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CREATING TEMENOS IN THE CLASSROOM:  
RELATIONAL ENCOUNTER AND THE SUBTLE  
ALCHEMY OF TRANSFORMATION

Gianna Di Rezze

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# **CREATING TEMENOS IN THE CLASSROOM: RELATIONAL ENCOUNTER AND THE SUBTLE ALCHEMY OF TRANSFORMATION**

**Gianna Di Rezze**

## **Abstract**

*The following article describes the interplay of self-knowledge and relational knowing in the co-creation of the classroom temenos. A nurturing classroom temenos is a particular quality of relational space which may be experienced by students as a place where they are safe, seen, heard and accepted. The greater temenos of the classroom is shaped and informed by teachers' cultivation of their own inner temenos through mindful practices which can help build capacity for relationship. In this article I borrow alchemical language and processes to describe my experience of the relational temenos. I use select personal narratives and two key symbolic images to describe how this embodied knowledge of self and other might allow students and teachers to become more fully themselves. I suggest that it is in this invisible but existent intersubjective space or "innermost layer" (Aoki, 1992, p. 20) of teaching where the potential for transformation and future well-being might be found.*

## **Résumé**

*Cet article décrit les interactions de la connaissance du soi et du savoir relationnel dans la co-création du ténemos en salle de classe. Un ténemos nourrissant est une qualité particulière de l'espace relationnel qui peut être vécue par les personnes apprenantes comme lieu où elles sont vues, entendues, acceptées et en sécurité. Le ténemos plus large d'une salle de classe est façonné par la personne enseignante qui cultive son propre ténemos intérieur par les pratiques réfléchies, lesquelles peuvent aider à renforcer les capacités relationnelles. Je mobilise le langage et les processus alchimiques pour décrire mon expérience du ténemos relationnel. Je présente quelques récits personnels et deux images symboliques clés pour décrire comment ces connaissances incorporées du soi et d'autrui peuvent permettre aux personnes apprenantes et enseignantes de devenir encore plus elles-mêmes. Je propose qu'il est dans cet espace intersubjectif à la fois invisible et réel, ou encore la « couche la plus profonde » (Aoki, 1992, p. 20, traduction libre) de l'enseignement, où se révèle le potentiel transformateur et le bien-être futur.*

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*Figure 1.* Barnett Newman. 1967. *Voice of Fire*. Acrylic on canvas.

The National Gallery of Canada/NGO, Ottawa, Canada.

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### **Introduction**

1995 proved to be a pivotal year in my professional life. At midcareer, having taught elementary school students for fifteen years in three different schools, I would take a yearlong sabbatical to begin a doctoral program focusing on teacher education. Over the course of my thesis coursework and re-search (Di Rezze, 2000), I would reclaim the intuitive and relational ways of knowing that had always been at the heart of my classroom practice. I would begin to understand why teachers who sought to enact a relational pedagogy were often left vulnerable and voiceless as discussions about the relational core of classroom teaching were virtually absent in the formal research on education. The compilation of a personal glossary would assist me in recovering and describing the subjective nature of this embodied knowledge. Entries in an early version of this lexicon included *relational knowing*

(Hollingsworth, Dybdahl, & Minarik, 1993) *attunement* and *empathy* (Miller, 1986), *caring* and *high fidelity* (Noddings, 1986), *response-ability* (Surrey, 1985), *wide-awareness* (Greene, 1978), *watchfulness* and *thoughtfulness* (Aoki, 1992) *authenticity* and *encounter* (Moustakas, 1966), to name just a few. As I continued to read across the disciplines, I would add *mothering* (Ruddick, 1989), *wholeness* (Palmer, 2004), *presence* (Woodman, 2005; Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006), *resonance* (Bache, 2008), *compassion* and *love* (Hinsdale, 2012; Miller, 2018) to this expanding glossary.

Now retired from classroom teaching and an independent scholar, I continue to use this collection of terms, along with other artistic forms, to describe and illustrate the nature of relational knowledge at the core of classroom teaching. Given the limits of this article I have selected only a few of many stories of practice as a way to illustrate the enactment of such knowledge. These narratives are drawn from the experiences of my own education as well as from encounters with my own students. The ephemeral nature of this subjective knowledge requires that we borrow from the more subtle and nuanced languages of the arts, spirituality, depth psychology, and holistic educational research in order to animate this “innermost layer” or “essence” of teaching (Aoki, 1992, p. 20). I also reference Moustakas’ notion of the *encounter* understood as “a direct meeting between two persons” in which there is “human intimacy and depth...absolute relatedness and sense of mutuality” (Moustakas, 1966, pp. 22–23) to support my emergent understandings of the relational field of the classroom (Bache, 2008). This essay is also informed by Barnett Newman’s painting titled *Voice of Fire* (1967) which acts as a visual symbol of the embodied knowing of the teacher and the invisible but existent relational space co-created by such knowledge. Newman’s artful use of the vertical line, which he called a “zip” represents this intersubjective space of the *temenos* (Jung in Sharpe, 1991; Moore, 1996). It is in this co-created relational space where the promise of transformative teaching and learning may be found.

### Creating Temenos in the Classroom

Much of what and how teachers know is tacit and can only be glimpsed through the images, cycles, rhythms and rituals of their practice (Connelly & Clandinin, 1988). During my years as a classroom teacher, the last week of August was marked by a yearly ritual of setting up my classroom for the new school year. During the last half of my teaching career, my classrooms were all located on the edge of the school yard in crumbling portables which I sought to make as comfortable as possible. In the heat of late August, I would paint damaged bulletin boards in bright colours and haul in my own shelving and books to create a reading nook. One year I set up an old sofa chair, and bought pillows and plants to create the feeling of a *schoolhome* (Martin, 1992). Over time, I came to understand this end of summer ritual as the creation of a particular quality of space which I now call a *temenos* (Jung in Sharpe, 1991; Moore, 1996).

In ancient Greece the *temenos* was the sacred space around a temple, an altar or holy grove where rites of passage were held (Whitley, 2001). In modern usage temenos most often refers to the sanctuary of a therapeutic or creative space and can also refer to a protected *inner sphere*, a ‘magic circle’—which represents “the wholeness of the personality” (Jung, 1989, p. 196). The classroom is usually construed as a place for learning about things ‘out there’ in the larger world (Ergas, 2016, p. 56), but when we recognize education as predominately a “journey of the self” (Huebner, 1993, p. 405) the classroom becomes a

temenos for the emerging soul life of both students and teachers. Soul, for the purposes of this discussion, "is not a thing, but a quality or a dimension of experiencing life and ourselves. It has to do with depth, value, relatedness, heart and personal substance" (Moore, 1992, p. 6). A nurturing temenos encourages dialogue and reflection while helping students integrate what they learn about the objective world with their subjective experiences of the self in the world. The self-knowledge that results from this movement toward *wholeness* or *becoming oneself* can be said to be the emancipatory goal of a true education (Cohen, 2009).

The creation of a temenos in the classroom is more than a rational "act of design" (Yinger, 1987). It is the co-creation of a "mutual space" (Schwartz-Salant, 1998) which exists somewhere between the subjective and the objective world. This invisible but living middle ground can be thought of as an *alchemical* space containing the potential for transformation. In a supportive and relational classroom temenos, the content and nature of everyday experience can be examined, refined and transformed through encounters with self, with learning material, fellow classmates and teachers. Both inner and outer—micro and macro—are at play in this "living classroom" (Bache, 2008) as the creation of temenos is in large part a manifestation of the consciousness and the language of practice—the inner temenos—of the teacher. It is important to emphasize here that "a language of practice is not primarily a verbal matter" and can be thought of instead as "a set of integrated patterns of thought and action...that constitute a kind of syntax and semantics for action" (Yinger, 1987, p. 295). This 'language' of practice is embodied in the person of the teacher and communicates subtly and intuitively through one's *presence* or way of being in the classroom space.

A more thorough discussion of the nature and importance of *presence* in teaching can be found in Palmer (1997), Rodgers and Raider-Roth (2006), Cohen (2009) and Miller (2018). Briefly stated, presence is an elusive quality which cannot be fully named (Palmer, 1997) nor reduced to a set of skills to be measured (Rodgers & Raider-Roth, 2006). Grounded in the identity and integrity of each teacher (Palmer, 1997) presence can be thought of as an embodied mindfulness which allows a person to be there for what is happening in the moment (Johnson, 1989). I am most drawn to depth psychologist Marion Woodman's (2005) simple but profound definition of presence as "being able to love, to hold an energy that allows people around you to open up and be who they are" (Woodman, 2005). Presence is central to teachers' work (Miller, 2018) and those who develop their capacity to do the continuous reflective "inner work" (Cohen, 2009, p. 31) of identifying, examining and integrating their life experiences can cultivate and come to embody a unique quality of presence which becomes the center from which they live, teach and thereby create the classroom temenos.

### **A Temenos of 'Mothering'<sup>1</sup>**

Greg (pseudonym), a twelve-year-old student, used to trek across the schoolyard to my classroom located on the edge of the schoolyard for learning support in literacy. Along with learning difficulties, there were on-going issues in his family which eventually culminated in a parental separation approximately halfway through his grade 6 year. It was during this time of turmoil that he paid an unexpected visit to my portable early one morning.

1 All names, dates and identifying details have been changed to protect the privacy of individuals who inspired the narratives in this article.

*Agitated and confused, Greg described how he was brushing his teeth that morning when his mother handed him the phone. It was his father calling him from the other side of the world. Dad had gone to stay with relatives for now. “He didn’t even tell us!” Greg shouted. In the car, on the way to school that morning his mother had another surprise for him. “Miss, do you know what my mom told me on the way to school? She said I was a love-child. Do YOU know what that means?” Invoking my ‘inner therapist’ we began to unpack some of Greg’s anger and confusion. At the sound of the first bell of the day I wound up our short conversation by looking at him straight in the eye. “Greg, I want you to think about the word “love” in that phrase—“love-child” I said to him. He nodded quietly. I told him I would check in with him that afternoon in class. Then he shuffled out the door to begin another school day.*

Ruddick (1989) reminds us that human individuation is “subject to chance, distortion and disorder” (p. 30). She also makes a distinction between birthing labour and *mothering*, the latter applying to those of *all* genders who nurture the physical, psychological, intellectual, emotional or spiritual well-being of students. Privileging the language of nurturing over that of classroom management affects the quality of the classroom temenos. Teachers need to be cognizant of the metaphors they use to describe their practice as “the way we interact with the world in knowing it, becomes the way we interact with the world as we live in it.... Our epistemology is quietly transformed into our ethic” (Palmer, 1983, p. 21). This ethic is then reflected in the language, practices and presence which shape the temenos.

Like Greg we all share early disintegrative and confusing experiences of self. “No child can count on being or remaining intact” (Ruddick, 1989, p. 30). A nurturing temenos supports and assists the integration of disorienting life experiences. Students’ inner experiences of anger and sadness are deeply felt but may be difficult to articulate. Teachers must use all their intuitive capacities to “read” the intersubjective field for clues to what may be going on within. This form of loving attention expresses as openness (Oliver in Hinsdale, 2012) and attunement (Miller, 1986) to the experiences of fragmentation that students carry within. Unsettling events which may cause aspects of self to shut down and/or split off are welcomed in as part of the “curriculum” to be examined and transformed in this mutual space of the classroom temenos. By working with the inner chaos students may bring to school, “mothering” teachers are working in preventative mode.

Developmental trauma occurs when “emotional pain cannot find a relational home in which it can be held” (Stolorow cited in Epstein, 2013, p. 4). Although “pain is not [necessarily] pathology” (Epstein, 2013, p. 38), the lack of adequate attunement to students’ emotional life over time can fragment the personality leaving the student less resilient and more vulnerable to distortions of the self, which can undermine future mental health. Perceptive teachers and caring others who see through the “thinking heart” (Miller, Irwin, & Nigh, 2014) know from the growing research on stress and trauma that a compassionate and attuned response from another in a time of emotional overwhelm can make a difference for students and indeed anyone who might be in crisis.

### **A Temenos of Compassion**

*Eileen was a ten-year-old student in my class who loved the Christmas season. Apart from the decorated trees, lights and gifts of the season December also marked the annual return of her father who had taken a job out of the country after her parents separated. Like Santa himself, her father's return was eagerly anticipated.*

*Second term would begin right after the Christmas break and students wanting to avoid going out in the cold weather months would often ask "Miss, do you need any help at recess?" Eileen and her friend asked this very question one cold March morning. I pointed over to the well-used classroom library nook which needed cleaning and reorganizing. At recess time the girls followed me to the back of the room to begin tidying up.*

*"What's your favourite book?" I asked them both as we headed toward the library nook. I was fully expecting to hear titles of longer and 'thicker' chapter books that grade fours were now able to read...*

*"I love Frosty the Snowman!" shouted Eileen.*

*"Why is that your favourite?" I asked—curious about this particular choice. "Because the children have fun with him in the winter and then in the spring...he melts and he's gone..." she replied.*

Frosty does return every year but in the meantime, he leaves a puddle. Children have little power over their familial circumstances and need support in expressing and containing feelings of loss and grief which may arise when separated from a parent. "Teaching tugs at the heart, opens the heart, and even breaks the heart—and the more one loves teaching the more heartbreaking it can be" (Palmer, 1997, p. 8). Eileen's predicament is one of many that breaks the heart and taps the teachers' own vulnerability. Despite our helplessness in these situations we must teach students to adapt and evolve to circumstances that are not of their making. A compassionate temenos honours feeling as a way of knowing while providing a watchful (Aoki, 1992) stance over vulnerable students whose feelings may overwhelm. Teachers may not be able to reunite families but they can provide the "resilient cheerfulness" which "resists despair and courts hope" (O'Reilly & Ruddick, 2009, p. 21). Yes, Frosty is gone for now but 'don't you cry' as he and his magic hat will 'be back again someday'.

### **A Temenos of Alchemical Magic**

Years ago, while patrolling the hallway after school, I spoke to the mother of a young child whose sibling was in my class. She was awestruck by what she had just witnessed as she picked up her younger son from his kindergarten class. "It was like magic!" she exclaimed. Mother then described how the teacher, in preparing for dismissal, flicked the lights on and off while the children froze in place. When the teacher had the children's attention, she dismissed them a few at a time until they all "disappeared". This story brought back a memory of my own grade three teacher who would use her magic touch to settle us down after the lunch hour. She would pluck a straight pin from the box on her desk and hold it in the air in front of the class. Before releasing it, she would say in her gentle voice, "Raise your hand when you hear the pin drop". In an instant the class would go silent in anticipation of the clink of the pin hitting the tiled floor. So simple and elegant—yet so complex. To an

outsider these classroom rituals appear to be a form of wizardry but the real power of this kind of ‘magic’ is contained in the subtle relational alchemy of the temenos or resonant field of the classroom (Bache, 2008)—where soul meets soul.

Alchemy has a rich history that can be traced back thousands of years. While there are many cultural iterations of alchemy, at the root of each tradition is the understanding that alchemy, in its introverted form, was a process of spiritual transformation leading to self-knowledge, healing and integration (Schwartz-Salant, 1998). Alchemists believed in the fundamental unity or essence of all things and that inner processes could affect outer events. Psyche and matter interacted in a liminal realm which was the place of manifestation or magic. Those who engaged this inner transformative spiritual journey and who were able to make even a drop of the metaphorical “gold” it promised were said to be able to affect change by their mere presence as the inner gold was the manifestation of a particular quality of presence of soul.

Like relational knowing, alchemical knowledge became marginalized with the rise of scientific thinking and the Cartesian schism of body and mind. We can see evidence of this historical legacy in the way we have conceptualized and organized traditional schooling (Schwartz-Salant, 1998) into discrete subject areas and grade levels underpinned by narrow understandings of what constitutes knowledge and intelligence. Using the lens of alchemical thinking as a guide (Mayes, 2003), we begin to glimpse the kind of *magic* that might be at play in the relational field of the classroom. The subjective, intuitive and even irrational knowledge of the teacher, and not the techniques of behaviourist psychology, affect the magic. Teachers’ embodied knowledge can even be read as “the hidden curriculum” understood as “the teacher’s own integrity and lived conviction” (Kozol, 1993, p. 20). Teachers’ own personal growth is an ongoing inner process with outer consequences. In the classroom temenos, the teacher who engages in their “inner work” (Cohen, 2009) manifests a distinct presence which in a real sense is the teaching (Kozol, 1993).

### A Temenos of Transformation

In the fall of 1995, I travelled to Ottawa to accept a teaching award and had a chance to visit the National Gallery of Canada. A few years prior, in 1989, the gallery had purchased a painting by abstract expressionist Barnett Newman for 1.8 million dollars. The public outcry over the purchase of this artwork continued for months and years after its installation at the National Gallery. The public could not understand why a painting they thought anyone could paint would be worth that kind of money. Curious, I actively sought out Newman’s expressionist work that day and found it displayed on a wall at one end of an enormous gallery. *Voice of Fire* is a massive work, approximately eighteen feet tall and eight feet wide. The canvas is divided into three vertical sections running the full length of the canvas. Its predominant colour is a deep ultramarine blue and down the center of the canvas runs a broad cadmium red stripe which Newman would refer to as a ‘zip’. Along with scale and colour, the ‘zip’ would become a distinctive artistic signature of Newman’s colour field paintings. As I approached *Voice of Fire* in the gallery that day, I had a feeling of slowly becoming enveloped in its presence. Then standing at just the right distance—where peripheral vision is within the perimeter of the canvas—I had the curious sensation of being enveloped in the colour field itself. A few days later, back home in Toronto, I placed

a postcard size picture of Newman's controversial work on my office bulletin board where it would continue to reveal itself over the years.

In early 1999, during the final year of my doctoral thesis writing, I met with my supervisor to discuss my struggles with the final chapter. Over the years of my re-search process, the temenos of his office had provided a refuge from the politics of the academy and a space in which to think aloud. That particular day I came with my postcard of Newman's painting in hand. Using this visual metaphor to help us articulate the nature and artistry of teaching practice, he and I began talking about Newman's use of colour and scale along with the ongoing controversy since its purchase by the National Gallery. I mentioned Newman's use of the vertical line or "zip" which had been variously interpreted as a streak of light, a feeling, a musical note, a heartbeat and a disruption of the colour field. No sooner had I finished this last sentence when he pointed to me and stated emphatically—*"And YOU are a disruption of the curriculum field!"* We both laughed at his observation but this new sudden understanding of my 'disruptive' teacher self, served as a beacon during the final months of thesis writing. Concretizing the symbolic meaning evoked by Newman's painting, I even had a thin red 'zip' put in my hair—as a symbolic reminder of my own emerging 'voice of fire' (Di Rezze, 2000).

### ***Reditude and Onement: Cultivating an Inner Temenos***

Through his distinct colour field paintings, Barnett Newman strove to represent the ineffable and the transcendent. Devoid of pictorial objects, his colour field paintings have a contemplative and meditative quality which would be called the *sublime* (Newman, 1948). Like the classroom temenos, Newman's works contain elements of the unconscious, the unspoken, and the unfathomable. He would even invent the word *reditude* (Simpson, 2017) to communicate the essence of a particular shade of red in his work. Gallery staff have even reported that the large-scale paintings containing this hue seem to "bathe the viewer in a red glow" (Simpson, 2017, p. 32) in some sort of subtle emanation. Like the embodied knowledge of teachers, Newman's aesthetic presence was a manifestation of his own inner alchemical process. Working with his muse in the alchemical vessel of his studio, Newman left something of himself on the canvas giving his works a depth and radiance. In the temenos of the gallery space, we are drawn to their luminosity. His colour field is alive.

Rather than dividing it, Newman felt that his use of the vertical line or 'zip' actually united the colour field, calling to mind the word *zipper* evoked by the term. Newman's 'zip' first appeared in a painting called *Onement 1* which the artist painted on his birthday in 1948 (Simpson, 2017). The title is a play on the word atonement which when hyphenated as 'at-onement' means 'being at one'. Newman's cadmium red 'zip' in *Voice of Fire* can represent this continuous movement toward our own center – the seat of our integrity (Palmer, 2004). Teachers who are able to create a loving temenos in the classroom also cultivate an inner temenos, which Jung saw as a protective circle for the "inner alchemy" of personal transformation (Burrows, 2015, p. 127). Teachers who draw on the self-knowledge that arises from the mindful reflection and integration of their lived experiences can affect the temenos by their very presence as this liminal space can be thought of and experienced as an "interactive field" (Bache, 2008) in which *being* informs and shapes the *doing*.

### Final Thoughts on Creating Temenos

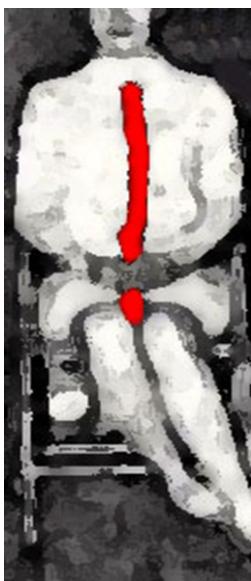
Using the image of Newman's painting as a guide, I have attempted to describe and animate my experience of this "innermost layer of teaching" (Aoki, 1992, p. 19) in the classroom temenos. But even with my ever-expanding relational glossary at hand one can only go so far in describing this invisible but active relational field. Much of what goes on in the temenos is beyond language, beyond the rational mind, and continues to elude our grasp (Aoki, 1992). But despite its elusive quality, a nurturing and loving temenos can provide the alchemical container where transformative teaching and learning may truly dwell (Aoki, 1992).

In a poignant section in his book titled *Rough Magic*, depth psychologist and teacher David Lindley (1993) describes a mirroring process in which the teacher begins to draw out the emerging adult in the child while the student constellates the archetype of the child within the teacher. Each reflects the other within. This mostly unconscious process is always at play as in this subtle realm of the classroom temenos. In this co-created soul space of the classroom temenos teachers and students communicate "involuntarily, automatically, silently, energetically" (Bache, 2008, p. 149) through presence. A loving and nurturing temenos is a felt experience which has a healing and transformative quality (Miller, 2018). Soul begins to emerge as it is reflected back to itself in the safety of a loving temenos reminding us all the while that it "does not want to be fixed, it wants simply to be seen and heard" (Palmer cited in Bache, 2008, p. 180). Even the mere *memory* of a teacher's healing presence can continue to resonate over time continuing to permeate our way of being in the world. Within such remembrances we remain connected across time and space. In this grander temenos where past and present come together, we are neither separate nor separated. In this temenos of love and memory, we are still present to one another.

### A Temenos of Love

*One long ago September day as I began my grade 4 year, I remember witnessing a disconcerting scene. We had recently been made aware that one of our young classmates had suffered the worst of tragedies over the summer. The family was returning from a road trip when her mother was killed in a terrible car accident. That fall day, confused and inconsolable, this young vulnerable girl with no warning nor permission ran out of the classroom in a dramatic exit. Our teacher rushed out after her with a couple of us right behind her. Our young friend had barricaded herself in a bathroom stall. By the time we caught up to her, our teacher had coaxed our friend out of the stall, wiped her eyes, kissed her on the cheek and brought her lovingly back to the fold.*

A year or so after completing my doctoral thesis while cleaning and reorganizing my office, I came across my own grade four class photo from 1968. Opening up the photo keepsake booklet I noticed a smaller photo of the school staff to the left of my class picture. My eyes were drawn to the figure of my teacher seated in the front row. There, down the center of her chic colour block dress was a solid red stripe—a zip—the embodied temenos and lingering presence of a favourite teacher.



*Figure 2.* Embodied Temenos (2019). Gianna Di Rezze  
[Original 'photo-painting' - cropped detail of Grade 4 school staff photograph transformed into painterly form using Adobe Photoshop CS5 - Version 12.1 x 64].

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