

## **The Two Loops: A Guide to Times of Transformation**

Sermon by Ben Wolfe

*Unitarian Fellowship of Peterborough, February 26, 2017*

The year I turned 20 I was given a life-changing adventure. I was part of a 7-month youth exchange program between Canada and Indonesia — Canada World Youth. I know there are others in this room who have connected with that program too, as host families or participants.

What is the *best* learning experience you have ever had? The one that still has new things to teach you years later... the one you would most like to give to your children or grandchildren? This was easily one of mine. In my group were seven young people from across Canada: English and French speaking, rural and urban, from all economic backgrounds and representing various states of youthful confusion. We were paired with seven Indonesians from all parts of that country, a diverse, conflicted, mostly Muslim nation of thousands of islands and hundreds of local languages and cultures, as wide from west to east as Canada.

I will never forget the feeling of arriving in that country, halfway through our time together. Apart from a token drive across the border to Niagara Falls, New York, I had never been out of Canada. 20 hours in the air from Vancouver to San Francisco, Honolulu, Hong Kong, Jakarta. Our plane descended over the coastline of Java just as the sun was setting, an entire landscape of deltas and rice fields. We landed in darkness, knowing almost nothing about the country around us or the adventure to come.

I could easily spend my whole sermon talking about that experience. The heart of it was two months living with families in a subsistence rice farming village of 600 people in the middle of what most people still think of as Borneo — a place few outsiders had ever been, a day's travel upriver from the nearest road. Animal sacrifices in the jungle, total immersion in another

language, conversations and relationships that spanned worlds and generations. Forestry and mining companies moving in on a culture that still practiced animist rituals thousands of years old.

But what I want to say instead, for a moment, is what it was like when it was over. The day we left our village we were perched on the top of a boat with a one-cylinder motor, chugging for hours down the river, and many of us were weeping at the ending and the loss.

We had travelled a version of the first curve on the insert in your order of service — a rising adventure, a peak experience that felt like it could and should last forever, and then a devastating fall.

The program itself ended soon after, and the shock of that was even larger. I'm sure many of you can relate.

It wasn't as if we hadn't had a calendar, as if we didn't know the shape of the journey all along. The whole point was that we would be returning home, to integrate what we had learned and figure out how to make it part of our lives.

But we weren't ready yet to see that whole pattern. We were stuck in linear time.

And aren't a lot of things like that. The cycles of a marriage, a career. Or on a smaller scale a fantastic holiday, or conference — even a perfect afternoon you get lost in. A childhood friendship you knew would last *forever*, and that suddenly no longer seems secure.

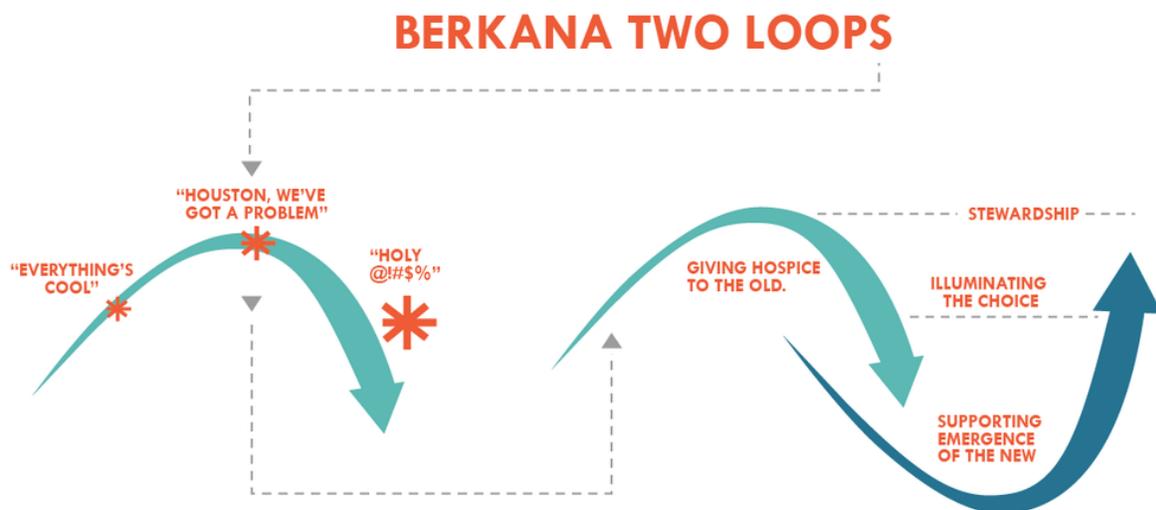
Our health. Our relationships with our children, on the day they make it very clear that we are no longer the centre of their world and they are no longer so small.

And... what about the projects and organizations we create, to carry and embody our hopes and our values? Don't we treat them sometimes like they will go on forever, even though we know that they will not?

My message today is about a simple model of change in times of transformation. It's so simple I hope it will seem obvious; and yet it has given me perspective in ways I want to share.

It's about how systems, and relationships live and die, and the different roles people can play in ongoing cycles of change and rebirth.

It's called "The Two Loops" — and as a theory of change it comes from the Berkana Institute in the United States. Berkana Institute is a grand name for a tiny, innovative group of pioneering facilitators and change leaders whose working motto has been: "Whatever the opportunity, community is the answer."



Source: Tim Merry, *A Practical User's Guide to Navigating Change*

The first loop is existing structures and ways of doing things, peaking and then in inevitable and necessary decline. The second loop, coming up from underneath, is the birth of the new.

How can we release and reclaim the life energy caught in old forms, and transition it to the new? Who will we each choose to be in times of transformation? This model sees four main roles — all essential, all serving life.

First, there is the role of *stewarding our existing systems*. We need our existing structures until the new ones are mature. We can't stop using fossil fuels today, or tomorrow, for example. But we must stop.

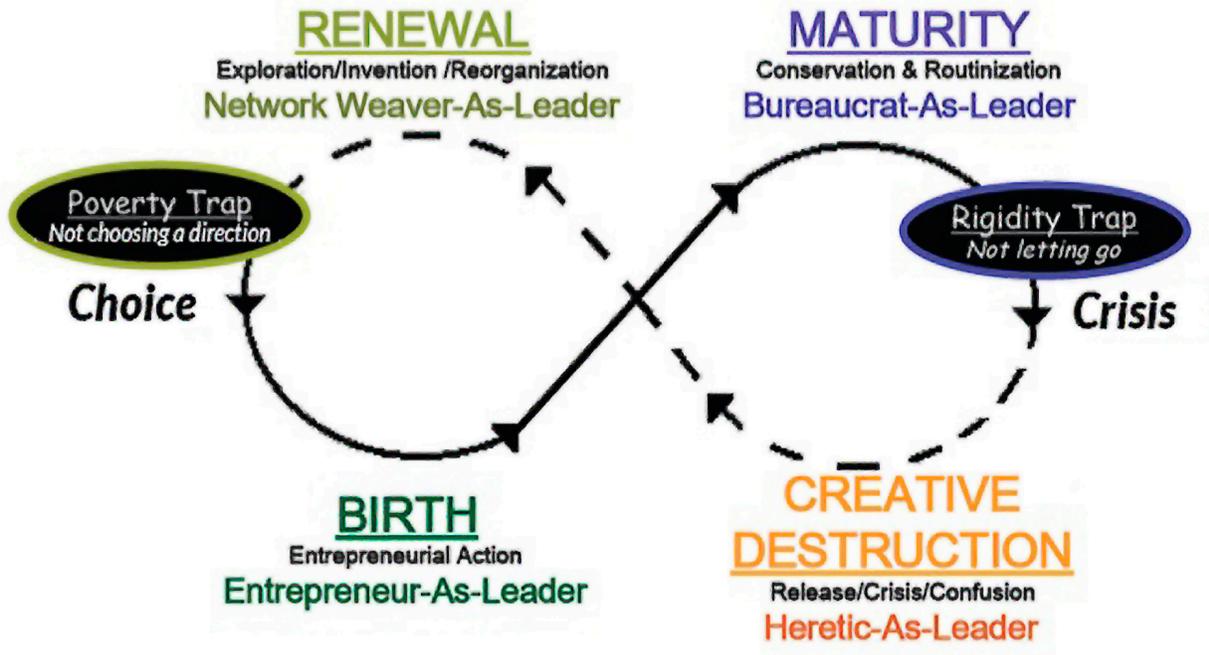
Then there is *giving hospice to the old*. Helping it decline and even die with grace, with ritual, with dignity. It is best done by those within systems who know the transition is necessary. (We heard earlier about the rapid decline in old-line church congregations. That's happening all over Canada and all over the world. Leading that change is tough work.)

Third, there is the role of *supporting the emergence of the new*. 35 years ago, President Jimmy Carter put solar panels on the roof of the White House as a sign of understanding and support for a change that was not yet ready to happen. (Ronald Reagan took them off again, shortly afterwards, but in a sense isn't that just an illustration of the whole pattern?) How many innovators have dedicated their careers to pioneering renewables and many, many other things, *before* they were financially viable, because they knew and saw the need. Locally, the Peterborough Utilities Commission was one of the original sponsors of the GreenUP Ecology Park, as a way of proving and teaching alternative forms of landscaping in our city that use less water and energy...

Fourthly, there is *illuminating the choice*. Telling the story of the coming shift, naming the moment. I like that one: being an artist, who invites people in — to clarity and possibility, with vision, with humour, sometimes with play.



# Ecocycle



Adapted from Brenda Zimmerman,  
EdgeWare & Getting To Maybe

There's another, closely related model, that is the reason for the möbius loop on the cover of your order of service. (You're probably familiar with the term möbius loop: it looks like an infinity symbol, it's fun to make with paper, I thought about doing that with the kids today but we will do that another time.)

Because the Two Loops of the Berkana model really feed into each other. They're continuous cycles, that are always at play. And in this continuous version, you can think of the cycle as moving through four quadrants.

At the top right is the Maturity of existing systems, peaking and moving into decline. The necessary form of leadership there is the one we are most used to: the Bureaucrat, the Manager, stewarding and guiding best practices.

A trap of that place is too much rigidity — a failure to see the necessity of change or the availability and possibility of something better.

The necessary form of leadership for that renewal is the Heretic, the Critic. Unitarians are good at that: historically we are among the heretics of the Christian tradition. So, in the bottom right quadrant, calling for the creative destruction of the old, so the new can emerge.

And then moving towards the top left, climbing up again, there is the Pioneer, the Innovator, the weaver of new networks, experimenting with things that are not yet mature enough to take the place of existing systems — and yet from them the new will be born.

Finally, in the fourth quadrant, feeding back in to a rising cycle of new maturity, is the Entrepreneur, a word much richer than its usual financial meaning: the leader who brings the best of the new into wider use in the world.

Living consciously through times of transformational change, with a sense of the pattern of the whole and all of these necessary roles, can let us pay attention to and experience the life essence of each of these seasons of transformation.

The sense of loss, of shock, of conflict and fear, can be lessened or even turned to something full of emerging hope and possibility when we see these roles that others need to play and are playing.

I can't do this without quoting Rumi. This is from Rumi:

Your grief for what you've lost lifts a mirror  
up to where you are bravely working.

Expecting the worst, you look, and instead,  
here's the joyful face you've been wanting to see.

Your hand opens and closes and opens and closes.  
If it were always a fist or always stretched open,  
you would be paralysed.

Your deepest presence is in every small contracting and expanding,  
the two as beautifully balanced and coordinated  
as birdwings.

The group of us who went on Canada World Youth had many reasons for being there.

Some were looking for an adventure, and they sure got one. Some were trying to figure out something important about themselves: gender identity, what on earth to do next in life. A few were mostly running away from something: a constricting small town, a complicated family.

I was a weird kid. I was partly trying to run as far away as I could from my whole culture.

I wanted to believe there was something else. I'd had a kind-of-unusual childhood. A father who was a fairly wide-ranging cultural critic — I've just been re-reading some of his essays with a plan to share them online. I'd spent a lot of time on extended canoe trips, paddling rivers from source to mouth in truly wild places. And I had a high school geography teacher who introduced us to the extent of the coming ecological crisis.

I was being groomed for leadership in some ways, at an elite academic high school — but I couldn't seem to make myself want to take on traditional roles, in traditional institutions. And I didn't know what else to do.

And isn't that *unease*, that deep and insistent sense that things cannot go on as they are, reflective of some of the larger choices we face?

The Anglican theologian and founder of Methodism John Wesley used to start every small group meeting he held with the question: “How is it with your soul?”

Mine was in rebellion, though I didn’t know it yet.

We’re not living in ordinary times. And I mean much, much more than just our new orange overlord to the south — he-who-will-not-be-named here this morning. (Though perhaps a nickname or two could be allowed: I like “Cheetoh Jesus.”)

In any case, he is just one large symptom of much larger changes.

Fifty years ago, in *Conjectures of a Guilty Bystander*, the contemporary Christian mystic and poet Thomas Merton wrote:

“We are living in the greatest revolution in history — a huge spontaneous upheaval of the entire human race; not the revolution planned and carried out by any particular party, race or nation, but a deep elemental boiling over of all the inner contradictions that have ever been in man, a revelation of the chaotic forces inside everybody. This is not something we have chosen, nor is it something we are free to avoid.”

A century before that, in the great prophetic poem “Stanzas from the Grande Chartreuse,” Matthew Arnold captured the whole pattern and theme of today:

Wandering between two worlds, one dead,  
The other powerless to be born,  
With nowhere yet to rest my head,  
Like these, on earth I wait forlorn.

This largest cycle of all is our materialistic, industrial, technological civilization racing headlong into its own unmanageable contradictions. I

don't need to list them. I've started skipping the opening chapters of books that do that. It is not as if we don't know...

But, are we not living, much of the time, as if our current peak could go on forever? We have become accustomed to handing over most of our forms of leadership to those whose skills are in managing things just as they are. They certainly run our city; they guide our economy.

My deeper challenge, my real question today is: what role can you, and I, what role can each of us play in having this Great Unravelling become, instead, a Great Turning?

What gift can we each bring to the cycles of transformation, from where we stand?

A beautiful thing about this Two Loops model is it gives you more choices. Every form of growth and learning and leadership is needed — whether you are the steward of an existing organization; a prophet of the necessary change; a storyteller, naming the moment; a pioneer of the new.

Over the last two and a bit years, I've been one of the founders of Peterborough Dialogues, a pioneering community initiative in community-building, learning, media-making and change.

It grew out of 25 years of community projects of various kinds, and a profoundly innovative small journalism company, Axiom News. Local resilience and thriving were the aims; and reconnection with the soul of this place, as a key to some of the healing we wanted for ourselves and our community.

We didn't start with John Wesley's question. But we've started most gatherings of the Peterborough Dialogues, and spinoff projects and gatherings, including our own UFP Community Conversations with a

simpler but equally sweeping question. As simple as: *Why was it important to you to be here today?*

It's an invitation to step outside your usual role and see the bigger picture. To stand at that still point at the centre of the Möbius loop and see the paths in all directions...

I want to close with a poem that was the opening of some of our richest Peterborough Dialogues sessions. It's by John O'Donohue, whose words have been heard here often, a wonderful poet and mystic. You might want to close your eyes for this bit.

### **For a New Beginning**

*(by John O'Donohue)*

In out-of-the-way places of the heart,  
Where your thoughts never think to wander,  
This beginning has been quietly forming,  
Waiting until you were ready to emerge.

For a long time it has watched your desire,  
Feeling the emptiness growing inside you,  
Noticing how you willed yourself on,  
Still unable to leave what you had outgrown.

It watched you play with the seduction of safety  
And the gray promises that sameness whispered,  
Heard the waves of turmoil rise and relent,  
Wondered would you always live like this.

Then the delight, when your courage kindled,  
And out you stepped onto new ground,  
Your eyes young again with energy and dream,  
A path of plenitude opening before you.

Though your destination is not yet clear  
You can trust the promise of this opening;  
Unfurl yourself into the grace of beginning  
That is at one with your life's desire.

Awaken your spirit to adventure;  
Hold nothing back, learn to find ease in risk;  
Soon you will be home in a new rhythm,  
For your soul senses the world that awaits you.

And we closed many of our gatherings at the Dialogues with what the Buddha said at the end of one of his sermons, which is simply:

And now it is time for each of you to go and do as you see fit.