifest material objects (they could, for example, divinely manifest success at a job interview), the process of manifestation sometimes leaves physical artifacts that are then proofs of moral labor. Jessica, for example, told me a story about when she was practicing manifestation while studying in the Netherlands:

I actually have my journal somewhere. But like, one example is I started experimenting with hitchhiking... And then, we were trying to hitchhike to our first place, and like, we just weren't getting picked up... And I drew someone picking us up, and like the, the whole idea behind the law of attraction is you don't... you visualize it as if it has happened... So you feel the emotion of "I'm so grateful we've been picked up, blah blah blah," and I would draw it with little cartoons, and then, within minutes, we got picked up by this guy whose name was Theodore, which is my brother's name. And he was like, I never get off at this exit, I never get off at it. I drive this drive every day, and I never get off at this exit, and for some reason I felt like I had to. And then, so we got in his car, and he tossed this book at me...and it was, the book was called "Manifesting from the Heart."

She explicitly pointed out that she still had the notebook from that summer and could show it to me, an offer that suggested a potency in the object itself that had compelled her to hang onto it for well over 10 years. The notebook was offered as proof of the divine within her, which is central to her identity as an Alchemist.

The last pathway for creating objects of moral proof are "downloads," which is what Alchemists call it when they have thoughts that they perceive as coming directly from God. Downloads, at least for the chiefs, are a part of everyday life, and they attribute many of their creative ideas to that process. While the downloads themselves are not tangible, they produce the shows that the Alchemists put on, which are the purpose of Alchemist Theatre in the first place. Each month they put on a show based on a pre-determined theme. As the Alchemists describe it, during that month the divine will bring the theme into their lives, and when they are creating their pieces they will get downloads about what they should say and what sort of show they should do. These downloads ultimately produce the show, which then becomes an object between recordings and transcriptions. Even years after a show, Alchemists refer to past shows as part of their stories and will show them to people, proving to both themselves and others the value of their moral and spiritual work. Their shared belief and value of these material signs

is one thing that supports them in their spiritual tribe, even as they encounter social and financial friction with the surrounding world.

Downloads are also interesting beyond their use as moral proof, because the term has an ontology that relates it to technology. The term download is more broadly used in certain spiritual circles. One spiritual blog, for example, defines it as “a communication to you from Source. It typically comes in unexpectedly, as a surprise or an epiphany” (Barret 2012). Though the term is not endemic to the Alchemists, it propagates the force of defragmentation into another societal dimension. The prevalence of the technological world and the general prominence of the word “download” makes the word naturally associated with the modern world. Many New Age spiritual groups like the Alchemists tend to associate themselves with the non-technological past, drawing their practices from indigenous cultures and other parts of history (Possamaï 2002, 198), but downloads are an exception. It frames their relationship to the divine explicitly in the context of a modern and technological world. Viewing part of their communication with God as downloads incorporates them more into that world, again decreasing the dissonance they might feel existing separately from it but within it. “Download” also implies an action coming from God: God puts the information in the recipient’s head. In that sense, the world also implies direct affirmation from the spiritual source. Thus, both materially and ontologically downloads can help Alchemists more peacefully coexist with the world around them.

Signs, manifestations, and downloads all illustrate the broader underlying and important reality of the Alchemist cosmology: it cannot be disproven. If looking for signs, one will find them. If thoughts can come from outside of the self, one will communicate with God. Like with

many religions, Alchemist cosmology cannot be proven or disproven from the outside and can only be proved from the inside. However, the Alchemists also do not communicate with the divine through just one source; all of them are directly linked with God and all can communicate with Her, should they choose too. Therefore, one could imagine a situation in which Alchemists would receive conflicting signs or one would reject the interpretation of the other of something as coming from God. In my three months with the Alchemists, I never witnessed such a situation, but the Alchemists would not be unequipped to handle it because they share certain moral beliefs about the world. Even though members are generally taken at their word when describing their communication with God, if one of them said “God told me to start a forest fire,” they would be commonly driven to reject that as the word of God. Even though members of the group follow different religious traditions to varying degrees, they agree on certain moral commonalities because they agree that some things—such as acts good for nature—are definitely God’s will. Whether the values come from the divine or otherwise, without the shared moral foundation, communication from God would be frequently questioned by the group and such communication could not be held as proof. Sharing ethical beliefs infuses the group with a stability that otherwise could not exist in a group in which all individuals can communicate with God.

Chapter V: Balancing Values and Economic Needs

To finish her sermon, Jessica speaks of her own path, saying that she is there to tell people to follow their bliss, because she believes that God is calling people to do certain things. “It is time,” she says, “for us to follow our personal prophecies because God has a plan. Higher

Power, Holy Matrix, the Great Mirror, the Void, whatever you wanna call it I do not care. It is time because there is a plan in place and we all have a role. And I kind of, I have a little bit of a socialist agenda, but I kind of feel like it's probably leaving behind the things that keep us enslaved and hurt our bodies and make us spend more than we have, I kind of have a feeling it—your personal prophecy—has something to do with helping the earth and helping other people.” The sermon finishes with the announcement of a new service she is offering through Alchemist—personal prophecy—in which she will help people “follow their bliss.” She invites people to pay what they can for the service, because it is her honor to help them on their paths, because they simultaneously help her on hers.

As has already been alluded to many times, being an Alchemist is not easy. They are pursuing spiritual and social goals that are in conflict with the world around them. They are trying to reform society, putting people on their divine paths and creating a space to live with tribal ideals and norms. However, they are also largely artists who need to support themselves in the world as it is, and to do so they must engage to some extent in capitalism. Often times, the Alchemists are able to find a compromise that modifies their participation in capitalism in a way that is more in line with their values. As Chris says, the Alchemist goal is to do things differently than other organizations by trying to “be this arm in the world that really lives the gospel. Feed your brethren, clothe them, heal them, love them, repeat.” They keep those goals in mind when deciding how to run their business, deciding that a model that is only accessible to people who “have money to purchase retreats and classes” is not what they want. To accomplish that, all of their practices present and future have a sliding scale pay system, where

people only have to pay what they can afford. An announcement of such a system is included in almost every promotional post the Alchemists make about a new offering or service, and I have often seen them give away services to those who express an inability to pay. They even raffled off free healing sessions randomly upon revealing their healing branch as part of their commitment to “healing the world.” As they participate in capitalism, they modify it to better fit their goals, demonstrating another way in which adhering to their tribal identity and values as much as possible affects their corporate functioning.

Another powerful and important way in which the Alchemists have been able to participate in society in a way that works for them is through folding that intersection into their organization’s mission. People involved in all levels of Alchemist recognize their mission as not just seeking spiritual truths or following their own paths, but as helping people who need help transcending a broken society. John, when asked about the purpose of Alchemist said, “I mean, they call themselves a movement, so it has progression and it has an idea of reaching people. And I don’t know about converting them... but maybe *a way of living*, to... to show people what is possible with meditation and prayer and spirituality” (emphasis added). The fundamental goal of Alchemist is reaching people who want to change their lives and helping them, which therefore means they must engage in the society that houses the lifestyles that people want to change. The four Chiefs also describe their goal as such, Chris saying that they “focus on transforming people.” Transformation and change is even ontologically implicit in the word “alchemist,” and that concept is the foundation of the Alchemist Movement. Engaging in structures with which they don’t agree is therefore essential to their pursuit of that goal, which

reduces tension they feel between tribalism and capitalism. It is, in a way, a necessary evil until the whole world is changed.

Alchemizing people who are part of non-tribal society is part of the formal and discussed mission of the organization but also part of people's individual lives and experiences. Thomas says that he gets "a spiritual high out of that, you know, I get a rush out of the connection of audience and performers, you know, song and idea." Part of the Alchemist experience, for him, is facilitating the connection performers can have with people, showing how the broader organization goal filters into his individual experience. Laurie—who is involved in the healing arm—said when discussing session pricing, "I just want this to happen for people," once again emphasizing the end goal of reaching people. That goal ultimately affects her pricing decisions and general involvement in the group. The Chiefs cite similar motivations: Chris explains Alchemist is unique because it helps facilitate "really powerful transitions in people's life and Joe says that seeing the effects in other people is "a big part of why we do what we do." The examples go on, with almost every interviewee at some point emphasizing the importance of changing people's lives to their own personal involvement in and experience with Alchemist. The prevalence of transformation-related rhetoric demonstrates the extent to which incorporating transforming people's lives into the organization's mission affects its functioning on an individual and group level.

Affecting individuals is important, but the Alchemists want ultimately to not just change individuals, but to change all of the society to which they are trying to build an alternative. Chris, in one description of what he wants Alchemist to be, describes it as a "conglomerate of artists and mediums and shamanic practitioners and all these folks who are under one umbrella

who are doing, who are literally transforming the very fabric of our society.” A transformed society is the ultimate goal, and spiritual healing is the method. The Alchemists must engage in society to change it, and therefore that engagement becomes part of their identity even as it is antithetical to it. The Alchemists are undertaking the monumental task of trying to live in a different way than the society around them while still causing broad cultural transformation, and while that goal is paradoxical at times, they manage to maintain it through sculpting the functioning of their business. While there are sometimes irresolvable tensions, they have towed the line for the last four years while growing their following, their influence, and their business. Though it may not be their long term ideal, they do their best to make the two parts of their goal supportive of the other instead of contradictory and destructive.

Chapter VI: Being an Alchemist in the World

The applause over, Jessica invites people to move into the next portion of the show: the Alchemy. She introduces the section as a guided meditation and Professor Daylover starts to play a smattering of keys in the background. Like before, she tells people to become present in the room. She pauses, once again swaying gently back and forth with her eyes shut. The room is entirely silent except for the occasional piano note. “Slowly you will begin to see the environment around you change to the most blissful place in the universe, whatever that is for you. You’re still sitting, but this time your chair has become the throne of a king or a queen.” She speaks slowly, pausing between every sentence, every phrase. The piano makes the room feel almost dreamlike. “In front of you is a desk, and on it is a case that’s gold. It has a lid. You take off the lid only to realize it’s bubbles. Dip the wand into the holy water with soap made by the

Holy Ghost. Pull it out and blow into the bubble wand until you see five magnificent bubbles floating right in front of your face.” The room stays quiet and the concentration is almost palpable.

“The first bubble is showing you images of things you thought were blissful as a child.” She pauses, giving people a moment to see. “The second bubble is showing you images that harmed your blissful nature as a child. Events that wounded you, that made you believe that bliss wasn’t possible on this planet. We skip over the bubble directly in front of your face. We’ll get back to that one later. We head to the fourth bubble and we see the mundanity of our lives. The illusion of bliss.” A singer echoes the last line in the background, singing in a minor key with ephemeral piano notes behind. For those who opened their eyes to see it, they would see Matt still painting in the background. “The things that are hurting us, the things that are frustrating us. And finally the fifth bubble is the thing that you thought you were here for that you’re starting to think might not be the entire picture. And they begin to float, as you take your attention off of them, to that bubble in the middle. You can’t see in it because it is solid gold. But you know that this bubble has the blueprints to your divine path. Something creative that is healthy for the earth and serves humanity. You take out the sword of Arch Angel Michael and you begin to pop the other four bubbles. Watching them fall away to dust. And when you’re ready, if you’re ready, you pop the golden bubble, ready to be revealed. And it showers down on you its blissful blessings of an abundant life. And if your bubble didn’t pop that’s okay. Place it above your head, and wear it like a crown, knowing that at just the right moment it will pop and rain down on you.” As the Alchemy ends, the band starts playing the next song—an upbeat number—and Jessica quietly leaves the stage.

The alchemist is more than just an archetype go which the Alchemists try to conform; it becomes a verb in their lives in many capacities. Alchemy is a tool they can use, in the show itself and in the world at large. While the Alchemists have created a sphere in which they can be their full selves—independent of the fragmenting forces of a capitalist society—they still often have to go outside of that bubble and reckon with the world around them. One tool with which they assert their identity and values in that world is through “alchemizing” their experiences. Joe illustrates the technique through an anecdote about bartending:

...I always try to think of things through that lens of, well how can I alchemize my experience. And so, as an example, you know I bartend, and it was, the situation of me bartending was just to help out a friend... And so I was starting to get kind of, regretting being there because there was a lot of people [employees] there, it was really slow, and I was kinda worried, like man, we're not gonna make any money in tips... and so I “alchemized” this thought or energy by thinking okay, well I'm getting paid to do relatively nothing and barely lift a finger so I should be grateful for that and, you know, I'm helping them out so that's also good too.

Alchemy—which in this example is Joe changing his mentality about a situation—is a tool that Alchemists use to maintain their identity in a world that does not share it. While performing alchemy could be described as just having a positive attitude, it is much more than that; it is a mindset that the Alchemists explicitly push in their shows. Jessica, in every performance introduction, will say something akin to, “Welcome to Alchemist Theater, where we know energy cannot be created or destroyed, it's got to be transformed, and if you are in this room tonight you are here by divine appointment whether you know it or not, because your higher power is calling you to transform something in your life and in the world.” The technique of alchemy is at the forefront, forming the basis of the message within Alchemist Theater.

The Alchemists explicitly try to teach alchemy in the shows, but the concept also surfaces when they discuss the main mission of their organization. As Jessica puts it, “Well we’re looking at things that specifically need to be alchemized. So why is our culture plagued? We believe it’s our relationship to death, our relationship to birth, and our relationship to each other, and so those are the things we’re trying to change.” Alchemy describes everything that needs to happen in society and therefore everything that needs to happen in the individual. Utilizing the tool of alchemy is a fundamental part of being an Alchemist, as Chris implies when he says, “I’m looking for the alchemists in the crowd [to join]. So I’m looking for the people who come to the show who then because of a song or an art piece or a talk or sermon decides to take action.” The act of alchemy can be employed in any part of society, and even in the fragmented world it helps make one an “Alchemist.” Therefore, alchemizing experiences is a way that all Alchemists can assert their identity and connect with the purpose of their tribe, no matter where they are.

Alchemy is one way in which the Alchemists interact with society around them, but their negotiation with that world goes beyond just one “technique.” In navigating the un-Alchemized world, Alchemists must constantly create their own space and blur the lines between the two realms. Many anthropological and sociological theorists have approached the question of religious spaces, most famously Durkheim who differentiates the “profane” and the “sacred” (1965, 52). Durkheim holds that all religious delineates things that have to do with the divine and things that do not. The division, he says, is absolute and profound (Durkheim 1965, 53). For the Alchemists, the sacred and the profane seem much more blurred than Durkheim claimed. As has already been discussed, through “signs” and other material routes, the most mundane

objects can be interpreted as coming from God. A stick can be profane in one context and sacred in another. The change need not even come directly from God; the world can be alchemized by humans. For the Alchemists in particular, the profane and sacred are also linked to fragmentation and defragmentation respectively. Through participating in Alchemist, they can be their full authentic selves, and thus any sacred space would necessarily be defragmented. Thus, the “sacred” is more tied to defragmented space, which the Alchemists have power to create.

Jonathan Smith promulgated a spatial view of religion and ritual, creating a paradigm in which “ritual action does not make space sacred; rather, placement renders actions sacred” (Grimes 1999, 264). Indeed, the Alchemists do already have entirely sacred spaces in which they can be their authentic defragmented self. Most notably and centrally is Jessica and Joe’s house, the site of all meetings, rehearsals, and even some official ceremonies. That space—which serves as the nexus of Alchemist activity—is the space that all members of the tribe know they can enter and be in the tribal world. However, as they move throughout the rest of the world, they must sometimes open that sacred space in other locations. For example, before every show at the Center for Spiritual Living, Chris will walk around the perimeter of the space with his ceremony stick, blessing the space and opening it to the sacred. Once that happens, the space is ready for the show, because it is a sacred and therefore defragmented space. Though the space later becomes liminal when defragmented people and people seeking defragmentation gather, the space still has an element of sacredness and can pull people toward being their authentic selves. The performance, a divine manifestation, can also exist in the space, denoting the space’s sacred element. While Jessica and Joe’s house “renders actions

sacred” in Smith’s sense, in other spaces ritual must be used to open the sacred and therefore give the Alchemists a pocket in external society in which to exist.

In doing so, they make those things sacred in the context of the performance and also project their own sacred space out into the world, linking the two spheres. The sacred too can move towards the profane; for example, Jessica and Joe turned Romans Chapter Eight into a colloquial verb to describe when they are feeling pushed to their limits. Through such mixing, slowly and surely the world becomes more liminal, everything capable of being both sacred and profane depending on an individual’s context and experience. In a liminal world, alchemy is much easier, because the profound division of the sacred and profane that Durkheim describes is diminished. Thus, the Alchemists both create their own sacred spaces and change the general state of the world to one in which the divine is potentially omnipresent.

Though the world is largely liminal, the Alchemists still must “hold space” within it. Moving through a mostly-fragmented world, the Alchemists must create their bubble of defragmentation and hold that space together. At Alchemist Theatre shows, for example, they create a spiritual space throughout the show with their physical bodily presence, their songs, and their words. Without that activity in the space, it becomes fragmented like the world at large. By “holding” the space, the Alchemists gain the power of alchemy, which in this instance specifically means facilitating a movement towards defragmentation. They can hold space anywhere in the world, and thus even when Alchemists leave the sanctuary of Jessica and Joe’s house, they do not necessarily leave their tribal and defragmented world behind.

Chapter VII: Charisma in the Tribe

The band plays through another song and—though he escapes the notice of most—Chris is quietly pacing by the side of the stage. He is wearing a beige tunic-looking top over slightly darker shorts, barefoot as he is in every show. Clasped in his hands is a stick, ornamented with feathers, twine, and stone—the same stick he waved around the perimeter of the room before the audience arrived. His hair is bright red and slightly unkempt as always, a beard covering the bottom part of his face. He stills to look at the screen as the band ends the song and the short video clip he had selected starts to play.

The clip is from sitcom Will and Grace and shows Jack watching Cher—who is God—descend down a foggy staircase. After a musical sequence with many dancing angels, Cher tells Jack, “Follow your bliss.” And as Cher’s voice fades away, Chris comes on stage, the audience still laughing from the clip.

“So the first thing when I hear the world bliss is that, just so we’re clear.” Many in the crowd laugh in response. After advising the entire audience to attend Northern Nevada Pride and see Mama Mia 2, Chris announces that he is in the running for being voted the best Minister/Spiritual Advisor in Northern Nevada and asks people to vote (he later wins the award, so his request must have been taken to heart). Then, the true talk begins.

Much can be said about the social values and techniques each of the Alchemists use to participate in both their tribe and American society at large, but one would not have a full picture of the group without considering the roles of its two charismatic leaders: Jessica and Chris. Max Weber was the first to outline charisma as a form of legitimate domination, defining

it as an authority that rests on “devotion to the exceptional sanctity, heroism or exemplary character of an individual person, and of the normative patterns or order revealed or ordained by him” (Weber 1978, 215). Charisma is identifiable in Weberian terms because other people are attracted to it. As trained and talented performers, Jessica and Chris pull people in, garnering enough acclaim and support for Chris to win Northern Nevada’s Best Minister/Spiritual Advisor despite having a relatively small congregation. The two of them are entertaining, eloquent, and have an ephemeral quality about them that Charles Lindholm would describe as “a capacity that has nothing to do with position, or power, or advantage, but emanates solely from an inherent personal magnetism” (2013, 1). That is their charisma, and it can be seen in how they are able to form a social group largely through their own emotional connections.

Although people will often speak about how Alchemist Movement is not about any one person, almost every interviewee mentioned Jessica and/or Chris by name as the core of the group and as someone with whom they have a personal connection. Their supporter Bob said, “actually um I’ve had more connections with Chris and Jessica and that’s not that frequently, so. But I feel tied in with them as well and almost like a local dad, you know. What can I do to help you, that’s my message to both of them.” Like many people interviewed, Bob brought up his relationship with Jessica and Chris, citing it as an important aspect of his involvement with the group. One of their volunteers said that Jessica and Chris are the core of Alchemist, again emphasizing their importance as charismatic individuals. Alchemists’ descriptions of their relationships with Jessica and Chris demonstrate the presence of some degree of charisma, which breeds “a compelling *emotional* attraction derived from the followers’ felt recognition of

a leader's divine or superhuman powers, however characterized" (Lindholm 2013, 4). Jessica and Chris are special for both their magnetism and spiritual abilities as respected shamanic practitioners, and that leads to the formation of powerful emotional relationships.

The importance of charisma runs through all aspects of the Alchemists. Weber describes the impact charismatic leaders have on the communities they organize, saying that they are based on "an emotional form of communal relationship" (Weber 1978, 243). It is clear from the comments of many interviewees that the Alchemists are a charismatic community that puts a premium on personal relationships. Chris also acknowledges his charismatic role in the group, saying, "there is a gift that only I can give... it's really that my alchemy comes in my words, for good or bad, that's how I plant seeds and plant ideas and how I choose to craft my words and the intentions behind them." Chris and Jessica, as Weber would expect, feel "called" to fulfill their role, following their abilities (Lindholm 2013, 8). However, despite this self-acknowledgement of charismatic character and the fact that the theme charisma runs through almost every interview, the Alchemists also take steps to decenter their performances from the two leads. For example, the "alchemy" in every performance allows the audience to also be participants in the show. Un-focusing the show from Jessica and Chris, which the alchemy and musical selections do, allows their messages to be coming directly from God rather than the performers. Their word is taken as perspective, not gospel, and therefore downplaying their importance can help the message shine through from its original source.

Downplaying the influence of charisma influences the experience of the spectators but also has an important impact on the tribe itself. While Jessica and Chris are generally considered the stars of the show, after every performance the whole cast and band will go to

get dinner at a 24 hour diner to recap the entire performance. As part of the dinner, everyone there will go around the table and share their favorite moments. I attended the post-show dinner five times, and each time most people would share not only their favorite moments but also their favorite contributions of every performer. The content of Jessica and Chris' talks was often a prominent topic of conversation, but everyone else's contributions were also mentioned and highlighted. Thus, in the group there is also an intentional effort to de-emphasize the importance of Jessica and Chris, pushing to the forefront of conversation the importance of everyone's contributions.

The post-show dinner roundtable is consistent with the occupational tribalism emphasis on roles. All roles are valued equally "because all are perceived as involved in the success of the tribe," and the key to a successful tribe is getting people in their ideal roles (Quinn 1999, 64). Chris fully embraced that philosophy in his business management, spending much of the summer meeting with the members of Alchemist and figuring out the way they could best contribute to a rapidly expanding business. In that pursuit, he sought to both maximize the personal fulfillment of people and the success of the whole group; in his own words, "it's not about just saying oh, I could do this, it's like cool, but what is your unique spin, what is your unique take, how do you color that to make it uniquely your own, so that it promotes the group and not the individual."

As a result of having multiple equally valued and distinct roles in the business, people feel content because there is no hierarchical ladder to think about climbing. No one is trying to become in charge because "the boss is just another person with a job—the job of being boss. The boss isn't envied or even particularly admired" (Quinn 1999, 73). People are more

concerned with finding a role that is the best fit for them and most productive for the whole group. That attitude came out when people were asked to describe their ideal future direction of the organization. Member Ethan, for example, said “I personally, like, don’t like a ton of responsibility when it comes to things that I don’t, like, totally... you know I dig it and I’m willing to contribute where I can, but ... there’s people above me, basically, that can make those decisions.” His comment demonstrates that he is happy in the role he has, supporting with his skills, but not desperate for the job of the “boss.” Another supporter, when discussing their contribution and the future possibilities, said “there’s always another level you can go up to, you know, and so at the right time we’ll take it to the next level.” He is ready to support the Alchemists in whatever capacity they need, but is also not seeking to steer the ship or step beyond his most useful and fulfilling role.

Due to the prominence of roles, a charismatic community is inherently in conflict with a tribal one. A charismatic group can be egalitarian, but even then the members revolve around and are set apart from their charismatic leader (Pinto 2013, 59). The Alchemists, however, structurally incorporate egalitarian roles into their tribe and follow group customs and rituals to equalize the elevated status of their charismatic members. Thus, their tribal intentions and charismatic nature constantly work against each other, the strength of one diminishing the power of another. By decentering Alchemist from any one person, the group does more than just superficially cover up a charismatic reality. They, in fact, undo the very thing Weber recognized as a hallmark of charismatic authority. The basis of true charismatic authority, he says, “in the conception that it is the duty of those subject to charismatic authority to recognize its genuineness and act accordingly” (1978, 242). Such genuine authority is also linked to

“revelation, hero worship, or absolute trust in the leader” (Weber 1978, 242). Jessica and Chris are only enablers, because they cannot have absolute authority while holding that God does and communicates with all individuals. By dealing with charisma in that way, the Alchemists are still able to maintain their tribal identity, which requires that all members are essential equal. Thus, while Jessica and Chris may serve as charismatic leaders by pulling everyone together through maintaining affective relationships, theirs is only one role of many, and the tribal identity of the group can still be maintained.

Chapter VIII: Synthesis and Defragmentation

“So, when I thought about bliss, I immediately instantly and by the way, Reverend Levity (Jessica) and I don’t talk about what our sermons are about. I mean, we kinda have a general idea, but it’s eerie how much they tie into one another. So, when I think about bliss, I immediately think about Cher, follow your bliss, or the way she puts it, follow your bliiiiiss.” Chris delivers the last phrase in his best Cher impression, and the audience laughs. *“And follow your bliss is actually a phrase that was coined by Joseph Campbell who is a prolific writer who is most known for bringing the mythologies to modernity.”* Chris continues to discuss the extended Campbell quote, *“Follow your bliss and the universe will open doors for you where there were once walls,”* pacing back and forth on stage with his ceremony stick in hand. He says Campbell’s phrase is problematic, and explains his discovery that he was not alone in his opinion. As he talks about the difficulty of achieving “perfect happiness,” the audience awes and laughs along with him as he shares that Nevada has been found to be one of the most unhappy states.

“Now the reason that it’s problematic that we use bliss—next slide—is that bliss actually has a spiritual definition,” he explains. “It comes from the Sanskrit word “ananda.” And ananda is the energetic state of awakening. It is the energetic state that comes from the realization of pure release in a state of utter liberation. Bliss has no counterpoint. At least in the sense of ananda, there’s nothing bliss is related to. So if you have happiness you have sadness, if you have joy you have despair, if you have ecstasy then you know, suffering, turmoil, badness. But ananda is a state that exists outside of its own and in fact, because it’s a state that exists outside of you, you can’t really own it.” Then, in Chris’ usually dramatic and exaggerated way, he says “You can’t own bliss. It don’t belong to you.”

...

“So like always with these thoughts, I go to Spirit and I’m like okay, new month...” Chris pauses to lean forward and back, as if waiting for Spirit to say something to him. “How are you gonna show up in my life this month? And Spirit sent three individuals into my life and it’s so funny how God works, because you ask for answers to your questions and I always assumed like the clouds would part and there would be like this bright light that comes shining down and I would hear the voice of God going ‘Chris.’” He starts to speak deeply now and people laugh. “Here are your answers.” He pauses for a moment then continues in his normal voice. “But most of the time like a song comes on K-LOVE and I’m like oh my Gooood, that’s it. Or someone tells me to watch a movie and you’re like oh my Gooood, Moana changed my life.” The whole audience is laughing as he continues to describe the ways God comes into his life.

Chris moves into talking about the three friends, his audience still laughing along. He speaks of the first, a powerful psychic, who told him that people are spiritually blocked because

of trauma they experience at five years old. Chris says "it's odd that he used five years old," and then moves onto the next friend, who is a healer. In a session with her, he said he thought Spirit wanted him to connect more with his five year old self, she found that his root chakra was blocked, saying, "That's funny, because your root chakra is usually associated with being five years old." After explaining the association, Chris says "oh, again. Why does this number keep coming up? And again, it wasn't just childhood, it was five years old. So, I started to do some research." The slide on the projector changes, and the whole audience starts to aw and laugh at the picture of five-year-old Chris that now appears on the screen. He assures the audience that he knows he's cute and playfully basks in their laughter before he continues, spinning around and striking poses.

He affirms the importance of childhood using a passage from the Book of Matthew, and then starts to explain the importance of five years old, using social psychology research that says it is the initial time of exploration. After feverishly explaining the psychology, still pacing around the stage, Chris says, "The CDC recognizes that at five years old the child starts to distinguish between what is fantasy and what is reality, but who tells the child what is real and what is not?"

The Alchemists takes things that were once separate and combine them in every capacity possible, whether it's through the content of their shows or the artistic mediums. As is evident in the Bliss show, Alchemists will pull from everything, be it television, the bible, scientific research, or any other relevant content. When performers discuss Alchemist theater shows, they often reference how that synthesis aids in the defragmentation of their own lives.

When talking about the special place Alchemist holds in their lives, Jessica, Chris, and Joe all independently mentioned how it allowed them to be their full and complete selves, combining their different interests and talents into one endeavor. As Chris says, “it’s being able to combine all of them into one.” Chris says Alchemist allows him to be a “whole person,” integrating all parts of himself into the performance. Joe describes his experience in Alchemist similarly, focusing on the creative side of his life:

I think it’s really a beautiful synthesis of all of the things I like to do creatively, play music and write. And I always thought that those two spheres were separate things, but they have come together in a really beautiful way inside of Alchemist. And the theater aspect too...it fulfills that creative side and the side that likes to worship and gives thanks, celebration.

While most Alchemists have other platforms on which to express the different parts of their artistry and personality, Alchemist is special because no part is excluded; through performance, Alchemists can accomplish the New Age goal of reconnecting members with “his/her ‘authentic’, ‘natural’ or ‘real’ self —from the person s/he is ‘really’ or ‘at deepest’” (Aupers and Houtman 2006, 204).

The synthesis of many different elements of art and of performers’ lives in the shows is also important to the Alchemists’ patrons. One highlighted valuing the “multiple different perspectives” the Alchemists give, additionally saying she loves “all the different [artistic] ways that they’re opening up for people.” While the performers themselves gain the benefit of being a whole person in the Alchemist shows, the audience members also reap the benefit of being able to integrate their Alchemist identity into the rest of society through the material and medium of the performances. Alchemist performers often refer to their shows as “irreverent” in conversation and in online promotional material because they combine the sacred with the

profane and the serious with the entertaining. The Will and Grace clip used to start Chris' talk is just one example. Connecting spiritual messages with pop culture and the profane world helps "keep [the younger people] engaged," as their supporter Elizabeth points out, but it also allows all patrons and performers to conceptualize their Alchemist identity as their authentic and complete identity. The variety and entertainment in the show, while engaging, is also an important tool in connecting being part of the tribe with the authentic self.

Chapter IX: Ceremony and Nature

Having pulled together all the lines of evidence that led him to five years old, Chris pulls it all together: "When you interact with a child they see angels, they talk to trees, they remember the face of God until someone tells them that the imaginary friend that they're talking to is not real... And suddenly there's a block because—next slide—yes I know." The whole audience laughs, looking at another slide with a picture of Chris, this one titled, "Yes I know, I'm cute." As the laughter dies down, Chris continues. "Because five years old is marked by the development of self-esteem. Five year old's are constantly asking themselves, am I good or am I bad?" After once more talking about the psychology of the process, Chris emphasizes, "Five years old is the moment that children forget the face of God. Five years old is the moment children forget they are God."

Moving towards the end of his sermon, he starts to talk about reconnecting with his five year old self, just doing things for the sake of doing it. He talks about ceremonies in his childhood life, like honoring the water spirits during bath time by always reenacting the final scenes to the little mermaid. "Most importantly, though, was Saturday morning cartoons. To

me, Saturday morning cartoons was like a Baptist tent revival. I prepared for days.” After a long pause for the laughing, he whispers once again. “Daaaays. And when I woke up, I went to my sacred space—my living room—donned in my ceremonial robes—my PJ’s—and I created an offering to the cartoon Gods—cereal and milk. Usually Applejacks, Cinnamon Toast Crunch, Frosted Cheerios. It just kind of depended on the season, my mood, the temperament of the Gods. I made sure that my wand—my tv remote—was fully charged and ready. I also made sure that if I was going to do ceremony with anybody else, they knew the importance of the work we were doing. They also understood the flow of the ceremony, what we were going to do and not watch just so we’re clear. But I realized that, as a child, my life was filled with the reverence of ceremony.”

The idea of ritual and ceremony does not just appear in the Alchemist’s shows; it is essential to their everyday existence and functioning. According to Durkheim, religious groups use rites—which include rituals—to create group cohesion and identity (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014, 674). Some evolutionary anthropologists also argue that rituals can serve as “credibility enhancing displays,” which “provide the learner with reliable measures of the model's actual degree of commitment to (or belief in) the representations that he has inexpensively expressed symbolically (e.g., verbally)” (Henrich 2009, 244-245). Whatever the means, it is generally agreed upon that rituals help unite groups both within religion and more generally (Whitehouse and Lanman 2014, 674). The Alchemists employ ritual and ceremony formally in their moon and other religious ceremonies, but they also heavily use social rituals to manage their relationships. The most prominent ritual that influences the functioning of the

Alchemists is their use of something called Real Love[®]. Real Love is a system developed by Greg Baer that advocates the life-changing power of unconditional love (Real Love, 2016). Posted prominently on the Real Love web page is the definition, “Real Love is caring about the happiness of another person without wanting anything in return” (2016). It is a love that does not go away—even temporarily—when someone makes a mistake or fails to meet expectations. Jessica describes Real Love as “a style of communication, um, and style of living that we’ve learned that we literally have a coach for, and ...well actually Real Love is, expectation is not allowed, it’s all about personal responsibility.”

The Alchemists got introduced to Real Love a couple years before the time of this research by one of their supporters, Sara. Chris was the first Alchemist to begin practicing Real Love and through him it spread to the rest of the group. Sara is a Real Love coach, certified through the Real Love company, and over the years she has supported the Alchemists for free through personal coaching and group programs, such as Real Love in Business and even Real Love in Marriage for Jessica and Joe. Now, anytime a conflict comes up within the group, the norms of Real Love are used to navigate it.

In practice, Real Love manifests as people asking each other “what do you need right now?” and prefacing statements with, “this is *my* wound, but...” In every situation I witnessed, people would take ownership of their mistakes and try to figure out the true reason they were upset about something, which is always that they have a “wound” from past experiences that still needs healing. The four chiefs in Alchemist use Real Love consistently, and Sara even helped them talk to their previous business partner—who’s addiction was interfering with work—in a “loving” way. Through using the ritual forms of communication and conflict

remediation associated with Real Love, Alchemists are always able to bring their vision of the world into their lives and their experiences. Even in following their own paths, they never need hurt the group identity because interpersonal impacts can be mitigated. Real Love has become a fundamental part of the Alchemist's social interactions, and thus every time they use it in and outside of the context of the group, they affirm their identity and commitment to Alchemist ideals.

The wider group of Alchemists also have many rituals regularly repeated that help them maintain an identity as a group. A prime example is the already discussed post-show diner visits. Before the show, the whole cast and crew will also often gather together to pray for the success of the show and delivery of their spiritual message. Rituals also exist in the show itself, such as the alchemy and the meditation, both of which are conducted in the same place every show. Those rituals, in concert with the more subtle interactional rituals of Real Love, normalize group interactions and help maintain the group identity.

While many of Alchemist's ceremonies and rituals come from the modern day and are merely repeated social patterns, as "shamanic practitioners" and followers of many indigenous spiritual practices, many of their ceremonies relate to nature, which is also an influential concept in the group. For example, for their new moon ceremony they did a despatcho, which Chris described as an offering to mother earth. The new moon ceremony—based around the power of nature and connected to an ancestral way of life—ties back to their tribal identity, as pointed out by one of their loyal patrons when she speaks about their tribe: "tribe, because it comes from a word that you're thinking of native American Indian, to me, they do all that, they do the ceremonial stuff, they do the, you know, they're into protecting the earth, so I, for them

especially I believe that its very much appropriate.” They engage in ceremonies and interact directly with the earth, which gives their identity more power both in their eyes and in the eyes of others.

In order to affirm the potency of a tribal identity, the Alchemists also reference abstract and material “nature.” People generally employ many different conceptions of nature, as outlined by William Cronon in his essay “The Trouble with Wilderness; or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature.” Some conceptions are explicitly religious, such as the “garden of Eden” which is the idea of nature as a pure, untouched, and spiritual paradise in which one can more easily connected with the divine (Cronon 1995). The association of nature with the spiritual is common in American culture, originally propagated by the transcendental movement. As Ralph Waldo Emerson puts it, “Whilst we wait in this Olympus of gods, we think of nature as an appendix to the soul” (Emerson 1849, 30). Anthropologists have recognized the same pattern in cultural conceptions of nature, terming it the “subjectivist-romantic” point of view (Coekelbergh 2016, 105). As Jessica puts it, “Nature is God, God is nature. It’s all one thing.”

Even when not talking about nature itself, Alchemists will employ the word to describe parts of their spirituality as positive and divine for their naturalness. For example, when describing the energy healing practice Reiki, Jessica says, “it’s the healing energy—*natural* healing energy of the universe that flows through intention, through your hands (emphasis added).” The simple act of using the word “natural” to describe their practices is a way the Alchemists can affirm their authenticity and therefore goodness (Coekelbergh 2016, pg. 107). Furthermore, the Alchemist tribal structure implicitly invokes nature, specifically through their emphasis on equal and essential roles. All roles in the Alchemists are valued and supported

because all are essential to the overall functioning of a group. Thus, the group functions like an organism; though there are many parts and some seem less glorious than others, without all of the parts, the group as a whole could not survive. All of the parts, too, could not survive without the support of the rest of the body. The idea of nature is invoked in the organic form of the group itself—which they pursue for its moral and divine superiority to hierarchical structures—and thus resonates throughout their lives even in ways they might not often consciously consider.

The concept of nature also extends to the objects used by the Alchemists to create and demarcate sacred space. The importance of nature in Alchemist materials can be best understood through archaeologist Ian Hodder's theory of entanglement. As part of his theory, Hodder describes and defines the ideas of coherence, resonance, and synaesthesia. Synaesthesia and resonance are both "bodily processes that themselves seek coherence across domains" (Hodder 2012, 124). Synaesthesia is the bodily seeking of coherence across different senses (Hodder 2012, 125) and resonance the bodily seeking of coherence across different areas of webs of entanglement (Hodder 2012, 132). He posits that people are driven to manipulate their material worlds in ways that make everything cohesive, and the Alchemists do exactly as he expects through their "natural" objects. Take, for example, the stick Chris uses to bless the space before every show: it is made of wood, feathers, and stone, all of the components coming from nature and perhaps representing different parts of it. The stick would not feel the same if it were made out of PVC and steel wool; the materials used invoke the moral authority of nature and nature's spiritual value. The sensory qualities of the stick as well as its resonances with nature, goodness, and God all give it power to affirm the Alchemist's

identity. Natural materials also mark Jessica and Joe's house in the form of many small quartz crystals near the door. They serve as markers and makers of a tribal and spiritual space; when I was looking for the house for the first time and unsure where I was going, I was assured I was in the right place upon seeing the crystals. Thus, the Alchemists build their relationship with nature into their material world, using those artifacts to invoke nature and use all of its abstract characteristics to support their own lifestyle and create spiritual space.

Nature is morally salient to Alchemists in its own right, but also because of its association with many of the non-western spiritual traditions that the Alchemists reference. As a part of their larger tribal identity, the Alchemists align themselves with the ancestors and their way of life. The idea of "ancestors" is salient not because of a substantive reality of Alchemists' own familial links, but rather because of its resonances. They speak of trying to emulate ancient ways both spiritually and socio-economically, and when they do so they often explicitly associate it with nature. For example, when explaining the use of the word tribe, Joe says, "I mean, I think part of it also is that tribe has a very, like, ancient connotation and kinda it bespeaks something, you know, almost like elemental, something that you need almost like food or water." The descriptor "elemental" and the fundamental needs of food and water evoke nature, using it to bolster the tribal identity. Using nature, the Alchemists can both imply the moral power of tribalism and affirm that value within their own identity.

Chapter X: Out of Bliss, Into Capitalism

After the long and funny narrative about his Saturday cartoons ritual, Chris hammers home his message about reconnecting with your five year old self with a final act: the bliss run.

He calls for back up, and two of the band members come up and start dancing behind him. As upbeat music starts to play over the speakers, Chris starts lip sync, showing off all of his skills as a former drag queen. Then, he starts to “bliss run” around the room, limbs going wherever he wants them to and the audience screaming and clapping along with him. After finishing his run with a lip sync finale, he tells people once again to find bliss through connecting with something beyond themselves. The song over, he takes his leave to enthusiastic applause as the band begins to play the final number. The song is Glorious by Macklemore and as Jessica joins to rap a verse, the audience starts dancing through the thank you’s and the finale of the song. Jessica, Chris, and Matt all stand dancing on the stage. When the song ends, the lights come up, marking the end of the show. The audience starts to trickle out.

In their performances and in their tribe, the Alchemists have created another world that exists somewhat separately within the context around it. However, after the bliss run is through and they all must reckon with the rest of the world, what happens? How do they persist and continue to grow despite the contradictions?

[Business with Real Love](#)

The conflict between the Alchemist’s values and the world they are forced to live in certainly does not go unnoticed to them. As the business director, Chris speaks most frequently about the difficulty therein. Discussing the temporary return of their previous business partner who had left because of problems with addiction, he compares the situation to the prodigal son parable, saying “I hate that parable, because to me, yes, you should always welcome the prodigal son home with open arms and with love, as family. In a business situation, there has to

be accountability, there has to be consequences, there has to be personal responsibility and ownership around your actions.” Despite their goal to create a different kind of business that emphasizes expressive relationships, Chris acknowledges that a business cannot follow exactly the same rules that a family would, noting that “there’s money involved, there’s people’s livelihood at stake, and that can be potentially harming and triggering for a lot of people... and so you can’t always treat it like a family, you do have to treat like a business.” When everyone involved is tightly connected to each other, also maintaining professional relationships would naturally be difficult and complex. The Alchemists have formalized procedures to maintain the difficult balance of business and family responsibilities, most of them coming from Real Love.

Real Love—itself a formal system with many methods—has specific training and strategies for businesses that the Alchemists have been exposed to through their Real Love coach. The four chiefs sometimes reference their Real Love sessions, in which they worked through many of the issues they had in the business in order to make everybody feel loved. Matthew, for example, in such a session brought up his difficulties with not being the same “spiritual flavor.” Once he mentioned that part of the session in the group interview, the other chiefs started to use Real Love strategies of interaction. After discussing ways in which Matt could feel more integrated, Chris says “I don’t need you to change” following one of the tenants of Real Love which dictates that no one should ever ask anyone else to change. As Jessica put it in a different interview, “part of real love is letting people be where they are and loving them where they are with no expectations.” On another occasion, when Jessica was upset because of something that was happening outside of Alchemist, the meeting was stopped to make sure she had what she needed and that everything was handled in a loving way. People asked her

what she needed and tried to figure out the root of the problem—or the “wound” that was triggered by another person’s actions—so that Jessica could feel better. Real Love is a way of relating to other people, and the Alchemists have worked Real Love strategies into their basic social functioning.

An incident that shows how Real Love affects not only social interaction but also business decisions is the departure of their previous members. When their previous member struggled with addiction, it grew to a point where he was harming the business by being a part of it. The time came when the rest of the Alchemists decided to have a conversation with him, which ultimately led to his departure. Having a business built off of personal relationships made the situation all the more complicated; to navigate it, Chris says he was “somewhere in the middle. I was trying to, you know, as a student of Real Love, was trying to find the most loving way to handle this entire situation for everyone.” Chris’ comment highlights the importance of not only interacting with the member in question in a loving way, but also making the business decision that is the most loving. Upon deciding to have the conversation, their Real Love coach “attended the meeting in order to keep it in a loving way,” also infusing Real Love into the conversation itself. The ultimate outcome of the situation was that the member decided to leave the group. Jessica, in a later comment about the situation, said that while all the chiefs viewed leaving as his decision, he would probably view it as being forced out. As she describes it, for him to stay socially accepted by the group, he had to leave the business. In leaving, he behaved in a “loving” manner, because Real Love “is all about taking personal responsibility.”

Real Love is not only used to make big decisions relevant to Alchemist; it also plays into decisions in other parts of the chief’s lives. While deciding the timeline of leaving another

theater company, for example, Chris said that circumstances would make leaving before December the “unloving thing to do.” In rhetoric around all decisions, professional and personal, the chiefs will often invoke Real Love in the decision process, choosing between actions that are “loving” and actions that are not.

Incorporating Real Love into business practices lastly works the “consequences” that Chris states business must have into the group as part of their personal relationships—which are governed by the principle of unconditional love—instead of as part of a traditional business structure. As Chris says, businesses must have “accountability, there has to be consequences, there has to be personal responsibility and ownership around your actions,” and following Real Love means “taking personal responsibility” and “owning your unloving actions.” Chris describes the principles of Real Love and the characteristics that a successful business needs in the same way. Real Love is the tool with which the Alchemists can effectively run a business while keeping the relationships expressive and loving, which keeps their identity as a tribe or family from coming into conflict with their for-profit goals.

Modified Capitalism

The Alchemists are compelled—to some extent—to participate in the society that is surrounding them simply because of their presence in the United States. However, their business model also requires some level of engagement in that society. As Jessica puts it, “We have to go, every time we make a sale that’s money in our pocket. It’s a sport, it should be a sport, we’re all trying to sell it.” Her comment is certainly not to say that the Alchemists are full supporters of capitalism, but rather that they acknowledge the need to participate in it until they have gained the capital and standing that allows them to more fully disengage. Ironically,

to separate themselves, they must first engage. In every decision they make regarding the business and their own personal behaviors, Alchemists must walk a very fine line between staying consistent with their anti-capitalist ideals and participating enough in the capitalist society they are against to succeed in the parts that they cannot escape. That is to say, ideals aside, Alchemists still must pay taxes, pay rent, and use the infrastructure around them. In order to maintain the balance between ideals and practicality, the Alchemists use two major strategies: viewing themselves as making the best decisions they can in the face of external limitations and modifying their engagement to better align with their ideals and identity.

When the Alchemists talk about their aspirations for the future, it is clear that they are fully aware of the limitations on them. Jessica, for example, describes a sanctuary on a piece of land in which all food is produced, classes and healings occur, there is a theater, and people can come to work, live, and learn. The four Chiefs all generally describe the same vision, and it is something they excitedly anticipate. However, all these dreams are always preceded by one small phrase: “once we have the money.” The Alchemists’ ideal future—which they have created and hold in their minds as a goal—accomplishes their business and spiritual goals and is consistent with their ideals and identity. However, they cannot yet live that way, because they do not yet have the money to do so. By keeping external limitations in the picture, Alchemists are able to reduce the dissonance they feel between the way they are forced to live and the way they want to live.

A clear vision of the future helps Alchemists be comfortable with the present, but they also must navigate the present world through making decisions that balance their ideal and their reality. Walking that line causes tension which emerges in conversations such as one

between Jessica and Chris about requests for improv gigs through The Utility Players, an older shared business venture now folded into Alchemist Movement. While debating the merits of accepting such requests, they must balance the benefits of “easy money” and the benefits of focusing on building their business plan and pursuing their spiritual goals. While the Utility Players were offering profitable business, the gigs did not further transform of society. The debate around that specific decision show the difficulty of maintaining the balance and how it influences the Alchemists’ decisions.

When making business decisions that maintain a balance between professional goals and monetary needs, the Alchemists sometimes take a both-and approach, in which they pursue both the things that they are most passionate about and the things that will bring them the most money. Since they are relatively young and have a small cash flow, the Alchemists are striving both to spread their message and to gain enough income to fully get the business off the ground and financially supportive of everyone. Alchemists prioritize both things, and when given the option they will pursue both. However, when the two come into conflict, Alchemists will often favor prioritizing their ideals: in the improv example, the Utility Players ultimately did not accept the gigs. Similarly, when presented the option between getting a new work laptop and funding a bonding retreat, the Alchemists chose the latter because of the idealistic importance of bonding and family time. Alchemists do tend to favor their values in the decisions they make, which ultimately leads them to more financial struggles and less participation in capitalist society.

Prioritizing the Tribe

Tribalism is distinct from capitalism in that it is a model of mutual success: if the tribe succeeds, so do the individuals, and vice versa. As Quinn puts it, “The tribe is what provides them with what they need, and if the tribe is gone, they're all out of luck” (Quinn 1999, 64). The importance of mutual success is frequently invoked by Chris, who says that he wants to find things that will feed individuals and feed the business. In talking about their decisions, the Alchemists never seem to be thinking solely about what is best for the group as a whole; rather, they seek solutions that are directly beneficial to the whole group and members whom the decision involves. That mindset was evident, for example, when Chris and Jessica were discussing the next chief to pay a monthly salary. At the time of the conversation, the only chief receiving monthly pay was Chris, who got paid for some of the time he put into managing the business. In the weeks and days leading up to this conversation, Jessica had brought up her own limitations on time she was willing to donate to the endeavor and had expressed interest in receiving some money for the advertising and media work she does. However, even with those desires already expressed, Jessica suggested to Chris that Matthew be the next one to receive pay in order to engage him more, since he makes his living as an artist and thus is drawn to devote more time to the artistic pursuits for which he gets paid. In doing so, she prioritized both the needs of the group and the needs of Matthew over her own. Behind her decision, there is a struggle to validate both the community and individuals, including herself, in the form of financial reward. Ultimately—at her own expense—she still encouraged a decision that was for the good of the whole group.

While people generally embrace their essential-yet-limited tribal roles, conflict can still arise over how to value those roles monetarily, another manifestation of friction between occupational tribalism and the surrounding capitalist society. For example, when Jessica was trying to figure out how much work she was willing to donate to the business, Chris asked her, “What do you need here to feel that your work is being valued right?” Part of the conflict was about financial needs, but the other part was just about the group placing appropriate value on the individual’s work. The band members also discuss the monetary valuation of people’s contributions. All of the band members are paid on a per-show basis because the chiefs believe strongly in paying the “talent.” Some of the musicians, however, feel like they are monetarily overvalued:

And I feel like I’m kinda like draining their financial pool and maybe not giving enough... like I know what I offer and what I can bring and like that it is definitely better with me than without, but...doing that is so easy for me that I don’t, like it’s like not really work... So it’s like, oh, am I like contributing enough here?

The inverse concern surfaced with one of their musicians at a rehearsal, when Jessica expressed she felt she wasn’t paying them enough. The musician, in response, said that she loves them and loves their mission and because of those things did not feel that she was being underpaid.

Their conversation hints at another aspect of the Alchemists’ functioning: to properly “value” people, they supplement a lack of financial capital with other “goods.” The musician felt okay with putting in more work than she was financially compensated for because she received the benefits of being involved in something she supports with people she enjoys. As Chris says, they are “committed to fulfilling your unique purpose and sacrificing your own egoic self.” People participate, at least in part, for the intangible benefits they receive. Another musician, for example, said “I feel like there’s something that I’m adding to Alchemist that’s like helping

them out too, so it's a very good, like, give and take. Like we're both helping shape and change each other." As Quinn states in his description of an occupational tribe, members benefit from the group just as the group benefits from them. Those benefits—though not a usable currency in the surrounding society—is part of what people gain from being part of Alchemist.

In speaking of values that Alchemists gain from their membership in the tribe, it is again useful to compare them to cults, which emphasize things that are "intrinsically valuable" instead of monetarily valuable (Dawson 2006, 43). Alchemists utilize intrinsic value in both their rhetoric and negotiations. One of their volunteers, for example, brings it up in discussing his decision not to get a second job: "...why don't I just keep using some of that time but use it for myself? You know, develop my own things instead of like going and finding some other job with some company, make a little more money. You know, it's just like, is that gonna make me happy?" People drawn to Alchemist tend to already be questioning the capitalistic fixation on money, and thus it is no surprise that a primarily non-monetary system of exchange has developed within Alchemist. While the LLC itself does get some capital that it primarily uses to pay musicians, most members currently do their work unpaid. The lack of money does not allow for an exclusively monetary system of exchange, and so the Alchemists exchange other things such as "loving requests" to make people's work feel fairly valued. Though "loving requests" are a currency that will not do much at a grocery store, they are one thing that Alchemists can provide each other to compensate for work even without money. The different arms of the business (theater, classes, healing, labs, and art) are also designed to support each other, exchanging resources even though different people are involved in each one. While different parts of the business supporting each other are more of a business plan than an

internal currency, the mentality is indicative of the sort of exchanges that can happen within Alchemist. The tribal nature of the organization allows for internal exchanges, and that capability allows the Alchemists to stay successfully in business even as they are still building their cashflow.

The ultimate proof that commitment to a tribal model and identity is a foremost driver of Alchemist business decisions is when Alchemists deny the opportunity to make more personal gains by abandoning that model. When Jessica was editing their first e-book, for example, she was saying that her progress was slow because she was only willing to donate an hour a day to the endeavor. In response to that, Matthew suggested that she get the royalties from the future sale of the book and therefore be compensated in that manner. Jessica, however, disagreed; she insisted that they all should receive flat-rate pay, because that was the best thing for the whole group and kept all of their interests in the business united instead of separate. Even though she could have gotten what she wanted monetarily by supporting Matthew's suggestion, she chose not to. Their commitment to their tribal identity manifests as their commitment to an occupational tribalism business model, fundamentally affecting the way that they function and, ultimately, enabling their continued success.

Chapter XI: Conclusion

Every day, the Alchemists face a paradoxical world. In each moment and each decision, they must maintain coherence in their tribal and anti-capitalist identity while still surviving in a neoliberal world. This research was born from a curiosity about whether or not that survival was possible. The answer, in short, is yes, but not without perpetual effort to maintain a

separation from the surrounding world. Even though the Alchemists manage not to agonize over the paradox of their position in every moment, it requires constant individual and social work. Capitalism is omnipresent and would be independent of their individual actions. However, their anti-capitalist bubble does not exist without their constant efforts to create it. They must, with decisions, art, bodies, and ideas, create their own world. They must do it constantly. In this manner, the contradictions that make their existence a challenge also binds them together as a group. The Alchemists—and any anti-capitalist group—are entrapped with the world they create. Their bubble needs them to exist, just as they need each other and the social mechanisms described to create and recreate the bubble.

In this way, the Alchemists' conflict with capitalism is as much their strength as it is their weakness. As they undertake the difficult task of growing a business, they can lean on intrinsically valuable resources within their own tribe to get them through. Despite their relative lack of resources, they can pull in talented people because they offer things the rest of the world does not, such as constructed familial relationships and a space to be fully one's self. While they face an inescapable set of contradictions that capitalist countercultural groups would not, they are constantly driven together to create their own world, because their world cannot exist without constant work and gathering. That need holds the Alchemists together and makes their identity necessarily present, even when individuals are away from their fellow tribe members. Collaboratively and socially, they can successfully create an anti-capitalist world, but in order to maintain it they are inescapably tied to it.

As the Alchemists rebel against capitalism, they also help understand its cultural nature. Capitalism is, to a certain extent, inescapable and perpetual. Even groups that do their utmost

to escape it are bound by it, and people need not repeatedly create it. Capitalism propagates of its own accord. Anti-capitalist groups, therefore, are swimming against the tide, whereas capitalism is the river itself. It infiltrates all parts of life and all pockets of culture, such that it appears the best one can do is try to create a small bubble within it. The Alchemists are trying to expand their bubble and propagate change outside of it, but much of their effort necessarily goes towards maintaining their miniature world. They must both choose to individualistically pursue their own relationship with God and also to create their shared social world. While they have shown success maintaining an occupational tribe, a question emerges from their business' specific goal: is it possible to truly change capitalism from within it, or must the change be top down?

From an outsider's perspective, changing capitalism from within seems a daunting task. Unless people are truly living entirely off the grid, they have money-related obligations they must fill for their own survival. The Alchemists face that struggle every day, and ultimately they make compromises with capitalism in order to endure. They are slowly able to draw more people into their bubble, growing their world, but society wide change would take many more people and groups. Thus, even though the Alchemists have been impressively successful in reconciling their existence with the surrounding world and using that intersection to fuel their own success, they are still limited by the world around them. Occupational tribes can exist in society, but it is much more difficult endeavor to use that tribe to create wider change. That being said, the Alchemists are still young, so who knows? To them, the question is most likely one of divine will. Perhaps it will take an act of God, or many small ones. And perhaps they're already getting them. The only thing clear is that the change they seek will take time.

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