

**EMERGENCE AS A CONSEQUENCE OF BELOVED COMMUNITY**

**THE UNITARIAN FELLOWSHIP OF PETERBOROUGH**

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**OPENING WORDS**      *The Church Incarnate* ~ Elizabeth Mount

Come into this place, bringing all you hold with you.  
Though your heart be heavily burdened,  
Whether you be on the brink of tears or burn with unquenchable rage  
This community can hold you and your strongest emotions,  
Yes, even the messy ones are welcome here.

Come in if you sing just a bit too loud,  
If you hold still as statues and just breathe it in,  
If you sway to the music moving your soul, you are welcome.  
Come in and say "amen!" When the spirit moves you!  
Tell that preacher to "preach, yes, that's right! Tell us!"  
Or close your eyes and quietly let your mind float free on the blessed words.

Come into this place with every piece of yourself gathered up,  
And let us be the church incarnate.  
Let us bring forth the spirit of all that we love  
By the words of our mouths and the doing of our hands  
As we make sacred this time together.

Come into this sacred time and place...this messy beloved community that holds all.

**STORY FOR ALL**      *If You Hold a Seed* ~ Elly MacKay

*(In this story, a child plants a seed and watches and waits as it moves through the seasons and grows.)*

**READING**      *The Enigma We Answer by Living* ~ Alison Hawthorne Deming

Einstein didn't speak as a child  
waiting till a sentence formed and  
emerged full-blown from his head.  
I do the thing, he later wrote, which  
nature drives me to do. Does a fish  
know the water in which he swims?

This came up in conversation  
with a man I met by chance,  
friend of a friend of a friend,  
who passed through town carrying  
three specimen boxes of insects  
he'd collected in the Grand Canyon—  
one for mosquitoes, one for honeybees,  
one for butterflies and skippers,

each lined up in a row, pinned and labeled,  
tiny morphologic differences  
revealing how adaptation  
happened over time. The deeper down  
he hiked, the older the rock  
and the younger  
the strategy for living in that place.

And in my dining room the universe  
found its way into this man  
bent on cataloguing each innovation,  
though he knows it will all disappear –  
the labels, the skippers, the canyon.

We agreed then, the old friends and the new,  
that it's wrong to think people are a thing apart  
from the whole, as if we'd sprung  
from an idea out in space, rather than emerging  
from the sequenced larval mess of creation  
that binds us with the others,  
all playing the endgame of a beautiful planet  
that's made us want to name  
each thing and try to tell  
its story against the vanishing.

**MESSAGE**      *Emergence as a Consequence of Beloved Community*

Every week, my sermons emerge out of all that I have encountered... conversations, memories, experiences, study, movies, facebook posts. I make up the title and description way prior to knowing what exactly will emerge, and I often struggle between trying to stick with what I said I would talk about, and what has emerged as I prepare. So, let me begin by unpacking my published title for today...Emergence as a Consequence of Beloved Community...and then we'll see where it goes!

Our theme packets (available on our website, in our eNews *The Flame*, and in the brochure rack) always begin with some wonderings. This month I said that when we chose the theme last spring, emergence seemed a synonym for beginnings, for newness, for breaking forth. Like the seed in our story, I assumed emergence to simply refer to the kind of new life that we experience happening rather predictably under certain conditions...seeds, pregnancies, new school years, new jobs.

But surprisingly...something different emerged. You see, in philosophy, in science, and in systems theory, emergence is not such a 'simple' or predictable thing; it is used to describe novel patterns and formations which could not have been predicted, but which come into being by virtue of the interactions that happen between diverse entities in any system. Emergence is order spontaneously arising out of chaos. Emergent are the realities that are more than the sum of their parts. And from

what I can tell, science is still quite flummoxed by its complexity. We can categorically list the conditions under which emergence occurs, and we can predict that emergence will occur, but we cannot predict what will actually emerge.

We live in an emergent universe. The Hebrew scriptures say that in the beginning, “the earth was a formless void and darkness covered the face of the deep.”<sup>1</sup> Traditionally, this has been interpreted to mean that there a nothingness out of which God created the world. But theologian Catherine Keller points out that “the face of the deep” is more accurately a description of an oceanic chaos, not emptiness, and therefore creation occurred out of that chaos “ex profundi” rather than out of nothingness, ‘ex nihilo’.

It seems science concurs. What existed before the Big Bang is now presumed to have been an extremely small, massively dense speck of heat and energy,<sup>2</sup> not nothing. And black holes are now described as ‘cosmic trash compactors’<sup>3</sup>, not emptiness. All-that-is has emerged from chaos.

From its known beginnings, our universe has expanded out of interactions between and among atoms and energy. This is the worldview that process theology builds upon...the reality that all is always in process; that the next moment is created out of the present moment in relationship to all it encounters. We can never completely predict what that next moment will be. In this, emergence has a magical quality.

Those who study emergence have gone so far as to name two types of emergence<sup>4</sup>... weak emergence to describe things like seeds and pregnancies...and strong emergence to describe the times when, in the presence of interactions and disruptions among and between diverse entities, something completely novel and unforeseen arises. The more diversity, the more interactions, the more chaos, the more creative energy.

This understanding of emergence as a spontaneous consequence of engaging diversity led me to wonder about beloved community...and the strong emergent possibilities... surprising, unpredictable, completely new...that can, and do, happen. I wanted to explore that more, and to share with you what I assumed would be embraced as the exciting benefits of increasing our hospitality toward, our ability to hold, and our capacity for navigating, the differences among us. I believed it would be a compelling argument for an increased preference for, and willingness to exist within, diversity... because really, who could resist all of the wonderful, persistently unfolding, consequences of beloved community?

Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. popularized the concept of Beloved Community, fundamental to which is inclusiveness of all difference. He used it to describe a society based on justice, equal opportunity, and love of one's fellow humans<sup>5</sup> (and we could expand that to include love of all beings.) Beloved

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<sup>1</sup> Genesis 1:2

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.livescience.com/61914-stephen-hawking-neil-degrasse-tyson-beginning-of-time.html>

<sup>3</sup> <https://science.howstuffworks.com/dictionary/astronomy-terms/before-big-bang1.htm>

<sup>4</sup> <https://coolkidproblems.com/what-is-emergence/>

<sup>5</sup> [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeffrey-ritterman/the-beloved-community-dr- b\\_4583249.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/jeffrey-ritterman/the-beloved-community-dr- b_4583249.html)

community, then, is by definition diverse. Inclusive. Therefore sometimes NOT coherent and comfortable. And since beloved community is what we strive to create here at the Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough, it serves us to understand how to live within systems that can be in unpredictable or in upheaval.

Our everyday lives are increasingly more diverse, more connected, more interdependent, and more interactive...making them more complex and chaotic. And so perhaps we don't have the luxury of choosing or embracing diversity, but rather, are called, even mandated, to become more skilled at living within diversity, and at facing and welcoming chaos bravely. Because. The consequence of Beloved Community is that emergence will occur.

Now, you might feel unsure about my use of the word consequence. Does it feel negative/scary to you? In truth, since the consequent emergence out of chaos or diversity cannot be predicted, it certainly might turn out to be something one would find negative. There are no guarantees that what emerges will be a welcome change. Since none of us gets an A+ at change, it makes sense that emergence might feel scary. We're just not that good at change.

And since we're not, and since the study of emergence is full of theories, I realized that this had the potential to be a lecture...suitable for yawns, note-taking and a pop quiz. Yuck. Not what any of us needs this morning.

So instead, I'm going to offer a real-life situation to bring this 'emergence' thing alive. And full disclosure; I have not asked consulted with our Board about bringing this to you today. But before I go there, let me lay out a few principles of emergence...some already mentioned:

- The pattern, or cycle, of emergence is from coherence to disruption to differentiation and then to a new, more complex level of coherence.
- Emergence will necessarily interrupt ordinary life.
- Emergent are the unpredictable outcomes that expand or grow out of chaos
- Emergence is always happening

So here's the right now, real-life situation:

In the arc of this congregation's history of 'place', there have been several emergent cycles (presented here as an oversimplification):

UFP had its beginnings in the coming together of like minds...a clustering of folks that led to a cohesion...an occasional gathering in homes, with the children meeting in someone's rec room. A homeostasis that was perfectly fine until...

Disruption. The group grew too large to comfortably meet in homes, and there was also some impetus to formalize and get 'real'...which led to exploring alternatives, while at the same time unearthing fears of costs, of taking on too much, etc... until a rented meeting place was found, where we met, and things got comfortable, until...Disruption. (And, actually this particular cycle happened repeatedly, moving to several different rental spaces)...until...

Disruption. A member left a sizeable bequest, and the voices that wanted to purchase a building

became louder and more confident... which unearthed differences of opinion...which led to exploring alternatives... holding a facilitated visioning retreat... and looking for property...putting together a building fund...until, surprise, wonder of wonders, a building was purchased on Chamberlain Street, and congregation life settled into a comfortable pattern...until...

Disruption. The space for children's programming and fellowship became too small and crowded, and worse, the building was not accessible. Our values of being inclusive and welcoming clashed with the building's shortcomings, and people began to complain, maybe even revolt. We explored what was most important to us, and decided we had to move, and began to explore options, making offers on properties...and surprise, the opportunity to rent short-term from Beth Israel arose from the chaos, and we moved here.

That was 2004. Fourteen years ago. We're pretty comfortable here. Sure, we don't yet have a long-term plan for our home, and we're unsure about whether or not this is permanent. Sure, some love the ease of renting while others want the investment of ownership. Sure, many ideas for ways in which we'd like to use the building are discouraged because it's not ours to change. But...it's been comfortable enough.

Until. (you saw this coming, right?) Disruption. Over the summer, what I would name as the 'final straw' with the stairlift occurred...it once again broke down. The beloved human stranded on it was confronted with an unacceptable loss of dignity. While I haven't been comfortable claiming the stairlift was reliably safe for several years, others have now joined me in that perspective, and we're now facing what may be a chaotic time.

Our values, if lived, do not allow us to exclude anyone who enters in friendship. Our values, if lived, require us to offer full hospitality to everyone, regardless of their physical abilities. And for me, that says, we can't do anything downstairs as a community and stay true to our values.

Many of you are aware that we've been in conversation with Beth Israel for several years about a longer-term relationship, even talking about completely different models than landlord/tenant. Our talks have gotten more serious over the past year. But, this new disruption...this stairlift/accessibility issue...is sure to ramp up (forgive the pun) our conversations.

I expect many questions and concerns will surface:

- What are the solutions? A new stairlift? An elevator? A ramp downstairs?
- Whose responsibility is it to ensure accessibility? What will it cost, and who's going to pay for it?
- What are we willing to invest in this building as renters, or what needs to change before we're willing to put money into it?
- What will we do, short term, about programming and activities? Do we need to rent other spaces for events?
- What kind of messaging about the building's accessibility, or lack thereof, are we comfortable with?
- Who are we excluding right now? And why haven't I done something about this sooner?

- Is it time to move? If so, where? Can we afford that?
- How do we best work together with Beth Israel on this?
- How hard will we work to try to keep things at the status quo?

This is just some of the chaos in my mind and heart. More is sure to come up because as diverse beings, our system is forever emergent. You each bring your own perspectives, ideas, resources, and feelings into the mix. So, we grock through this, we will each be interacting with a whole lot of other perspectives, ideas, and feelings. Chaos.

Social scientists who study emergence, and I'm particularly relying on the work of Peggy Holman<sup>6</sup> today, recommend how to best engage emergence in ways that lead to unexpected breakthroughs. I wish there were time to talk about each of these, but as there's not, I simply offer this list.

- Be clear about intentions - name our purpose and direction
- Take leaps of faith - embrace the mystery
- Be willing to be stretched and refreshed. Encourage random encounters.
- Be open to new and unlikely partnerships. Invite diversity.
- Experiment and pioneer new ideas and projects
- Encourage both no leaders and all to be leaders (shared ministry in other words)
- Seek meaning and cluster with those who have common awareness and values
- Follow the energy...seek out the places that are alive or even delightful
- As always, be compassionate

So what are the consequences?

Do you remember the TV game show, Truth or Consequences? I do, vaguely. What I remembered was that it reinforced the moral dictate that if you didn't tell the truth, there would be dire consequences. But when I looked up what actually happened on the show, I learned that contestants received about two seconds to answer an off-the-wall trivia question before "Beulah the Buzzer" sounded. If the contestant answered incorrectly, there would be "Consequences," usually an embarrassing stunt. Oddly, most contestants preferred to answer the question wrong in order to get to perform the stunt.<sup>7</sup>

This maybe says more about the type of people who chose to be contestants than it says about human nature. More often, in my experience, we are fearful of both Beulah the Buzzer, AND the consequences we'll face. But what if we did just leap in and enjoy whatever arises? What if we saw this disruption as a way to engage with those values we hold most dear in the presence of diverse perspectives and feelings? What if we learned something new? What if?

Assuming we engage compassionately and with appreciation for difference, greater trust and courage will emerge. All of us will have grown in our ability to work with upheaval and change. And, I believe that what will certainly emerge is a stronger community because we will better

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<sup>6</sup> <https://thesystemsthinker.com/engaging-emergence-turning-upheaval-into-opportunity/>

<sup>7</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth\\_or\\_Consequences](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Truth_or_Consequences)

appreciate our interconnectedness.

Sound like fun? Maybe. Maybe not. But surely something new will emerge, and surely the more who engage in surfacing the possibilities and in discerning the best way to assure accessibility for all, the more chaos we'll create! Who knows what will emerge!

In the name of Beloved Community. So be it.

**READING**                      *In Gatherings*                      ~ *Marta I Valentín*

In gatherings we are stirred  
like the leaves of the fall season  
rustling around sacred trees,  
tossed hither and yon  
until we come to rest together,  
quietly, softly . . .

We come to gather strength from each other.  
We come to give strength to each other.

We come to ask for strength from the Spirit of All That Is and Is Not.  
When our hearts sing or when they frown  
it is the way of compassion telling us to give.  
It is the way of peace telling us  
to share our gifts,  
for we are happiest  
and most powerful  
when Love is made apparent  
in and through us.

Spirit of the circle that is Love,  
as we twirl in this dance that is life  
we give thanks for reminding us each day  
of our task of ministering to each "other"  
with a searching glance,  
a safe touch,  
a generous smile,  
a thoughtful word...

Thank you for reminding us  
that we are always building our beloved comunidad. [communauté]

Thank you for reminding us  
that through our covenant with you  
we covenant with each "other"  
and are made whole.

In gratitude, we celebrate

with open hearts and minds.  
We discover who we are,  
separate from each other  
and within one another.  
In this circle that holds all life  
may we ever work toward  
widening its boundaries  
until there are none.

Amen. Paz. [Paix] Blessed Be.

**\* CLOSING WORDS**      *Beyond Borders* ~ Rick Hoyt

Go forth

Because we are always going forth from somewhere  
Going from our homes, our childhoods  
Going from our cities and countries  
Going from innocence to experience to enlightenment  
Going into mystery and questions  
Going into the desert  
Getting to the other side.

Go forth,

Leave behind the comfort and community of one place  
Head into the anxiety and loneliness of another.

Carry with you the love and laughter of this place  
And let it light your way

Carry with you the wisdom you learned  
and the good memories

May they give you strength for your journey

And when you have been away long enough, far enough,

Done what you'd set off to do

Been there so long

That place too, starts to feel like home

Come back

Come back to the one, universal

Everywhere and every when and everyone inclusive home,

This beloved community of all creation

That you can never really leave.

Go, open to all that will emerge. Go in peace and love. Amen.

**EXTINGUISHING THE FLAME**