

Persistent, Emergent Love
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver
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Reflection on the Theme – Emily Layfield

I've always struggled with social anxiety. Not in all situations - for example, I don't get anxious about doing things like this, speaking in public, where my role is prescribed and the expectations are clear. I also don't seem to get anxious around people once I've had a few interactions with them and my nervous system has had a chance to get acclimated. But when I interact with strangers, especially in unfamiliar settings, or if my brain categorizes the interaction as a potentially unwelcome imposition, my nervous system would really prefer me to shut down completely. You are unlikely to find me starting a conversation in a grocery store or on an airplane, or honestly even making the first conversational move at coffee hour after service, not because I'm unsociable, but because my nervous system is mistakenly convinced that those are wildly unsafe sorts of things to do.

That being said, as strong as that anxiety can be in my body, those feelings are at odds with the kind of person I want to show up as. I know how important small moments of connection and building community and making people feel seen and cared for are. I deeply admire those people who are effortlessly warm and friendly in their day to day interactions - including many of you. I see how impactful those small gestures can be. Reconciling the person my values would lead me to be with the person my nervous system would lead me to be is tough. There are certainly some times that fear is legitimate and is there to protect me from an unsafe situation and should be listened to, but there are many other times when it's not legitimate. I can sometimes power through and force myself to do it anyway, and even though it feels bad at first it usually feels good afterwards. But too often I have stayed frozen and had that ache of missed opportunity stick with me instead. The times that go well, it's usually because I'm able to somehow connect to the version of myself that is operating out of love rather than fear. I try to actively look for that version of myself, to deliberately ask myself how I want to show up and practice the feelings that self needs to feel in order to act how I'd like to act.

Overall, I've found that it's most sustainable when I can have compassion for myself, though, too. Rather than beating myself up for the times I'm not managing to show up how I want to, how others appear to do so effortlessly, I can find a way to reach towards connection in ways that feel more authentic to me. If it feels safer to speak in public than to introduce myself at coffee hour, I can be a worship associate, and people are more likely to start conversations with me. I can join groups where roles are more prescribed and have my initial interactions in safer feeling contexts. I can ask people I already know for introductions to others I don't to reduce the hurdle. I hope that over time I'll be able to continue to shift my social anxiety's sensitivity levels and power through when it matters most, but while I'm still working on that, I can find ways to get creative, to work within my current capacities, and operate increasingly out of more love than fear.

Persistent, Emergent Love© by Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh

In this morning's second reading, Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman writes "All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born; all around us life is dying and life is being born."^[1] That is a scientific and a spiritual truth—that new life is emerging as old life falls away. The Circle of Life, as they say. It all sounds

quite beautiful, right? Well, at least it's beautiful from a distance. Up close, when those things and people and institutions we love are dying, collapsing, crumbling, burning, or getting trampled upon, that "Circle of Life" doesn't feel so good.

The loss and grief so many of us feel these days is deep. In addition to the very real and personal losses we've endured, you are now anticipating a future loss: the retirement of your minister, Rev. Kathryn Bert, which was just announced last week. Your church leadership will be changing, which is a natural sort of cycle in church life, and yet at a time when so much around us is changing, it can feel like you're going to lose an anchor, a source of wisdom and grounding, a source of comfort in these devastating times.

These times are devastating. We are enduring collective losses, collective grief. And so many of us are daily feeling outrage, anger, fear, alienation, numbness and all the other host of emotions that the news and events inspire. At times like these, sometimes all the hope we can muster is to say, "I hope it's not so bad" or "I hope they fail at this awful thing they're planning." I find myself saying and thinking this a lot these days.

But our readings this morning, from the Jewish and Christian traditions, ask us to go further. To be intentional, alert, engaged, and actively pursuing a hopeful future. This is a practice we do well to bring to our personal lives, our civic lives, and our lives here at UUCV as we enter into a time of transition.

Rabbi Ora Nitkin-Kaner shows us that in Hebrew, the word for crisis, and the word for birthing stool, have the same root. Wow. What if we looked at these crises as also being birthing stools? What are we giving birth to in these times of shattering, in these times of crisis? What are we looking towards, beyond stopping this political/social/world nightmare that's unfolding all around us?

Our Unitarian Universalist faith movement, our participation here at UUCV and our identification with UU principles and values... they call us to hold fast to a vision. To envision what we are birthing, what we are nurturing and growing, with our actions. Your vision statement that you created earlier this year calls you to come "Together [to] cultivate a world that celebrates diversity and champions justice for all beings, grounded in the transforming power of love."

Cultivating a world based in love and justice for all creatures, all beings... that's what UUCV is here to give birth to, together. And it's not just about who your minister is that gives you this vision: it's yours. The Sufi Muslim story about the birds reminds us that our strength and beauty and power is beyond who we have as our leader. Our strength and our power is within us, among us, and beyond us. And we do well to align ourselves with it. But how?

The contemporary author, teacher, and activist adrienne maree brown has articulated a method for nurturing love and justice in the world called "Emergent Strategy." One of the key components of Emergent Strategy is this: "what we pay attention to, grows." When we are trying to transform the world based in love, justice, equity, interdependence, pluralism, and generosity, we can't just fight against the stuff we hate and expect the good stuff to be there when we prevail. Because our attention has power. What we pay attention to grows.

Adrienne maree brown often returns to this quote from her mentor Grace Lee Boggs. "'Transform yourself to transform the world.' [adrienne explains] This doesn't mean to get lost in the self, but rather

to see our own lives and work and relationships as a front line, a first place we can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet.”^[2]

I believe that Howard Thurman recognized how hard it can be to “look well” to what is growing—as he called it, the growing edge. Howard was born during a bleak time for Black southerners: 1899. The Civil War had ended just 34 years before. The Reconstruction era, which had followed the Civil War and resulted in a great improvement in political and material conditions for Black southerners – that era had ended 22 years before, with the election of Rutherford B. Hayes and political compromises that reinforced systemic white supremacy throughout the South. In 1899, baby Howard entered into a violent, repressive Jim Crow world that had no signs of changing anytime soon.

Hope in times like those... that was something that lived in Black families, Black communities, Black culture. Something nurtured in the Christian faith, the active, engaged, Jesus-following kind of Christian Faith that Thurman claimed. Because Jesus was always calling his followers, and anyone who would listen, to recognize their power to pay attention to the revolutionary love that they can grow. And Thurman, and others, spread that love, planting seeds for the next generation’s civil rights revolution.

The words often translated as “Kingdom of God” in the New Testament can make us think of a place other than this earth. As if when Jesus talks about the Kingdom of God, he’s talking about the afterlife, or some parallel realm in the sky. But John Dominic Crossan, a scholar of the Historical Jesus, shows that Jesus was also talking about the here and now, the active reigning of God on Earth. Now even if you aren’t a person who believes in the same God that Jesus did, let me tell you some things about the God he followed and what Jesus’s “reigning of God” looked like: loving, just, compassionate, non-materialistic, generous, merciful. And Jesus was constantly telling people, it’s all around us. We can just move into it. All we need, he’d say, are metaphorical eyes to see and ears to hear—all we need is our attention. What we pay attention to grows.

Jesus said, “With what can we compare the kingdom of God, or what parable shall we use for it? It is like a grain of mustard seed, which, when sown upon the ground, is the smallest of all the seeds on earth; yet when it is sown it grows up and becomes the greatest of all shrubs, and puts forth large branches, so that the birds in the air can make nests in its shade.”

Crossan writes, “The point, in other words, is not just that the mustard plant starts as a proverbially small seed and grows into a shrub of three, four, or even more feet in height. It is that it tends to take over where it is not wanted, that it tends to get out of control, and that it tends to attract birds within cultivated areas, where they are not particularly desired. And that, said Jesus, was what the [reigning of God] was like. Like a pungent [life-giving] shrub with [uncontrollable] takeover properties.”^[3] Imagine that, spreading love, mercy, generosity, joy like the wild mustard plant: uncontrollable, wild, springing up everywhere.

Adrienne maree brown was also speaking from the Black American tradition when she says more about what it means when she says “what we pay attention to, grows.”

“At a collective level, this is the invitation to practice the world we wish to see in the current landscape. Yes, resist the onslaught of oppression, but measure our success not just by what we stop, but by how many of us feel, and can say: I am living a life I don’t regret, a life that will resonate with my ancestors, and with as many generations forward as I can imagine. I am attending to the crises of my time with my

best self, I am of communities that are doing our collective best to honor our ancestors and all humans to come.”^[4]

Those of us who have not inherited generations of wisdom and strategies for survival amidst harsh times need to listen better, and look well. Things are very hard now, and they are likely to get even harder before they get better. We have to do something that may feel strange if we’ve had lives of relative privilege. We cannot let the hope inside us be dependent on external success. We must have revolutionary patience, and plant seeds everywhere we go, knowing some of them will likely never flourish. But some of them will.

Where I live, I think about the revolutionary patience of the activists who, thirty years ago, succeeded in saving a canyon and coastal hills from development. While housing tracts were flattening hills, filling in valleys, and paving new roads everywhere in my fast-growing city, these people had a vision for not just an absence of development. They had a vision for a thriving ecosystem. Over time, they took out invasive rabbit brush. They planted live oaks, Torrey pines, native grasses and sages, toyon bushes, and sycamore. And because of this attention, the animals of the coastal chaparral began to make a home there: the Wrentit, the California Gnatcatcher, squirrels and nesting pack rats. The creek below came to life with fish and worms, sandpipers and Green Herons. And now it looks like it’s always been this way, an ecosystem in balance. And yet, if you look closely, you can see the signs of their efforts: poles that once held transplanted saplings steady, worn-down plastic flags that marked the places seeds were planted. Now they grow and go to seed and replant themselves, wild and lush like mustard plants from mustard seeds.

What we pay attention to, grows. And as we look to those things we want to grow, we have so much wisdom to rely on: ancient, ancestral, spiritual, natural. Those planters of the ecosystem had to learn the ways of nature, and the ways of indigenous tenders of the land, to know what to do. That means we have to be in relationship, no one can know these things alone: we only know them, together.

So let us be that for one another. Holders of wisdom and practitioners of healing ways, ancient, ancestral, spiritual, and natural. As we move more deeply into this time of transition, preparing for a good goodbye with Rev. Kathryn, engaging in our lives and our world with as much integrity and love as we can muster, may we find our hope. The kind of hope that comes from knowing that even if things get worse, we are “looking well,” “paying attention to” the good things that are growing among us, and can grow with our tending.

Amen, and Blessed be.

^[1] Thurman, Howard. “The Growing Edge.” *Meditations of the Heart*. Beacon Press, 1999.

^[2] brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK Press, 2017. Kindle Edition.

^[3] Crossan, Dominic John. *Jesus, a Revolutionary Biography*. Harper San Francisco, 1994. p. 65.

^[4] brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK Press, 2017. Kindle Edition.