

*Keeping the flame alight during a time of burnout*  
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*Keynote: Re-Vision Winter Conference, Saturday 28<sup>th</sup> January 2023*  
*Wyboston Lakes, Bedfordshire*

[Slide 1]

Re-frame & Intro:

We'd like to re-frame this keynote as a community contemplation. Together we'll consider, what it might mean to keep this notion of 'the flame' alight during a time of burnout.

Let's start by moving beyond classical definitions of burnout that emphasise subjective experiences of preventing, overcoming, and reducing our capacity to stay with experiences of stress and physical and emotional exhaustion. No quick tips or succinct takeaways will be offered to get anyone strong again.

What if burnout was a symptom of soul? What if burnout were an individual and collective transformational process where old ways of being, inspirations, personnel, and ways of conceiving of our values and visions are *burning out* and re-vised ways of being might be *burned in*? What if we adapted David Whyte's contemplations on exhaustion, to consider that the antidote to burnout isn't necessarily rest, but wholeheartedness? What if burnout brings attention to where we might have lost our vision and soul values?

Wholeheartedness invites us to look again at our identifications and what they have become. Wholeheartedness, through burnout, invites us to look again at the old skins that may no longer serve us.

[Slide 2]

In terms of the Re-Vision wheel, where we highlight the cyclical process of separation, liminality and return, burnout summons the territory of separation, loss, death, grief. It takes courage - the whole heart - to let go of what has been and burned out when ego clings to the controllable familiar. Wholeheartedness risks looking again through an often-disorienting, dismembering liminal process. Here, ego's ideals are often shattered, as soul's door opens to the creative potential of unknown uncertainty. Following this descent, as a symptom of soul, burnout's transformational process invites us to reconnect with our soul values to return with a re-vised state and re-nourished inspiration that might be *burned in*.

Re-Vision is in its own transformational process of *burning out* and *burning in*. This is reflective of wider collective experiences orchestrated around the call to attend to a planet that is *burning out*.

**Context:**

Founders, Chris and Ewa Robertson left a few years ago. Whilst still a trainer, Nicky recently ended her role as Training Director. *In this in-between space*, we have an interim holding team that is collectively holding leadership responsibilities. As an organisation, we are called to look again at our leadership, values and vision to consider what may be burned in at a time of burning out.

Let's consider the ancient myth of Sankofa, now. It originates from the Akan people of Ghana. I have adapted and expanded it to support our collective contemplation. Sankofa is a symbol of a mythical bird and word in Twi - the language of the Akan people. It means "to retrieve". *San* – return. *Ko* – go. *Fa*- take. Sankofa, Return. Go. Take. Sankofa invites us to hold sacred the act of re-membering and re-claiming our personal and collective values and vision.

**Sankofa:**

A long time ago, in a village far away, there lived a small bird called Sankofa. Sankofa was admired for their beauty and smallness. Sankofa's job was to kindle the pot of community values, which sat on a small fire. Over time, Sankofa's attention was drawn to life outside the village. The flame under the pot of community values burned out. Looking for fire, Sankofa left the village. Yet, outside of the village, they felt vulnerable with other birds – their ways of communicating seemed different. Without the pot of values, Sankofa forgot their beauty, vision and direction. Sankofa cried. Hearing the faint whispers of Sankofa's soul cries, three elders found Sankofa. The three elders wondered how they might repair what had been ruptured. They had an idea to craft an egg. The elders placed the egg in Sankofa's beak as Sankofa slept. The egg contained the values and vision of the community that had once burned under the pot. Placing the egg in the beak meant Sankofa could remember their values and take them wherever they were headed. Sankofa woke up confused, with their head turned backwards and feet faced forward.

**[Slide 3]** So, now, when you see the image of a Sankofa bird anywhere, the egg is always placed in its beak – feet forward, head looking back: a reminder to look back to our values and roots so we can reconnect meaningfully to our vision **[Slide 4]**

**'Small is beautiful'**

When Chris and Ewa left, they offered a keynote at the Winter Residential called 'Minding the space'. They highlighted that their talks and rituals echoed an inspiring, originating impulse, drawing on James Hillman's invitation to engage in an imaginal tracing back to our original vision. So, drawing again on that impulse, let's look back together at one of the core values that existed at Re-Vision's inception: 'small is beautiful'.

In order to provide excellent training standards, 'small is beautiful', as a value, kept the training size small so that attention could be given to quality, care, the healing potential of relational intimacy, and the flexibility to meet individual needs. As time went by, recognising some need to keep group size small, in theory, the size of groups, in practice, increased and the organisation, as a whole, became medium-sized.

Let's consider 'small is beautiful' as a soulful metaphor. Literal interpretations of maintaining the value of 'small is beautiful' run the risk of being unhelpfully nostalgic; suggesting things ought not to have changed and that we have to mourn or hark back to some type of heyday. 'Small is beautiful' invites us to savour the commitment to care, quality, the healing potential of relational intimacy and flexibility demonstrated through community sharing, working and playing together, allowing spaces for rupture and repair – as demonstrated through student IPGs and staff IPGs.

It remains necessary to stay attuned to the marginal shadow voices, so that we can stay conscious of the shadow side of transpersonal energies. Consider the seduction towards heroic, martyr-type tendencies to inflation and dominance. Consider how we can become detached from our limitations and vulnerability. Consider the tension between holding power collectively and the incessant pulls towards individualism. Growth can be exciting and demanding. Yet, rather than take flight with transcendence, looking back to the vision and the metaphor of 'small is beautiful' supports us to contain and ground ourselves through our foundational principles. So that whatever we *burn in* (including all our decision making) is rooted in our soul values, rather than unconscious energies that have the capacity to wipe us out physically – leaving us feeling unappreciated, resentful, burdened, hopeless, depleted, unacknowledged, stagnant, fearful, abused, taken-for-granted, betrayed and miserable. As a craft in soul making, our challenge is to stay open to cultivating the qualities and values of vulnerability, embodiment, and containment – even as numbers grow.

In the early vision, Re-Vision had an outside supervisor, who had capacity to catch and reflect back unconscious dynamics. This cultivated an intention to listen and pay attention to the discounted, unheard, marginal community voices. Today we have community forums, stage reps, council meetings, the Black Lives Matter space and a variety of opportunities for feedback and response. Perhaps the inclusion of such supervision, as was the case at our inception, may support our transformational process of burning out and burning in.

### What might beauty itself might mean to us now?

Rather than staying fixed to the literal principle of small is beautiful, it might be helpful to contemplate, together, *what beauty itself might mean to us now?* [Slide 5]

We may wonder what we mean by beauty. But, let's not be too quick to reach for a common consensus and definition. Beauty seems elusive. Conclusions will remain incomplete. Drawing on Eros, perhaps it is our encounters, and experiences of being touched by beauty that provides our sense, respect, and reverence. We might say that beauty is ordinary; it isn't always beautiful, nor does it only show up at special times. Beauty dwells in our midst - often unnoticed, shy, hesitant, momentary.

[Slide 6] Hillman (1992, p.33) suggested that 'Beauty is not an attribute like a fine skin wrapped around a virtue, merely the aesthetic aspect of appearance. It is appearance itself. Beauty is the way in which the gods touch our senses, reach the heart, and attract us into life'.

[Slide 7] John O'Donoghue describes beauty as 'swift, sheer grace, it is like a divine breath that blows the heart open' (JD, p17). Such heart opening might be the salve that attends to the fatigued, broken, lost, unsure, distressed, too-numb-to-awaken-to-endings and death that beckons us all.

Might beauty be the flame, at a time of burnout, that ignites our wholeheartedness? Might beauty be our source of organic vitality that we burn in? Organic vitality might kindle the flame, transforming energy, as we look again at our values.

Perhaps it is the neglect of beauty that underpins the notion of burnout at Re-Vision. We might consider the impact when our hearts close to pursue efficiency and pragmatism; where we disconnect from values like 'small is beautiful' and forget to foreground principles of care and relationality. Instead, we might become burdened by cultures of perpetual sacrifice that become impossible to carry.

### **Personal contemplation:**

Whatever your relationship and history with Re-Vision as an organisation, bring to your heart to a time when you have been touched by, or encountered beauty through Re-Vision. Within your body, how does it feel to reengage with this experience of beauty?

**[Slide 8]** Consider this question together: How might your engagement with beauty keep the flame of re-vision alight?

### **Final offering:**

Burnout may be our renaissance and the liberation we need to re-source and dream again into our vision. Returning, again, to our early template, Re-Vision began with the imaginal – consecutive dreams held between Chris and Ewa. Perhaps we have to re-engage the value we place on collective dreaming, as a community practice, to dream ourselves into our re-visioned state with reconsidered values. As a soulful messenger, burnout calls us to pause and attend to all we have dishonoured, stopped noticing and ceased caring for, in terms of our intentions, values, vision, and planet. Burnout might be our opportunity to *burn in* a re-awakening with the beloved.

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Joel Simpson is a trainer at Re-Vision, psychotherapist, presenter, group facilitator, writer, trainer and a celebrant, who has an intention to live and work soulfully through the heart.