

Living into the Living System  
Congregational Life Sermon Series, 2023-2024

Reading 1: “My Ancestry DNA Results Came In” by Fred Lamotte

Reading 2: “The Growing Edge by Rev. Dr. Howard Thurman

Sermon, “Living Into the Living System” by Rev. Sarah Gibb Millspaugh

On election day, 2016 – yes, remember that day? – on election day, 2016, I started to plant a garden. To take control of something – anything! – and beautify that little plot of earth behind the condo my family had recently moved in to. Feeling distressed about our culture, our nation, feeling despair about climate change, I would make this backyard not just beautiful but an expression of my spiritual values.

Now, this was a small backyard. About the size of a typical living room. And most of it was taken up by patio. I didn’t have a heck of a lot of soil to work with. But I plodded ahead anyway. First I brought out the beauty that was already there, by weeding carefully, fertilizing the roses, and the like. Then I purchased native plants, so threatened in our area where new houses swallow sage covered hills every day. I bought a house for solitary bees and planted flowers they’d like. And with great expectancy, I bought some milkweed, envisioning generations of Monarch Butterflies, birthed at our home.

All was going well until I brought in the veggies. First it was the demise of the spinach, taken down by mites. Then it was the kale, devoured by

aphids. I started to apply organic pesticides, but then realized I couldn't—they would hurt the butterfly larvae. So I bought some ladybugs to eat the insects off the veggies. And they all flew away or died. I planted new kale and spinach. But then I noticed something was coming in and eating them. Birds. I built this whole ugly contraption to scare away birds from the garden. This garden—my garden—wasn't pretty anymore. Then workers came to fix the patio and a nest of five rats ran out from underneath. Oh my. *They* were the veggie eaters. Did I mention we're vegan? Now we're vegans with a rat problem. I was already feeling like this little yard is putting my values at cross purposes.

But then we got a dog. Who loves to dig and lie in dirt. She has trampled carefully-nurtured native plants as well as kale and onions, and she has come very close to squishing precious monarchs. This yard, this expression of my spiritual values, became an illustration of the interdependent web, but not just in the pretty way. It became a system at war with itself.

Have you experienced that, too, at home, in life, ...or here in your congregation? Feeling that despite your best efforts at all good things, things are just not working? Feeling like every intervention you make just causes new problems? Feeling like you're within a system you just can't seem to control?

We Unitarian Universalists talk a lot about systems: the justice system, the economic system. The systems that are out there (solar systems!) and in here (digestive systems!). The social systems we're caught up in. Unless

you believe in an all-powerful God, you've probably come to recognize that no one and no thing is in charge of a system. A system is really a community: a complex community of beings each with its own behaviors and purposes. And like my backyard, the *results* of a system say more about it than the values and efforts that went into it. It's not just "the thought that counts."

I am on the Congregational Life Staff of the Unitarian Universalist Association. This means I support the "living systems" of congregations, partnering with you to tend to the health of your congregation's systems. And our congregations, like my back yard, can find ourselves all tangled up. We face conundrums, like "We value radical inclusion, but we also value kindness and good boundaries." So what does it mean to be radically inclusive of someone who's behavior is hurtful or inappropriate? Those values can come into conflict in the life of a congregation. Or times we clean up our policies and procedures only to find that no one follows them and the loosey-goosiness persists. Or times when a congregation's bylaws say who's really in charge here (the board) but the system knows it's really Sally and Jo who are in charge. In a complex human system like a congregation, there can be so many layers upon layers of values and meaning and culture and "the way things have always been done" that it can feel pretty hard to try to change things. It can be hard even for someone in a position that we ask to *make* change, like our congregational president, even our minister. A living system is naturally resistant to change. And the whole system needs to be taken into account if we are to transform a congregation, a backyard, our world.

This is a very very challenging time to be a person in the United States. So much anxiety, fear, hatred, so much violence, so much “othering.” It tears at our hearts. It is hard to know how to respond when every day there is another thing to be outraged about, another example of cruelty, autocracy, and more. This is not what we were supposed to be like. Not how we were supposed to be as a country, as a world. We are Unitarian Universalists because we believe in the human capacity for goodness and yet... there is so much evil.

And at the same time, something else is emerging. A new sense of our power as people. Several deeply interconnected, creative, and wise movements of people, working together to not only challenge the evil, but working to make love prevail. Movements rising up as if from nowhere, catching hold, and changing the course of history.

The emergence of love-based activism can surprise our nation: why that time? Why those people? This is the heart of what I want to share with you today: beauty and power emerge in unexpected places when we’ve been tending to our living systems, planting the seeds and nurturing the roots.

The contemporary activist Adrienne Maree Brown sees “Emergence” as a key strategy for how we change the systems of our lives to be more loving and more just.

Her book, *Emergent Strategy*, integrates justice work and sci-fi and queer and black lives. She explains emergence this way: “Emergence is the way

complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions' ... There are examples of emergence everywhere.”

She continues: “Emergence is beyond what the sum of its parts could even imagine. ... Oak trees don’t set an intention to listen to each other better, or agree to hold tight to each other when the next storm comes. Under the earth, always, they reach for each other, they grow such that their roots are intertwined and create a system of strength that is as resilient on a sunny day as it is in a hurricane. Dandelions don’t know whether they are a weed or a brilliance. But each seed can create a field of dandelions. We are invited to be that prolific. And to return fertility to the soil around us. ... And what emerges from these cycles are complex organisms, systems, movements, societies. Nothing is wasted, or a failure. Emergence is a system that makes use of everything....<sup>1</sup>

I invite us to think of those oak trees. “Under the earth... they reach for each other, they grow such that their roots are entwined.” How are we reaching for each other in this congregation? How are we reaching for each other in the United States, as politicians sow cruelty and division—how are we reaching out and building connections, instead? How are we reaching for each other beyond our border, and across the world? What sort of things might emerge, if we but build the relationships, the connections?

The connecting... the connecting... Waking up to the Ancestry DNA results that just came in for all of us, that we are each of us deeply interdependent,

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<sup>1</sup> brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Kindle Locations 186-205). AK Press. Kindle Edition.

deeply indebted to all people and all life. Realizing that we are related to, and in relationship with, everyone and everything. Feeling awe and wonder and love: Love for this tremendous experience of life we share. Love for one another. Love for those who are different from us. Love for the creatures, the microorganisms, the earth... resisting with all our might the forces that tell us that we are separate; that they are “other.”

The early 20<sup>th</sup> century activist minister Howard Thurman counsels us to “look well to the growing edge.”

All around us worlds are dying and new worlds are being born;  
all around us life is dying and life is being born.

The fruit ripens on the tree, the roots are silently at work  
in the darkness of the earth against a time  
when there shall be new leaves, fresh blossoms, green fruit.

All around us worlds are dying and worlds are being reborn, all around us life is dying and life is being reborn... Howard Thurman didn't say this lightly. He grew up in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century as a black person in the segregated South where he witnessed everyday legalized terror targeted against him.

He did most of his work and ministry in a time when there was no certainty at all that legal segregation would end. There was no proof that nonviolence could change the world. But all the while he was planting the

seeds, nurturing the shoots, looking at the life-giving possibilities for equality and freedom. Without knowing it, he built relationships and made connections that in the 1950s blossomed into an unstoppable Civil Rights Movement.

Where is the growing edge in our living system? The living system of your community: where is that growing edge? The living systems of your town, your county, your state or province... where is that growing edge? What shoots are arising here? What roots are spreading underground?

The systems thinker Donella Meadows tells us: “The future can’t be predicted, but it can be envisioned and brought lovingly into being. ... We can’t surge forward with certainty into a world of no surprises, but we can expect surprises and learn from them and even profit from them. We can’t impose our will on a system. We can listen to what the system tells us, and discover how its properties and our values can work together to bring forth something much better than could ever be produced by our will alone. We can’t control systems or figure them out. But we can dance with them!”<sup>2</sup>

My backyard garden is in the process of becoming. As a player in its system, I’m watching, and learning from it. There was a time I thought I’d made a perfect haven for pollinators, but then came grasshoppers and powdery mildew. I’m always having to adjust, and rebalance, and pay attention to how the system is changing and what the system needs. Just like in a congregation, just like in life.

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<sup>2</sup> Meadows, Donella H. *Thinking in Systems: A Primer*. Chelsea Green, 2008. p. 167-170.

Keep participating. Keep tending. Keep dancing. Keep living in to the living system. Through all of the ugliness, we have faith that beauty and life-giving powers may emerge.

So may it be. Amen.

Benediction – May Sarton (#691, Singing the Living Tradition)

Help us to be the always hopeful  
gardeners of the spirit  
who know that without darkness  
nothing comes to birth  
as without light  
nothing flowers.