

***Embracing Possibilities, Embracing God***  
Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver  
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***Reflection on the Annual Pledge Campaign*** by Eric LaBrant

I joined UUCV in 2013, originally to help my kids find a healthy social community outside of school. At the time, I hoped the church wouldn't mind my atheism too much. I was surprised to discover how many UUs identify as non-believers — a surprise that was mirrored in my heart. Raised to believe atheists don't believe in anything at all, I was encouraged to explore my own beliefs, realizing that non-belief carries a heavy responsibility: that we are interdependent upon each other. Having grown up in a church built on holiness and redemption, fear and sin, I'm now free to explore the idea that no one is waiting to judge us — but no one is waiting to save us either. All we have is each other. HUGE responsibility.

Years have unfolded, and I've seen this community's impact in action. Direct support for Martin Luther King Elementary. Word in the community about BIPOC folks helped by the community garden during the pandemic. A meeting in the RE building with a neighborhood association to fight an oil train terminal in Vancouver. And people taking spiritual refuge as our society backtracks on basic human rights. The things we do here matter — in our own hearts, and in the wider world.

That's why I pledged years ago and why I continue to do so. UUCV has been a powerful force in my life, and its impact on the Vancouver community remains powerful. UUCV acts on values I hold sacred, balancing respect for the individual with strong connection to the broader community.

Rather than requiring me to have everything together, UUCV asks me to show up real and flawed — and accepts me as I am.

I'm now in a financial position to contribute to making that possible for others. There have been times I could give more, times I could give less, and times not at all. What's mattered is staying active, responding during the pledge drive, and supporting to the extent it's practical.

When someone in our community shows up looking for a healthy spiritual home, I want to know that UUCV isn't just *here* — but that we're ready and able to make things better.

***Embracing Possibilities, Embracing God***© by Rev. Kathryn A. Bert

Martin Luther King said, “When our days become dreary with low hovering clouds and our nights become darker than a thousand midnights, we will know that we are living in the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born.”

We are certainly living in the chaos of storms and creative turmoil. And we have experienced chaos before. Theodore Parker was a controversial 19<sup>th</sup> century Unitarian minister and abolitionist. He led the Boston opposition to the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850 and served as minister-at-large to fugitive slaves in

Boston. He was also a proponent of women's suffrage. Parker helped move Unitarianism away from being a Bible-centered faith when he gave a famous sermon at the ordination of Charles C. Shackford entitled "*A Discourse on the Transient and Permanent in Christianity*," a sermon I've quoted more than once from this pulpit. It was this sermon that began the controversy as a majority of Unitarians found his ideas to be non-Christian, barring him from many of the area pulpits at the time. We often associate Parker with King's quote about the moral arc of the universe, but that was from a sermon given more than 10 years after the *Transient and Permanent in Christianity*. The quote from this sermon I've probably shared with you before is about this idea that Christianity is a cultural expression of a universal truth, and that we shouldn't confuse the cultural trappings of the faith with the Truth it is seeking to express. He put it this way:

"Almost every sect, that has ever been, makes Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, and not the immutable truth of the doctrines themselves, or the authority of God, who sent him into the world. Yet it seems difficult to conceive any reason, why moral and religious truths should rest for their support on the personal authority of their revealer, any more than the truths of science on that of him who makes them known first or most clearly. It is hard to see why the great truths of Christianity rest on the personal authority of Jesus, more than the axioms of geometry rest on the personal authority of Euclid, or Archimedes. The authority of Jesus, as of all teachers, one would naturally think, must rest on the truth of his words, and not their truth on his authority..."

I hope you can see how this sermon raised the possibility that there might be other cultural paths besides Christianity that could express the great moral and religious truths which Christianity tries to teach. And therefore why it might be threatening and dangerous to those Unitarians who were attached to the idea that Christianity – even Unitarian Christianity – was the sole source of religious truth; the one and only true religion.

But like so many human communities, we eventually caught up with Parker and embraced his ideas.

We reject the idea that, as Michelle Collins says, "human understanding of the sacred reached completion in the past. Instead, it trusts that new insights, deeper understandings, and previously unimaginable truths are always available, through science, art, lived experience, other religious traditions, and the ongoing work of justice." We reject the idea "that God spoke once and then fell silent." Or as it is said in the United Church of Christ, "God is still speaking."

"God" is a tricky idea for Unitarian Universalists, at least in this day and age. So many identify, as Eric does, as atheist. But I find the concept of God useful as we embrace possibility, because it points toward mystery and those things we don't know. As Michelle Collins put it, "what we do not yet know matters as much as what we think we know."

I love this idea that "the future is spiritually generative," and it is this spiritual generativity that describes my idea of God – an animating force in the Universe that creates, sustains and transforms the world and us in it. Michelle Collins said that this idea that revelation is not sealed "refuses to limit the sacred to what previous generations could articulate, trusting instead that the future is spiritually generative, that human consciousness can expand, and that religious community exists not to guard old answers but to pursue new questions."

So I always worry when I get knee-deep into theological discourse that I'm going to lose my listener. I'm fascinated by this stuff, but I know that not everyone is. What I want to point out here is how Parker's theology informed his sense of social justice, and that all of this talk of God means nothing if it doesn't lead to a way of being in the world, reflecting on the world, and changing the world. *Praxis*, to use the educator Paulo Friere's language – action and reflection. The theological language is the reflection, and the social justice – the working for abolition and suffrage – is the action. Praxis. But even those concepts date me.

So, let me turn to adrienne marie brown, writer, activist, facilitator, author of *Emergent Strategy* and *Pleasure Activism*. Even though I am not as familiar with her work as I am with Theodore Parker or Paule Freire, she is living in this time with us, and writing about embracing possibilities. And of course, that's the point, even of Parker's theological framework, is that we must not guard old answers but pursue new questions. Embracing Possibility – as much as Embracing God – is about going into these new territories, territories of the unknown. I was first introduced to her through the Unitarian Universalist Association General Assembly.

So, I'm not as familiar with adrienne marie brown, nor even Octavia Butler, the science fiction writer brown embraces, but I do know my Star Trek, and that, too, had an influence on brown's thinking and writing. The science fiction genre is about Embracing Possibility – it is about going into these new territories, territories of the unknown. *Like Space: the final frontier – the mission to explore strange new worlds; to seek out life and new civilizations; to boldly go where on one has gone before!* That sounds like spiritual generativity to me. I was surprised about how moved I was this week when the Artemis II shared photos and landed safely.

But let me back up a bit, because identity matters. It matters in this white supremacist, hierarchical, patriarchal system we share. Adrienne's parents were an interracial marriage in the mid-seventies. Her father, black, and mother, white. And it's no coincidence that adrienne fell in love with Octavia Butler's fiction, as Butler was the first Black woman to achieve national recognition in science fiction. Brown's father loved *Star Trek* and made them watch it at home.

Brown's first book, *Emergent Strategy*, outlines these systems and practices in nature that we can use to reframe the way we work and live. She calls these the six Elements of Emergent Strategy and they are based on how the natural world works, which we can apply to our change work in the world. Like Parker, she is making a theological framework that informs the possibilities of changing our world – it informs our social justice work.

All six elements are a part of an ever-expanding understanding of emergence, a future that is spiritually generative. There is a sermon for each of them, so please forgive me for just listing them and moving on. If you want to learn more, read her book, *Emergent Strategy*. Here are the six Elements of Emergent Strategy:

- **Fractal:** The relationship between small and large. Geometric shapes in nature that look the same no matter how big or how small they are.
- **Intentional Adaptation:** How we change and how we purposely change
- **Interdependence and Decentralization:** Who we are and how we share

- **Nonlinear and Iterative:** The Pace and Pathways of change
- **Resilience and Transformative Justice:** How we recover and transform
- **Creating More Possibilities:** How we move towards life

In addition to these elements, she has these Principles, which she calls catch phrases that we can use when we want to center ourself in a particular practice or element. I hear these catch phrases being used all the time in the volunteer work I'm doing with immigration justice. Honestly, I didn't connect them to adrienne marie brown until I sat down to write this sermon. And they really do help. They are:

- **Small is good; small is all** (the large is a reflection of the small). See how this principle is related to the fractal element?
- **Change is constant** (be like water). Isn't that one so true especially now?
- **There is always enough time for the right work.** If there isn't enough time, perhaps it's not the right work.
- **There is a conversation that only these people at this time can have. Find it.**
- **Never a failure; always a lesson.**
- **If you trust the people, they become trustworthy. Move at the speed of trust.** I love this one. I've often used the phrase, "moving at the speed of church" which, to me, generally means very, very slowly. In part, we move slowly because church is comprised of so many interlocking relationships, and we have to build trust in those relationships before moving too far ahead.
- **Focus on critical connections more than critical mass** - build the resilience by building the relationships.
- **Less prep; more presence.**
- **What you pay attention to grows.** This one reminds me of Emerson : "A person will worship something, have no doubt about that. We may think our tribute is paid in secret in the dark recesses of our hearts, but it will come out. That which dominates our imaginations and our thoughts will determine our lives, and our character. Therefore, it behooves us to be careful what we worship, for what we are worshipping, we are becoming."

These are not new ideas. They're actually ancient ones, and based on natural systems. But the way in which brown has combined them is unique and gives us some principles to rely on as we embrace possibilities, explore strange new worlds, and seek to bring genuine civilization into existence. Civilization, you know, that is "civilized" – in the best meaning of the word – a well-developed social system that treats everyone in it with dignity and respect, in which humans are equal and not subjugated in an oppressive hierarchy that values some more than others. Civilized – you know, when your elected leaders don't insult and demean others, foster division and instigate war, but rather serve the public good and the public – all the public. Civilized - civic dialogue that is civil and not coercive or threatening or vulgar.

This is a future that is spiritually generative. It turns chaos into " the creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born." Along with Theodore Parker, Martin Luther King, Paulo Friere,

adrienne marie brown, and the crew of Star Trek Enterprise, we trust that new insights, deeper understandings, and previously unimaginable truths are always available, through science, art, lived experience, other religious traditions, and the ongoing work of justice.

This spiritual generativity describes my idea of God – an animating force in the Universe that creates, sustains and transforms the world and us in it. What I like about the idea of God is that it doesn't center humanity. The concept of God itself is an embrace of possibility – an embrace of the unknown and unknowable.

I was recently reading Jon Meacham's book, *American Struggle* – I didn't finish it because I had to return it to the library, so I'm on the waiting list again. But I started it. The subtitle is: *Democracy, Dissent, and the Pursuit of a More Perfect Union: An Anthology*. And it is an anthology of primary source documents from 1619 to the present about this country and is "pursuit of a more perfect union." Something akin to that "creative turmoil of a genuine civilization struggling to be born." And what struck me about those documents is how much the founders understood that people are selfish and motivated by greed and power. They did not expect our leaders to have pure motives of benevolence but knew that we humans are corruptible. They took that into consideration as they imagined this new way of governing as a democracy.

I call that force that allows us to be creative and generative and resilient, God. Though people can be selfish and motivated by greed and power, it does not always have to be so. We can embrace the possibility of something different. Human consciousness can expand. Genuine civilization can be born. And religious community exists not to guard old answers, but to pursue new questions.

You don't need to embrace my idea of God, but I do hope you will embrace the possibility that there is more out there than we currently understand. That the future is generative. That we are endlessly creative. As adrienne marie brown writes: "Our radical imagination is a tool for decolonization, for reclaiming our right to shape our lived reality." And she says, "I believe that all organizing is science fiction - that we are shaping the future we long for and have not yet experienced."

As Captain Picard of the USS Enterprise says, "Make it so"