

Adaptive Ministry

Blurb: When one strand of the web is broken, the entire web is prone to collapse. When we in UU spaces speak of our 7th principle, belief in the interdependent web of all existence, we are not merely speaking in metaphors. Our existences are intricately woven with all life. When violence, oppression, and marginalization occur elsewhere in the world we are consciously and unconsciously bound to it, and vice versa.

Speaker: Cameron Young

Bio: Cameron Young is a native Texan and lifelong Unitarian Universalist. Having grown up in those programs, they developed a particular affinity for youth and young adult ministry. Prior to joining the UUA, Cameron served as a lifespan religious educator in Fort Worth, Texas for five years, having helped to implement their congregation's first ever Coming of Age, Spirit Play, and Young Adults programs. Cameron also served a two-year elected position as Young Adult Co-Facilitator at General Assembly. Cameron has a Bachelor of Music from Louisiana State University and is currently a seminarian at Fort Worth's Brite Divinity School. A professional musician and classically trained singer, Cameron has performed in numerous operas, musicals, is a member and co-founder of DFW's Uptown Carolers, a professional Christmas caroling company, and also recorded with Grammy award winner Leon Bridges on his debut album. In their spare time, Cameron is an avid traveler, die hard fan of Dallas sports teams, and devoted coffee drinker.

Opening Hymn: #398 Wake Now My Senses

Readings

"We have experienced what it's like to release any assumption that one person has all the skills needed to lead and support the work." When there's so much to be done to transform this world, brown offers us a gentle and liberating reminder that none of us have to bear such responsibility alone. --- adrienne maree brown

(#580 in the gray hymnal) "The central task of the religious community is to unveil the bonds that bind each to all. There is a connectedness, a

relationship discovered amid the particulars of our own lives and the lives of others. Once felt, it inspires us to act for Justice. It is the church that assures us that we are not struggling for justice on our own, but as members of a larger community. The religious community is essential, for alone our vision is too narrow to see all that must be seen, and our strength too limited to do all that must be done. Together, our vision widens and our strength is renewed." -- Mark Morrison-Reed

Sermon

In her book *Emergent Strategy*, writer, doula, and black feminist activist adrienne maree brown speaks of the scientific phenomena of fractals, which she defines as "objects or quantities that display self-similarity, which means it looks roughly the same at any scale." A fern is an example she provides for fractals- if you look at a fern through a microscope it will reproduce an identical pattern as the large-scale object. Another concept she uses is *biomimicry*. Brown contextualizes biomimicry to suggest that when systems and institutions bump up against design flaws, they can look at ecosystems, including micro-ecosystems that have already solved this challenge. Answers can be found in nature.

The church as fractal is a good metaphor for how we want to be in the world. We seek to create beloved community among ourselves and through our relationships in hopes to the world will replicate. A quote often attributed to Gandhi is "Be the change you wish to see in the world." However, the full quote reads "We but mirror the world. All the tendencies present in the outer world are to be found in the world of our body. If we could change ourselves, the tendencies in the world would also change. As one changes their own nature, so does the attitude of the world change towards them. This is the divine mystery supreme. A wonderful thing it is and the source of our happiness. We need not wait to see what others do."

Brown also uses an analogy of a spider web. When one strand of the web is broken, the entire web is prone to collapse. When we in UU spaces speak of our 7th principle, belief in the interdependent web of all existence, we are not merely speaking in metaphors. Our existences are intricately woven with all life. When violence, oppression, and marginalization occur elsewhere in the world we are consciously and unconsciously bound to it, and vice versa.

Brown tells us that “when we speak of systemic change, we need to be fractal. The same spirals on seashells can be found in the shape of galaxies We must create patterns that cycle upwards.” As someone who identifies as transgender, specifically non-binary (not male nor female), Unitarian Universalism was one of the first spaces I could show up authentically in, give me language for my own experience, and thus empowering me to be myself out in the world. At the 2017 General Assembly in New Orleans, we changed the language for the second of six sources in our faith from “words and deeds of prophetic men and women,” to “Words and deeds of prophetic people which challenge us to confront powers and structures of evil with justice, compassion, and the transforming power of love.” This was to recognize that past prophets who have revealed to us truth and meaning have not all fit within the construct of gender binary. This includes trans people like Marsha P Johnson and Sylvia Rivera, whose civil disobedience eventually led to the Pride movement. When I came out in my home city of Fort Worth as a direct result of my faith making space for me, I was one of maybe a handful of trans or non-binary people I knew locally. Five years later, I know dozens if not hundreds of them, many of whom told me directly that I helped inspire them to live more authentically. Ripples. Fractals.

In *Emergent Strategy*, we’re invited to envision a world-yet-to-come through the lens of a science fiction writer- Octavia Butler in this particular case. Science Fiction writers themselves have often been prophets of their times. With their own imaginative visualizations having eventually become a reality. Jules Verne foretold the moon landing 104 years before it happened. Mark Twain wrote a short story of a medium strikingly similar to the internet. HG Wells wrote of catastrophe producing uranium-based bombs. In novels from the 70s to the 90s, Octavia Butler told stories of worlds ravaged by authoritarianism and climate change, which no longer feel like dystopian fiction in 2022, but also of the resilient humans who manage to build better societies amidst such chaos.

The next piece at the heart of *Emergent Strategy* is adaptation. One of the cornerstones of liberal religion according to Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams is that revelation is never sealed. God and truth are always in process- constantly changing and being revealed to us. We live in times of unprecedented change. While the disastrous effect of the Covid-19 pandemic and our national response to it should never be minimized, we

have seen resilience and innovation emerge from it. We've found ways to make church more accessible to those most vulnerable. We reimagined collaborative ways of doing hybridized small and large events, most recently our General Assembly in Portland last month. What I've observed throughout this pandemic is the direct correlation of an institution's ability to live out their mission, center their values and de-center personalities, and that institution's sustainability through uncertain times. People give time and money to organizations who practice what they preach -- it's really that simple. Admittedly, we are not always perfect at that.

At (*y*)our Unitarian Universalist Association, we have a pretty elaborate search system which helps to match ministerial candidates with prospective congregations. This year, more congregations came up empty-handed than ever before, as we've experienced a major shortage in ministers looking for positions. The other day I was asked by an acquaintance, a Catholic who knew what I did for a living but had very little contextual understanding of UU, asked me point blank, "do you guys have a minister shortage right now?" She was privy not only to a shortage in her religious context, but also as an educator. Her observations- there's been a mass exodus of people in and/or pursuing *helping professions*.

In anxious times, our individualistic society seeks both saviors and scapegoats. People to come in with superhero capes and fix all our problems. People to blame when things go wrong. Since, by their nature, they lead from a vulnerable place, this burden tends to be placed disproportionately on the shoulders of servant leaders. Adrienne maree brown observes that "so many of our organizations working for social change are structured in ways that reflect the status quo. We have singular charismatic leaders, top-down structures, money driven programs, destructive methods of engaging conflict, unsustainable work cultures." This results in "Burn out. Overwork, underpay, unrealistic expectations (ie this leader is going to come and help us grow and drive up pledging units... when long-term sustainable growth is contingent upon an infinite number of factors beyond who is in the pulpit). She also says we get "organizational splitting, personal drama disrupting movements, and stagnation- or an inability to make decisions." This phenomenon is compounded with leaders of marginalized identities, and UU organizations are far from immune.

The report from the UUA's commission on institutional change, *Widening the Circle of Concern*, tells us what many of us already inherently knew.

The turnover rate for leaders -- and when I say leaders I mean ministers, religious professionals, and lay leaders alike -- is significantly higher for those who are black and indigenous people of color (BIPOC) and/or people who are trans-identified.

Though I'm inching closer to ordination as a UU minister, my plan for the foreseeable future is to remain in my calling of associational ministry, rather than congregational ministry. I will certainly never say never, but I did work in a congregation as a religious educator for five years. I came out during my tenure in this congregation, and while many were affirming, and many made mistakes in all of their earnestness, I could gradually see a shift in how I was perceived and respected as I went from identifying as male to being openly trans and began presenting more femininely or more fluidly. While there had already been some issues because of my age and inexperience, they became exacerbated. There was a shift in willingness to respect my own boundaries and personal space. I was becoming a shell of myself.

Associational ministry on the other hand, while certainly bearing its own challenges, has presented an infrastructure centered in equity and inclusion. The UUA prioritizes employees with multicultural competency, and ongoing training to build on it. In my workplace, people use my correct pronouns far more often and never question the validity of my identity nor the pronouns that I use. It's also nice to not feel like 200 people are your boss -- and that your livelihood is subjected to their every whim. I don't feel like people are keeping tabs on me and scrutinizing my every move. There is a more collaborative, but also more formal supervisory structure than exists in most congregations. Informal structures privilege those in power.

There's also something to be said about the way our broader national culture, rooted heavily in protestant work ethic, perceives servanthood. The suffering servant archetype has been seen as noble and typical for folks across all helping professions. I think those who have historically gone into helping professions -- ministers, nurses, teachers, counselors -- have bought into this nobility and assumed self-sacrifice to be a part of the territory. Until now. I think people of younger generations are setting appropriate boundaries for the sake of their own well-being. Too many teachers I know have been overburdened with polarized politics infusing the classroom, among other expectations. Nurses overburdened with full hospital beds as the result of negligent state and national governments who

unnecessarily politicized a virus for their own self-interests. Institutions -- churches included -- which center hierarchy and wealth are imploding in on themselves. The other side of that coin is that we're seeing new models for equity and collaboration emerge. Some of them based on ancient methods.

I've worked with a couple of congregational boards on using discernment circles for decision making. Everybody takes their turn speaking when a decision is at stake and consensus building is prioritized. These methods are based in millennia-old practices of indigenous peoples. When I helped model this for a congregational board- many of the female-identified people in the room remarked "it's nice to feel like I have a voice for a change!"

With this in mind, I believe it's time to put our science fiction goggles and imagine what these collaborative, and equitable models can look like for the 21st century UU church and centuries to come. How can we be beloved community even without a minister? Or practice truly shared ministry WITH a minister? Will we have the courage to recognize that the way we've been doing things is no longer serving us- or never served many in the first place? What could the church and other institutions look like if we move from competition to collaboration? From power hoarding to power sharing? From individualism to community? From viewing progress as bigger or more to progress as quality and sustainability? From perfectionism to appreciation? From urgency toward understanding? What a powerful church that would be -- and it's within our grasp.

2022 Cameron Young / MidAmerica Region UUA