

## Chapter 15

# The shadow side

## Why embracing death and decay is essential to flourishing

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This provocation argues for the need to integrate these ‘shadow’ aspects as an essential part of creativity and innovation processes.

The Swiss psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Carl Jung coined the term ‘shadow self’ in reference to parts of our personality that are buried deep within our psyche—essentially, our blind spots. He argued that we are somewhat controlled and robbed of personal autonomy by that which remains in the shadows, and it is only when we become aware of, accept, and integrate these hidden traits of ourselves that we become whole, integral human beings (Jung, 2005). This got me thinking: What is ‘the shadow side’ of flourishing? What lies beneath, hidden and unspoken, in innovation and growth discourses? What aspects are we neglecting that need to be integrated through design?

Let us unpack the ‘flourishing’ metaphor by turning towards Nature and personal development.

### **There is no such thing as an immortal flower**

In Nature, nothing is lost; everything is transformed. A seed is planted out of sight, under the ground. Growth is the product of striving, which also reaches an optimal point that is related to the ability of the soil to keep providing the nutrients. When the peak has been reached, the flower gives way to fruit. Then, withering, death, and decay follow. The soil takes care of the decomposing, transmuting the dead matter into rich nutrients that serve as fertilisers to nurture new growth. Yes, in its flowering state, it glowed and was admired. But its role when decomposed under the ground is no less important, and for that matter, transforms into the substance that facilitates the continuation of life.

Flourishing, *eudaimonia* in Greek, was the centrepiece of Aristotle’s ethics. He saw it as the ultimate end, or good, of human purpose, ‘the highest good’ or a ‘life well-lived’. The shadow side or antithesis—to wither, wilt, diminish—is well portrayed in Kafka’s (1915) *Metamorphosis*, where Gregor’s transformation stands as a symbol of how he has been dehumanised by his job and family: he is treated more like an insect than a human being, so he becomes an insect. His new outward form represents how he feels on the inside—unsatisfying work, burdensome responsibility, sacrifice, and isolation are the environmental

conditions that form his reality and cause his degradation into a lesser form, a seemingly negative transformation, or anti-flourishing.

As human beings, we all undergo transformations and mutations throughout our lives. If we turn our attention to traditional folktales, it's striking to see how many address the subject of loss. A sizable number begin with the loss of a parent, sibling, fortune, home, or identity—and rarely does that which is missing return, intact and unchanged, at the end of the story. Instead, loss is the catalyst that leads to transformation. Yet in our overoptimistic culture, we render anything associated with loss a taboo subject, missing out on the fact that for some things to come about, others—old patterns, habits and ideals—will need to 'die'. Psychological development is the process of overcoming setbacks, limitations, and conditioned behaviour; rising to challenges gives us the opportunity to reach a new level of personal freedom and maturity. We accept that some sort of death, letting go of some parts of ourselves, must happen so we can be renewed and fit for purpose.

As an emergent property of living organisms, flourishing is therefore a potentiality, a positive transformation that is only realised when the right systemic conditions are present. In design, this means paying attention to how we create the right contextual conditions, acknowledging that flourishing is just one transient state of creation.

Creation, bringing forth that which is not yet in existence, implies the acceptance of destruction. There is no such thing as an immortal flower.

### **In-novation needs out-novation**

Transformation is not alien to organisations, which are likely to undergo necessary and beneficial periods of change. Although we are familiar with the natural cycles of flourishing and decay, life and death, it is obvious we still have some work to do in integrating the 'shadow side' when we move the discussion to the context of innovation. The negative connotations these terms carry in our culture mean these aspects often get neglected. In the words of Carl Jung, "One does not become enlightened by imagining figures of light, but by making the darkness conscious. The latter procedure, however, is disagreeable and therefore not popular" (Jung, 1967, p. 335). Perhaps a mix of misinterpreted positive psychology together with an ingrained Western view of prosperity has contributed to our prevalent, dystopian view of flourishing as the absolute panacea—a joyful, ecstatic achievement, reaching higher and higher goals, constantly driving us ever upwards.

The problem is, the sky might have no limits, but we do.

Admittedly, it is more exciting to ride the wave of anti-failure, the optimistic thrill associated with innovation and creativity, and to overlook the less appealing counterparts. Who, if given a choice, would turn the pile of compost rather than tend to the flowers? But inevitably, the better the compost, the better the flowers.

In design, we are familiar and comfortable with iteration, cyclically improving, adapting, pivoting, and morphing to suit the purpose. But how willing and capable are we to deal with death, grief, and transformation as a natural part of the process? When old things need to be shed, how do we do this by design?

The first challenge implies the elimination of what is no longer of value. The hardest, unspoken side of innovation is the discarding, discontinuing, and letting go of comfort zones. 'Dead parts' need to be identified, pruned, and mourned. What can we let go of or allow to shrink, lessen, wither, cease, languish, and decline so that we create the space and conditions for the new to grow, develop, build, ripen, improve, and increase?

Pondering these questions reminded me of the *Stages of Death and Dying*, by psychiatrist Elizabeth Kübler-Ross (1969), who found that terminally ill patients progress through five distinct states towards acceptance of their fate:

- Denial—the patient may deny that the illness is really happening to them and act as if nothing is wrong.
- Anger—the patient experiences deep emotions such as rage, frustration, and resentment, which are often directed at others.
- Bargaining—the individual acknowledges the illness but attempts to negotiate more time to engage in desired activities or to complete unfinished business. In a sense, bargaining is an attempt to delay the inevitable.
- Depression—the patient becomes melancholic, sombre, and dejected. During this time, the patient may mourn things (including relationships) that are already lost as well as things that may be lost in the future.
- Acceptance—they no longer fight the inevitable and prepare for their impending death. During this time, they also experience a sense of inner and outer peace.

Innovation is a complex process that can be fraught with obstacles and 'pain points'. Surely, there are great rewards to be gained when striving towards flourishing, but the journey of organisational and cultural change, with its manifold interdependencies, is far from a joyride. Organisations are made up of people who might not be ready to transition, to let go of what is familiar and embrace the unknown, and if we do not develop tools for navigating the inevitable tensions, the tendency is to turn a blind eye and expect magic results by planting new seeds on untreated ground. Then, it is worth asking how well we are facilitating the 'phasing out' through transition and change. Perhaps when we are called to bring about the 'new and next', we have an opportunity to consider how we facilitate transformation of those involved, especially easing the hidden, unspoken, and potentially most painful parts of the process.

Better still, how can we design for everyone's creative force to emerge from within?

### **'A seed grows best in broken soil'**

There is nothing like a crisis to shake up inertia. The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly has marked the end of a certain way of being. Under the influence of external factors and forces beyond our control, we were forced to adopt the new and adapt, at a global scale and in record time, feeling like we were being moved around like pieces on a chessboard. Powerlessness is not a feeling we humans

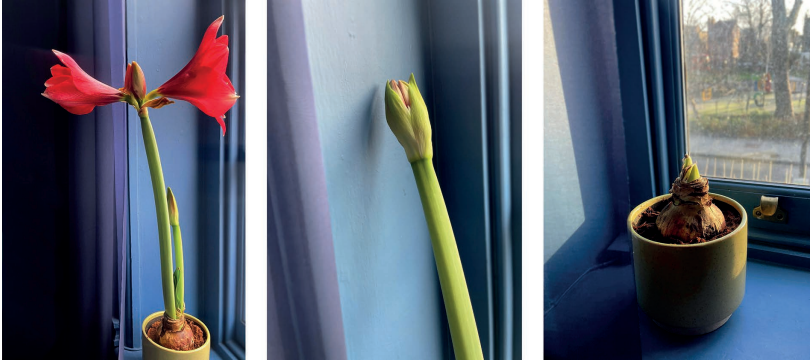


Figure 15.1  
**Flourishing cycle: realisation (blossom), striving (stem), potentiality (bulb).**  
*Photo series courtesy: Francesco Mazzarella.*

relish. Yet in the striving, we found the inner resources, the will and purpose to transform. Jung poses, “recognition of the shadow, on the other hand, leads to the modesty we need in order to acknowledge imperfection” (Jung, 2005, p. 73).

The nature of Nature is that it is constantly breaking down distinctions and building them up into something new and then breaking them down again, and around and around. As an integral part of Nature, our bodies, cultures, and organisations are being ground in this existential mill, more than at any time in history as we face unprecedented social and ecological systemic collapse.

We, designers, creators of human-made systems and cultures apt for flourishing, have a central role to play in creating the right conditions for the environment and people to thrive. As we engage in designing for flourishing cultures, let us turn our fascination away from newness and towards cultivating hope and a sense of collective purpose. Let us facilitate elimination, termination, and interruption of the status quo, and let us do it in the way of Nature, where the old fertilises the ground, preparing it well for the fledgling to grow strong.

Flourishing then becomes not a destination but a constant process of tending to our garden, our health, and our wholeness. And as we reach a higher level of awareness, let us develop resilience and kindness to execute our designerly ways with grace.

## Reference list

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