

### **“Imagination for an Emerging World”**

*“We are all learning what it means to be somebodies who shape the future,  
to operate at the scale of transformation.”  
- adrienne maree brown*

### **INTRODUCTION**

I began my writing just days after the insurrection at our capitol. Like so many of us, I watched in utter horror as rioters invaded, brandished weapons, scaled walls, smashed windows, vandalized offices with little to no consequence. The lack of response, with its hypocrisy and double standards compared to the Black Lives Matter protests of this summer, reveal the depths of our White Supremacy culture. The events of January 6th, while not altogether surprising, ripped open a wound many of us thought was just beginning to heal. Imagining something like this was one thing, living it and watching it unfold was entirely different and left me wrestling with my own reactions and wounded spirit. From friends, congregants, and colleagues, I have heard words like violation, trauma, grief, anger, rage, contempt, hopelessness, despair.

While I have been engaging in the work of emergent strategy for a couple of years now (as part of a local community group), and really turning toward the inspiration of the book during this pandemic time, I am more convinced than ever of our need to fully embrace and practice these strategies. With visions and practices so beautifully aligned with the values and visions of Unitarian Universalism, our communities and our ministry is called to engage in this work of emergence. Because the events we just experienced remind us of the deep cracks and wounds in the foundation of our society with its structures and systems that are fed by a decaying worldview. We are called to recreate, reimagine and rebuild a whole new foundation; guided by the vision of emergence; a way of noticing the systems and patterns that arise out of a multiplicity of events in self-organizing ways that feed off of intersections of connection, experimentation, risk taking and failure (definition adapted from adrienne maree brown, Nick Oblansky and Susan Beaumont).

### **THE EMERGENT WORLDVIEW**

*“We would understand that the strength of our movement is in the strength of our relationships, which could only be measured by their depth. Scaling up would mean going deeper, being more vulnerable and more empathetic” (brown p. 10).*

Shortly after the 2016 election, a church member who also serves as a state legislator, invited me to participate in a community group which formed to process the outcome of the election and begin conversations about how to create a new vision and narrative for our community and beyond. What initially brought us together was a profound sense of grief for our country and the turn it had taken, but we realized that grief also birthed a hunger for a new way of being. A

hunger that had been growing inside all of us (that perhaps lives inside any one of us who sees injustice in the world and seeks to dismantle it); a hunger that was inherent in our working lives and beyond. Yet, in the midst of the constant barrage of injustice and indignity we were witnessing at the hands of the government, that hunger felt overwhelming.

Meeting together in community reminded us of the power of being in community, that none of us had all the answers but each had gifts to contribute (Brown p. 63). We orientated ourselves to a commitment to choose all of us; a commitment to collective thriving. We found ourselves almost instinctively integrating Brown's Emergent Strategies as we began by deepening our relationships with one another through icebreakers, storytelling, and deep sharing, before tackling the "big problems." We practiced the kind of vulnerability and empathy Brown holds at the center of her work.

Our conversations helped us recognize that for far too long we'd been focusing on survival, individual rights, overturning injustices and solving the problems of community (all worthy of our attention). But somewhere along the way we realized humanity deserved better than mere survival. Fueled by our hopes, dreams, endeavors we imagined a vision of a world where all would thrive in community together. This vision arose out of centering the voices and lived experiences of those directly impacted by the forces of fear, hate and violence growing more visible around us; those who held marginalized identities, who had been subject to lifetimes of oppression and trauma. Again, central themes Brown weaves throughout her book; that if we wish to transform the world to serve, support, protect, lift-up marginalized voices, they must also be the center of our work.

The vision of emergence we claimed, imagined, borrowed, and co-created alongside and with influence from so many others, offered a hopeful contrast to what many began to see as a decaying worldview (the artistic graphic expressing these ideas is included as an addendum to this paper). You might notice ideas that have been long articulated in justice movements (both old and new) and in religious and spiritual communities. This emergent worldview comes from all of those places: theology, psychology, sociology, justice work, deep ecology, and environmentalism. When I first saw this graphic I thought to myself, that is Unitarian Universalism. That is the very same vision we express in our communities!

One learning that has begun to take root in light of the emerging worldview, underscored in *Emergent Strategy* is that we cannot employ the structures, tools, and practices of our current dominant culture (which has historically fostered oppression, domination, and hyper individualism) into the work of changing those systems (this might be the definition of insanity or at the very least a Sisyphean endeavor). We cannot use old patterns to bring forth a wholly different, emerging world. This new emergence requires our collective imagination; creative, innovative shifts in our ways of being and doing, in our organizational structures and leadership, in our individual lives. "What we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system." We were committed, as Brown shares from the wisdom of activist Grace Lee Boggs, to *transforming ourselves to transform the world* (p. 53).

## **PRINCIPLES AND APPLICATIONS OF EMERGENT STRATEGY**

*“We have lived through a good half century of individualistic linear organizing (led by charismatic individuals or budget building institutions), which intends to reform or revolutionize society, but falls back on modeling the oppressive tendencies against which we claim to be pushing” (p. 8).*

Clearly, if we wish to change these organizing structures and systems that rule our lives (even those of us who lean liberal, collectivist, socialist, etc) then we need to stop employing them in our own lives, communities, and especially our liberal churches. In adrienne’s maree brown’s pages I began to recognize how the systems that surrounded my life felt at odds with the spiritual aspirations of my faith and ministry. Cultural systems fed by deep seated beliefs and practices that center authority, hierarchy, capitalism, constant growth, extraction, hyper individualism, exceptionalism, self-preservation, critical mass; show up everywhere—even in the church—despite our values to the contrary. And, that there is this almost magnetic pull toward the belief that those beliefs are the only way to create change (p. 8).

Brown invites a kind of practical, strategic meditation, reflected in the natural world, that reminds us of our deep interwoven connections; our interdependence (a cherished UU value and theological claim). From that place of interdependence, she reminds us that change begins in the smallest spaces of our lives, moment by moment, relationship by relationship, pattern by pattern. We can “...intentionally change how we live in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for.”

I want to share some of the specific principles of emergent strategy (pp. 41-42) along with my thoughts about practical application in our congregational settings:

### **Small is good, small is all (The large is a reflection of the small)**

Brown uses the natural world example of fractals, never ending patterns that repeat themselves, each small part possessing the same characteristics of the whole. This strategy embodies the recognition that “every member of the community holds part of the solution, even if we’re engaged in different layers of the work” (p. 63).

Changes we make in the smallest spaces of our lives and in our own institutions will gradually allow us to grow, model and invite changes on a larger scale. For example, the more I consider this principle, the more I begin to feel an imperative to extract ourselves from hierarchical models of church leadership including our Boards (with presidents, vice presidents, etc) who bear the brunt of the work and instead shift to shared leadership councils where each meeting invites members to take on different roles including meeting facilitation (old role: President or Chair), note-taking & communication (old role: Secretary), etc. I also feel a strong pull to dispense with Robert’s Rules of Order and find more collaborative, communal, egalitarian approaches to meeting facilitation and discussion. After all, we are communities striving for covenantal right relationships pursuing a shared mission and vision. Pitting opinions against each other using terms like “pro” and “con” only reinforces dominant culture systems replete with binary,

either/or thinking, casting opponents instead of facilitating conversation amongst a beloved community. We are far too wedded to a fixed sense of democracy. One that clearly we have seen become distorted in our own government. We can still hold the value of allowing all voices to be heard and participate in the shaping of our own destiny while letting go of some of the rigidity of democratic practices that continue to entrench us in hierarchical, capitalistic, white supremacy habits (see [“The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture”](#) by Kenneth Jones & Tema Okun).

### **Change is constant (Be like water)**

Brown shares the natural world example of a murmuration of starlings, how they move in sync with one another, share leadership, are constantly communicating and shifting their flight pattern. She quotes Sierra Pickett to describe how they are organized, “Every individual bird focuses attention on their seven closest neighbors and thus manages larger flock cohesiveness and synchronicity (at times upwards of over a million birds)” (p. 67). Imagine if we found a way to mimic that organizational structure in our churches! This principle focuses on intentional adaptation or mindful change. Like water, we too, can teach ourselves and our communities to move with ease around obstacles while maintaining an intentional flow.

If nothing else, this pandemic forced us all into greater adaptivity. We’ve been living this principle out of necessity and it’s been a refreshing adventure of experimentation. Think of the extraordinary ways in which our communities have found new possibilities for virtual worship and ministry. Now take a moment to tune into your own emotional and physical reaction to reading that sentence. Did you shift into reactive and negative thinking full of “Yeah, but I am so tired of zoom!” or did you perk up at all the cool, creative experiences you’ve encountered or helped create? Brown suggests we individuals can develop our capacity for adaptation by assessing our default reactions to change and whether those reactions create space for opportunity, possibility, and continuing to move toward our vision. (p. 71). Finding our flow and synchronicity like the starlings (and resting when we need to, knowing others are leading).

Personally, I have been thrilled with all the new virtual spaces and experiences we’ve created in my community. I love sharing music and sermons from UU colleagues we otherwise might never have gotten to see. I’ve watched folks step up to offer yoga, meditation, online concerts, small group ministry and so much more. I am also aware of my leadership role in ensuring the success of those new endeavors. While I was able to hand them off well, I hold the awareness of the work I must continue to create the space for more intentionally shared leadership.

Perhaps because the changes that resulted in the pandemic happened for all of us at once, we’ve become more willing to experiment and more forgiving of technological glitches and challenges. I hope we continue our commitment to this kind of adaptability and innovation recognizing that the things we once saw as obstacles have disappeared (traffic, distance, etc). The benefits that arise out of this principle of adaptation and

change is both focus and resilience. I have been forced to let go of so many small things and ideas in order to focus on the top priorities of church life and home life (this kind of prioritization and letting go has always been a struggle for me). Brown's words resonate deeply, "As an individual, get really good at being intentional with where you put your energy, letting go as quickly as you can of things that aren't part of your visionary life's work. Then you give your all, from a well-resourced place, when the storm comes, or for those last crucial miles" (brown p. 72). The more we cultivate healthy, non-reactive, creative, opportunity pursuing spaces, the more we refine and hold up our vision as change arrives, we will also help to increase our resilience when the challenges and storms arrive again.

**There is always enough time for the right work. There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have. Find it./ Move at the speed of trust.**

These two principles relate to one another, stemming from the same core values of relationship, interdependence, and decentralization. Time becomes something of an artificial construct as we practice allowing space for the work to unfold and emerge while also noticing what is unfolding and emerging on its own. Brown highlights the vast interdependent network of mycelium as nature's example: "Mycelium is the part of the fungus that grows underground in thread-like formations. It connects roots to one another and breaks down plant material to create healthier ecosystems. Mycelium is the largest organism on earth" (p. 45). We Unitarian Universalists know this concept deeply. We have woven it into our commitment of deep ecology, environmental sustainability, and climate justice. We claim it in our 7th principle affirming the interdependent web. And yet, in our churches it often feels as if we are still too often pulled by individuality; by personal needs, likes, and visions rather than the collective whole. I sense many ministers spend much of their career working to shift their system into an organism of interconnection instead of a group of individual cells. And doing so often requires much time, depth of relationship and patience. My default personality certainly leans toward impatience when it feels like things are moving too slow or I am not seeing "results". But rarely does my impatience produce anything deep and meaningful; often the result is shallow, one-sided, and lacking imagination

Additionally, these principles eschew hierarchy and urgency, relying instead on connection and flow. Moving at the speed of trust may sound intuitive and attractive, but it is so hard because we have been conditioned to produce at maximum speed for maximum profit (or outcomes in the nonprofit world). Shifting to moving at the speed of trust means meeting people where they are at and supporting processes of transformation and restoration over punishment. My congregation is in the midst of revising its by-laws. One lens they are using in their process is the lens of anti-racism/anti-oppression, asking, "Do our by-laws support our commitment to inclusion and multiculturalism?" We were all a bit shocked to read a nearly full page section of our current/soon-to-be-old bylaws that outlined a trial process for disciplinary

procedures and removal of membership. Using words like accused, complaint and investigation, this procedure is more detailed than removing the minister and does not acknowledge anything that resembles a relationship or covenant. I vaguely remember reading these by-laws when I was in search and also remember thinking they were outdated, but reading them now carries a bit more grief and shock because it underscores our deep attachment to the dominant culture need for punishment, for right and wrong--the process values conflict and pain over love and support which we say we hold as a core theological claim. If we orient ourselves in this way toward each other how could we imagine we could be any different beyond our walls? "This can't be the purpose of our species, to constantly identify each other as 'other,' build walls between us, and engage in both formal and informal wars against each other's bodies" (p.16). Though we all realize when our by-laws were written we occupied a very different understanding of the world (and clearly they were drafted by a trial lawyer), but if our basic founding documents do not support the vision of who we say we want to be and how we wish to show up in the world, how can we imagine we will ever build the beloved community? The practice of Transformative Justice is a central component of *Emergent Strategy*, one in which our churches could be well suited to support. A transformative justice approach in our by-laws would certainly center conversation, mediation, and repair (if possible). The speed of trust almost always slows things down but the outcomes are much richer and more expansive with plenty of room for growth.

### **Never a failure, always a lesson**

This one is my favorite principle and perhaps the hardest to practice. When we embrace failure, we create room for and even come to expect experimentation, innovation and iteration. We also strengthen our resilience. Brown shares JoLillian T. Zwerdling's reflection on starfish as an example in the natural world. "From starfish I have learned that if we keep our core intact, we can regenerate. We can fall apart, lose limbs, and regrow them as long as we don't let anyone threaten that central disc's integrity. . .[w]e have to nourish ourselves with the resources we are surrounded by, with our community assets if you will and by doing so we keep ecosystems delicately balanced" (p. 124). I wish my congregation intuitively understood this and embraced failure. They seem steeped in the driving sense of "rightness;" that they must do it right (whatever that means). As a result they've mired themselves in process instead of possibility. If there is one gift I can leave them it may be greater freedom to try things and fail and welcome the lessons and fun along the way. I have noticed that fear of failure permeates so much of life and when we allow that fear to drive our choices, we eliminate imagination, even become distrustful of it and experimentation stops. Embracing the learning when things go wrong gets us closer and closer to discovering what works (and what works will always be evolving and changing alongside us). This principle, also reflects our commitment to interdependence; recognizing that humanity itself is a delicate ecosystem along with institutions and our lives and all require balance but each has its own core nature. Sometimes, failure is the most effective tool to help us truly connect to that core.

### **What you pay attention to grows**

A family systems clergy coach once shared with me this helpful mantra (one I suspect many of you have heard over the years), “Feed the health, starve the dysfunction.” Brilliant in its simplicity, I employ it regularly when I get stuck in the small negative spirals inherent in church life. I look around and remind myself to feed the love, feed what is working. As one who is still learning that I do not have to solve every problem or help launch every program, Brown shares the importance of knowing your own strengths and passions and getting out of the way of others who have creative energy for a project when you don’t (p. 120). Unfortunately, our society has modeled for us excellent practices of constant critique. We are so good at pointing out the flaws of something (especially in church communities), but critiquing, pointing to flaws, still requires energy and attention. Instead, we can invite ourselves to let go and find ways to encourage, give thanks, support and more than anything else, love. Brown gently advises, “[I]f you don’t want to invest growth energy in anything, just be quiet. If you are not going to help birth or raise the child, then shhhhh. You aren’t required to have or even work toward the solution, but if you know change is needed and your first instinct when you see people trying to figure out how to change and transform is to poop on them, perhaps it is time to just hush your mouth” (p. 120). Amen. Imagine the trajectories of passion that would open up in our communities if we not only practiced this with deep intention but also gently held others accountable to the practice as well. I also appreciate her clarity here that we are not obligated to do work we are not passionate about. In this paradigm of justice work, we trust that others will have passion for work that does not call to us but which we still deem important. AND when they do that work, we are reminded to get out of the way and applaud their efforts (rather than employ sideline quarterbacking or backseat driving). One of the antidotes to the habits of white supremacy is gratitude (a long-held spiritual practice). Lead with gratitude, start with gratitude—imagine what would happen!

If what we pay attention to grows and what we want to grow is an emergent worldview and practices, we will need to unlearn some messy, culturally ingrained habits. As people of faith and leaders in our tradition, we are uniquely suited to support and experiment in this work with our communities. After all, this is about listening to the deep call of our spirits, hearts, the world—for life’s longing for itself and love’s longing for a paradigm shift. This is the work of the spiritual community.

### **SUSTAINING THE WORK**

Here, I want to be sure and mention the vital need for sustainable practices while engaging emergent strategies (which also includes our individual lives). We must find ways to move through change with joy, love, and sparks of passion and energy while also seeking out those spaces when we can rest and restore (coasting like the starlings). Brown calls this practice, “Adapting toward pleasure” (p. 73) and in fact published a second book, *Pleasure Activism*, focused entirely on this concept. We will never survive the constant change emergence

welcomes unless we make a clear, strong commitment to slowing down and self-care (another lesson offered in this pandemic season). If I have learned anything from this time it is that I do not have to work as hard and fast as I once thought. My capacity for adaptation (often fueled by creativity) expands when I slow down and leave space for unstructured time—daydreaming, art, walking, meditating. My creative capacity also expands when I make space for the basics (rest, food, play). In my 15+ years in church work I have rarely seen any good role models for this kind of orientation to ministry. Sure, we all talk the talk because we've heard the words and read them, but rarely do I witness ministers who model healthy practices for sustaining the work and balancing life.

A core premise of *Emergent Strategy* rests in the clarity that we must wrest ourselves away from ingrained habits of White Supremacy Culture (perfectionism, urgency, productivity, etc) as skillfully expressed in the 2001 [work of Tema Okun and Ken Jones](#). Our culture wants us to feel that our worth is tied to being busy and productive, and it's our job to resist those messages and to know that we are beautiful, good people regardless of our productivity. How can we, as leaders of progressive communities, not only resist these concepts but center the emergent practices that effectively counter them?

None of these concepts feels new or particularly revolutionary when taken singularly. Most of them I have encountered in all kinds of self-help/transformation work, therapy, leadership books etc. But, taken together as an integrated model and applied in this moment, I experience them as a path to that collective liberation so many of us have begun to actively name and seek. Brown asks, "How do we turn our intelligence towards collaboration, if that is the way we will survive?" (p.9) which integrates well with Tsing's early question in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, "How else can we account for the fact that anything is alive in the mess we've made?" (p. vii). Indeed, these are tools for our collective survival and hopeful thriving. Using this book and engaging in its practices have been a sustaining force for me in this pandemic. It is difficult to fully articulate. Perhaps in this time of forced slow down, I have been able to feel (in my body) the effects of these practices. I have also begun to see the deep hunger for them in the world around me. This framework encompasses so much more than a mere orientation toward justice and social change, it invites transformation at the deepest level. The vision of what is possible that emerges when we focus on emergence brings me hope. Like Brown invites, these practices remind me to repurpose my life, the whole of my life, for liberation—which is what called me to ministry and continues to call me today.

Remember, *Emergent Strategy* invites us to embrace the idea that we can "...intentionally change how we live in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for . . . transforming the conditions that make injustice possible."





## **Bibliography & Resources**

*(Ya'll, I am not an academic and it has been years since I wrote one of these. In the interest of time, sanity, and pushing back against norms that don't necessarily fit with this particular work, and my perceived culture of this group, here is a list of sources cited and some from which I drew inspiration).*

*Emergent Strategy* by adrienne maree brown

*Pleasure Activism* by adrienne maree brown

["The Characteristics of White Supremacy Culture"](#) by Kenneth Jones & Tema Okun

*The Mushroom at the End of the World* by Anna Tsing

[We Choose All of Us](#) (Community of Purpose group)