

Element imbalances

What does it feel like to lack an element?
How does it shape a person's life and how
can we work with it creatively?

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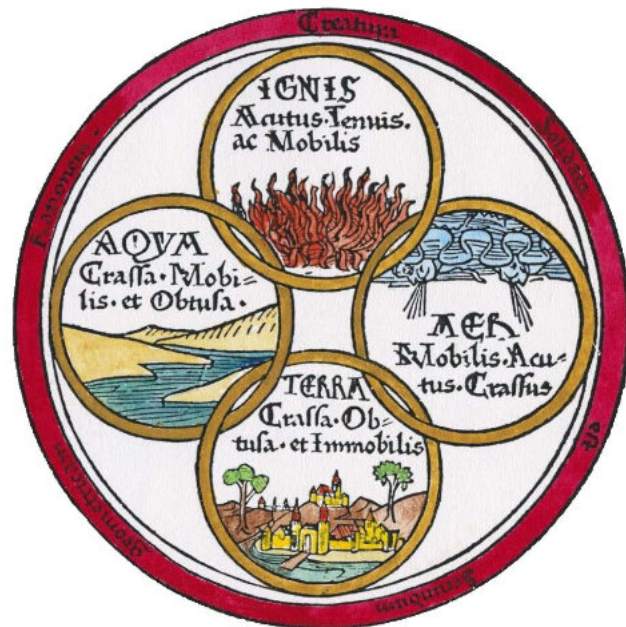
Segment of the macrocosm showing the elemental spheres,
from Robert Fludd, *History of the Two Worlds* 1617

We are defined as much by what is absent in the birth chart as what is present. Whilst the abundance of an element suggests facility and unforced expression, its absence suggests the opposite – here we can be awkward and self-conscious, feeling we lack an important skill. A missing element often takes on a mythic quality, becoming something we long for and make impassioned attempts to find, perhaps through our work or through the people we gather around us.

Yet, the quest in itself offers us something of priceless value – here we can be inspired towards extraordinary achievements that might only be possible because of the high emotional charge which a missing element generates.

Absence implies presence...

In E.M. Forster's novel *A Passage to India*, Professor Godbole explains the interplay between good and evil in the universe; God is present in the one, absent in the other: "...the difference between presence and absence is great...Yet absence implies presence, absence is not nonexistence."¹ We might say something similar about the elements – absence implies that it is still archetypally present.



Empedocles' four elements: woodcut from Lucretius' *De rerum natura*, 1472.

It was Empedocles who first put forward the idea that all four elements conjoin as the fundamental material of the cosmos. Thales had believed this to be water, Anaximenes said it was air, Heraclitus fire – we might be forgiven for thinking that our early Greek philosophers were themselves personally driven by element imbalances. Empedocles declared for all four and claimed that good health comes from equal balance – how very Greek – associating them with deities (Zeus, Hera, Hades and Persephone)² and understanding them as archetypal forces. His vision linked the physical substance of each element firmly back to an idea in the mind of God.

In alchemy and in Jungian thought there is the idea of the union of opposites where all polarities and separations are transcended – a rather grand spiritual goal which we might struggle with in the reality of living. But somewhere inside us is a blueprint for perfect balance and therefore an instinctive knowledge of what is missing. To make the connection is an act of magic, arising from a longing of the soul – the missing element can be the source of a major life quest, fundamental to the alchemical work of creating ourselves.

Making the unconscious conscious

In *The Magic Thread*, Richard Idemon suggests five mechanisms by which the psyche responds to a missing function in the chart: denial, repression, projection, sublimation and compensation.³ It implies something working at an unconscious level, but trying to become known. The missing element might seem alien and unfamiliar, where we feel a lack of dexterity and spontaneity; we look to others for guidance or approval, trying to find a formula which will allow us to understand it.



Marie Stopes in her laboratory, 1904

Anything suppressed gains in power and tends to generate both desire and dislike. As Idemon puts it, the faucet is either all the way on or all the way off,⁴ but either way, it seems to generate both light and shadow. It can become something of a mission, the driver for the development of great talents, but also a source of discomfort, where we are liable to criticise both ourselves and others. For instance, Marie Stopes, with no earth in her chart save the Ascendant, campaigned valiantly for sex education and the right of women to control their own fertility. Yet she was also an ardent advocate of eugenics, believing only the physically perfect should have children and possessing a horror of physical disablement – she disinherited her son because he married a short-sighted woman and she feared their children would be similarly afflicted. As the only point in earth, the complex around the Ascendant takes on sharp definition – a point symbolising the complex emotions generated by birth. Virgo here perhaps evokes the idea of physical purity and control of the birth process – all the more urgent and vital, as earth's only outlet.

Whatever is repressed often emerges in projection, as a theme in our relationships. With a missing element, we might try to import it by gathering around us people who possess what we lack, to fill in the gaps. People within a group often fall naturally into different roles: fire leads, air generates ideas and plans, water reshapes them so they are more human and nuanced, and earth takes the minutes and makes sure the meeting ends on time. But of course, we are individuals and when we aren't in the group, we revert to type. Partnerships and marriages offer another route and again this both works and doesn't work – each partner plays to their strengths but we are still left with the psychological work needed to create a relationship to the missing element.

'Compensation' is the compulsion to become supremely brilliant, to cover for a perceived lack of facility and to master, or indeed dominate, the missing element. I have a friend with no air, who at 18 applied to university but was rejected due to low school grades. She continued retaking her exams and re-applying until she was finally offered a place at 24, at which point she became ill and was unable to take it up. I imagine she did not actually want to go, but did want to prove she had the intellectual capacity.

A lot of psychic energy is bound up in the quest and I've never come across anyone with a missing element whose life was not somehow dedicated to the search for it. Often this is unconscious, until you view your life from a different vantage point – maybe it is only in retrospect that we can see it as a shaping influence. My airless friend now runs very successful courses in interior design and has developed a rare gift for communication. Needless to say, her knowledge base is vast.



Matisse: *Les toits de Collioure*, oil on canvas, 1905 (Hermitage Museum) Image: www.languedoc-france.info/artcourse/matissetoits.gif, PD-US, wikipedia.org/w/index.php?curid=21478320 4

Through the looking glass

The creativity which emerges is thus of a particular kind – often forged out of obsession and driven by a compulsion to create the ultimate expression of the chosen elemental conduit: the person with no air who becomes (like Goethe or Laurence Olivier) the supreme wordsmith, or the person with no water who (like Mark Spitz) takes Olympic gold in swimming (nine times). I demon contrasts Beethoven (no water) – the water moves like a torrent, intensified by the loss of hearing which forces focus onto interior feeling – with Chopin (Sun-Venus in Pisces) whose music flows like an easy stream.⁵ Or we might contrast Monet (where water is dominant) with Matisse (no water), the latter suggesting a more painful articulation of feelings, as if squeezed through a narrow space. Matisse developed a style known as Fauvism – 'fauve' being French for 'wild beast' – so-called because of its dissonant colours and wildly passionate style. Lack of water is neither rounded nor soft.

A void or a space or a lack provides an opening – a place where something can be created. The gift slowly emerges, forged in the shadows, often without us being aware of it. The transformation is often slow and painful, but the capacity for hard work can be quite awe-inspiring, matched only by the capacity for self-criticism for a perceived lack of facility. As a sacred journey, it evokes diligence. Here we unconsciously pay homage to an archetypal principle – we feel a sense of serving something. We might not articulate it in quite this way,

but it is perhaps a quest for the missing face of God.

We often don't recognise our own efforts and achievements. The chart of Lewis Carroll provides both example and metaphor – Carroll had no water and yet he constructed an entire imaginative world called 'Wonderland'. As well as underground, this world existed on the other side of the mirror – *Alice Through the Looking Glass*. It's a beautiful symbol – our achievement is built in the shadow spaces, in the cracks in between, in the mirror image. It often doesn't feel as though it's ours, it feels inconsequential – and yet it is unmistakably there.



Earth: substance and form

Earth

Earth was seen as the densest and most stable of the elements. It is productive, dependable, realistic, patient and conservative, representing life in the here-and-now. It crystallises energy into material form and reflects an ability to maintain boundaries, to be organised and methodical, and to fulfil the mundane tasks that keep the wheels on the truck.

A lack of earth puts a powerful unconscious emphasis onto these processes, generating the desire to prove oneself competent, superlative even, in the physical realm: the body, sex and sensuality, food, money and all the stuff of the material world.

We might think of a double-edged relationship to money – driven to create it, but equally a sense of guilt about possessing it. The shadow might be an unconscious materialism: outwardly critical, but privately envious. Yet, the drive might also be there to do something extraordinary, emerging out of the troubled relationship with material things. For instance, Bill Gates has a net worth of around \$65 billion – but he has left the corporate world to become a full-time philanthropist, focused on global health programmes and improving material circumstances for others. One might say he demonstrates an impulsive desire to give money away.

A missing function tends to be primitive, mythic, archetypal, emerging in dreams and fantasies. Hugh Hefner, publisher of Playboy, offered to millions of men the dream of a glamorous world of casinos, mansions and unlimited physical gratification. Indeed, we might identify a kind of *puer aeternus* quality with lack of earth – a reluctance to adjust to physical limitations or rites of passage into adulthood, such as those which constellate around Saturn transits. But from a different perspective, we might see that Hefner also contributed towards

the social changes of the 1950s and 1960s – whatever your views on Playboy, there was a wider social impact in addressing the austerities of post-war life, with its low material and sexual expectations. A passion, rooted in his own psychology and strict upbringing, in effect became something of a cause.

The body can become a powerful focus. Evelyn Glennie, the deaf percussionist, registers pitch and tone as the sound resonates in different parts of her body. Fashion designers such as Pierre Cardin and Gianni Versace, the naturalist, geologist and biologist Charles Darwin, and a slew of famous sculptors and artists – Rodin, Raphael, Michelangelo – their work sensuous and fleshy, anatomically accurate, a testament to all the joys and agonies of physical life. From a family of bankers, Michelangelo became a professional artist at age 14, at the first Saturn half-return, a year before he created his first sculpted relief (the Madonna of the Stairs); he created the statue of David at his Saturn return. Sculpting is a slow, agonising process – first a vision of what is to be found in the stone, the god hiding in the marble, and then the patience required to reveal it. In the process, the relationship to earth is made through every tap of the chisel, in the patience and persistence which the project demands.



Water: fluid and emotive

Water

Water reflects the world of instinct and emotional truth. Water ‘sees’ with a different pair of eyes, beyond the tangible world. The feelings flow from a deep inner place and responses tend to be personal, subjective, self-referencing. It favours imagination, narrative and story – receptive, impressionable, atmospheric, absorbing, lacking containment.

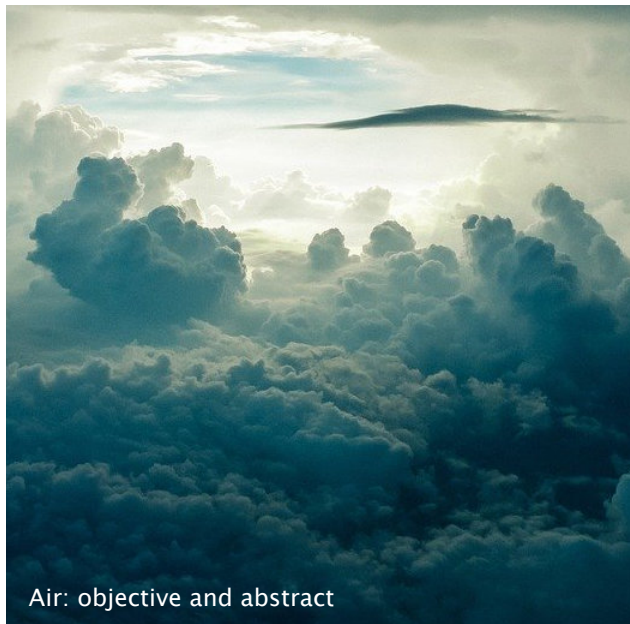
Water creates emotional bonds. Cancer seeks clan, family and tribe, the importance of belonging to a group, protective and enmeshed. Scorpio locks together, a deep bond of loyalty. Pisces recognises no boundaries and dissolves itself into the whole.

To lack water suggests a search for ways to express the feeling realm. To ‘express’ means literally to get oneself outside of oneself – a task which might be more fraught for someone who distrusts water’s sixth sense. When feelings are expressed, they often come out in forceful ways, tumbling uncontrolled. At times of anguish or bereavement, the accumulation of undischarged feelings wells up, searching for a language of sufficient proportion. We might remember the outpouring of grief at the death of Diana in 1997, which surely evoked

emotions well beyond the nation's attachment to its princess. For a person with no water, such a public show can either evoke horror or provide a longed-for outlet – or a personal bereavement might open the floodgates that leaves the person drowning in a tidal wave of long-buried emotional material.

But again, something forms slowly in the void. Idemon remarks that many therapists lack water.⁶ I certainly know several, all of whom create with great care and deliberation an empathetic environment for others, where clients can connect with their own feelings – such a therapist has perhaps even greater sensitivity to these things.

Writers, artists and composers who lack water often soar to great emotional heights in their work, perhaps using it as a safety valve or to process a tremendous depth of feeling which they might feel inhibited to express in daily life: Shelley, Coleridge, Grieg, Strauss, and of course Woolf (author of *The Waves*, blurring the boundary between prose and poetry). Life is often dominated by relationship: Jane Austen never married, yet her books are centred around romantic relationships.



Air: objective and abstract

Briefly back to Lewis Carroll: the fantasy realm he created was literally a world away from life as a professor of mathematics, a vehicle for emotions which cannot be conveyed via mathematical equations. His characters are otherworldly and emotionally complex. Carroll first met Alice (and her mother Lorina, with whom he is said to have been in love), and wrote the first story, as his Sun progressed into Pisces (he also took up photography and began to write romantic poetry). We often conjure the missing function in the form of a relationship, just at the point when it is ready to emerge in us. Here it takes a feminine form, as Alice and her sister and mother, the *anima* which allows the imagination to open.

Air

Air is social – interested, objective, establishing non-partisan connections across the great divides of distance, creed, race, opinion. It inclines to verbalising and articulating, to the rational and the abstract, able to appreciate different perspectives without necessarily agreeing with them. In abundance, it can end up tying itself to a theory or a formula, uncomfortable with the messier emotional dimensions. Gemini implies a leaning towards language and speech, Libra towards fairness, justice, equalising and interchange, and Aquarius immerses us in community and common bonds.

For those who lack air, hell might well comprise of being tested in verbal or intellectual terms. The film *The King's Speech* tells the story of King George VI who suffered from a stammer and stood in terror of public speaking. He overcame it only with the help of the speech therapist Lionel Logue (with whom he had an interim falling out, on learning that Logue possessed no qualifications). The chart of Colin Firth, who played the King, yields only Mars in air – perhaps he understood something of the terror himself.

Clearly the capacity for intellect doesn't bypass those with no air. Indeed we might say it sharpens it, creating extraordinary intellectual achievements – polymaths, polyglots, people whose lives revolve around a mastery of words: Tolstoy, Swinburne, Dumas, Hemingway.

Marlon Brando possessed no air – and had a Mercury-Saturn opposition to boot. Famous for mumbling (and for extemporising rather than using the script), he communicated volumes through a powerful physique and sexual presence. With Billy Graham, communication was impassioned and urgent, the words carriers of the holy fire.

Idemon talks of agoraphobia, a fear of open spaces. The *agora* in ancient Greece was the public forum, where citizens gathered to debate. For a person with no air, there might be complex feelings generated by such social spaces – a longing for connection and yet also a difficulty in holding the separation which social connections rely on. We might think of Van Gogh and his desire to create an artists' colony in Arles, revolving around himself and Gauguin, which fell to pieces following Gauguin's departure after the 'ear' episode. One can appreciate how much Van Gogh might have needed the presence of others, to provide reflection and objectivity.

Fire

Fire is the animating spirit, wild and uncontained. Its energy, vitality, inspiration and valiant heart are joyful to be around. Aries is the pioneer and entrepreneur, dicing with danger; Leo's task is to lead and to bask in the glory of being oneself; Sagittarius inclines to adventure, the trajectory set towards the far horizon and into the future.

Fire brings a sense of hope, confidence and enthusiasm. To be enthused is to be *entheos*, filled with the god, the power of the divine which allows one to overcome earthly impediments.



Fire: animated and spontaneous



The Four Elements, by Artus Wolffort

Fire stays 'high' in a world of myth and story, with the fire person as central player; the here-and-now is not as interesting as adventure and make-believe.

For those who lack fire, a central theme might be the search for one's own special place, to be recognised and applauded, and to shine one's own creative light. It might seem easier to draw inspiration from others, to live in the shadow of someone perceived to be more creative, rather than seize the limelight for oneself. But clearly those without fire have no lack of creative vitality – and many are noted for their tremendous passion: Jacqueline du Pré, Vanessa Redgrave, Byron, Keats. If fire offers an image of the action hero, those who lack it might create this role in the imagination, like Sean Connery, Bruce Willis or Rudolph Valentino – or, like Kurt Cobain or the Dalai Lama (only Venus in fire), become the quiet idol or revolutionary leader. With a lack of trust and faith, the connection to the divine may be of vital import, driven by a search for meaning. Like Joan of Arc or Mother Teresa, it can become a fervent and passionate cause to which the whole life is dedicated. For the deeply religious Gaudì, with only Venus in fire (in the 12th), we might see earthly love sublimated into the most glorious art and offered in the spirit of divine service.

A trip to the Moon surely counts as a 'long journey' by anyone's standards. Unlike the first man on the Moon (Neil Armstrong), the second man (of course) was the fire-free Buzz Aldrin. With many planets in earth and air, Aldrin was a technician; it is said that, to calm his nerves the night before, he stripped and re-assembled a washing machine. It's perhaps unsurprising that the only picture of Armstrong on the Moon is a reflection in Aldrin's visor – the jealousy seems palpable. After their epic voyage (during which Aldrin celebrated holy communion) he struggled with the ensuing fame and adulation, and experienced a profound loss of direction and purpose. The extraordinary courage needed for such a journey must be generated, ounce by ounce – a task of superhuman proportions.

Just as Jupiter might have been a motivating force for Aldrin, so the Sun seems to have been a powerful symbol for another epic voyager, Thor Heyerdahl, who exemplified the spirit of adventure as leader of the Kon Tiki and Ra expeditions (Kon Tiki is the name of the Inca Sun god and Ra the Egyptian equivalent). Not many people would set sail across the Pacific Ocean on a balsa wood raft; not many would formulate a project called 'The Search for Odin' based on a theory that people from Azerbaijan (from Baku, to be precise – site of Yanar Dağ, the Fire



Carole Taylor is a professional astrological consultant, teacher and author, based in the UK and working internationally. She is also a freelance writer on myth, symbol and archetype.

She gained a Diploma from the Faculty of Astrological Studies in 2000 and has held a variety of roles at the Faculty since then, including Summer School Organiser, Head of Classes and Director of Studies. She pioneered the Faculty's online seminars and online classes programme, shaped its syllabus and has contributed extensively to its course material over the years. She was Vice-President of the Faculty for nine years and President for three years, being awarded a Fellowship in 2012 for her unique contribution to the life of the school. She continues to teach on the Faculty's Foundation and Diploma training programmes.

She holds an honours degree in Geography from the University of Cambridge and an MA with distinction in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred from Canterbury Christ Church University. She is a tutor on the MA in Cultural Astronomy and Astrology at the University of Wales, Trinity Saint David teaching on the Sky & Psyche and the Researching Contemporary Cosmologies modules.

Mountain which boasts a continuously burning natural fire) migrated north to Scandinavia and brought their god with them.

Most of us may never stretch to such distances. But for anyone who lacks an element, it might nevertheless be the wellspring of an extraordinary gift and one which lies at the very centre of life.

All chart data taken from Astro-Databank and Solar Fire:

Buzz Aldrin, 20 January 1930, Glen Ridge, NJ
Marlon Brando, 3 April 1924, 11pm, Omaha, NE
Lewis Carroll, 27 January 1832, 3.45am, Daresbury, UK
Bill Gates, 28 October 1955, 9.15pm, Seattle, WA
Antoni Gaudí, 25 June 1852, 9.30am, Reus, Spain
King George VI, 14 December 1895, 3am, Sandringham, UK
Billy Graham, 7 November 1918, 3.30pm, Charlotte, NC
Thor Heyerdahl, 6 October 1914, 4.40pm, Larvik, Norway
Michelangelo, 6 March 1475, 1.50am, Caprese, Italy
Marie Stopes, 15 October 1880, 4.10am, Edinburgh, UK
Vincent van Gogh, 30 March 1853, 11am, Groot Zundert, Netherlands

Footnotes:

1. E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*, Penguin Books 2005, p.167.
2. Empedocles, Frag. B6 (Sextus Empiricus, *Against the Mathematicians*, x, 315) and quoted in Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic: Empedocles and Pythagorean Tradition* (Oxford University Press, 1995)
3. Richard Idemon, *The Magic Thread*, Wessex Astrologer 2010, p.33.
4. Idemon., p.41.
5. Idemon., p.39
6. Idemon., p.57

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