

**A response to Marlin Lavanhar's
"Shaping Change in a Changing World"
by Ashley Horan
Prairie Group 2018**

The world is on fire.

Authoritarianism, white supremacy, ecological catastrophe: there is every reason to question the eschatological optimism of Theodore Parker's assertion that the arc of the moral universe bends toward justice¹.

adrienne maree brown looks unflinchingly at the crises we face—what she terms “apocalypse:”

when i read the news... i feel i am in a long line of fools carrying the soul of the world in pieces, in overstuffed mismatched luggage, along a tight rope, over borg replicator sauron darth voldemort's mouth.

but it is the soul of the world. and we hold it.

so i look down, i place my attention on my next move. i am focusing on who i love and want to build futures with, extending kindness and connection².

Working at the intersections of faith and justice movements, I often question whether Unitarian Universalists are these people for me, when so many of my family and community will never find a home here. But when I am able to give my most emphatic yes, I am clear that our most non-negotiable organizing question—our mission—is to ask: How can Unitarian Universalism be of use to a world that is on fire?

I disagree with Rev. Lavanhar that brown's *Emergent Strategy* describes “practices that are normative in UU congregational life;³” I do believe, however, that emergent strategies can absolutely help us as we strive to be of use. To envision how they might apply to groups like us, I offer some basic observations:

1. The most compelling strategies for resisting violence and solutions for creating liberation emerge from frontline communities. Most of these leaders cannot find a political/spiritual home within UUism because the kyriarchy⁴ is embedded in our cultural DNA.
2. Both individually and collectively, most UUs are shielded by our social locations from systemic violence. UUism's role, then, must be as allies, rather than as leaders determining the solutions and strategies.

¹ Theodore Parker, “Of Justice and the Conscience” (1853) in *The Collected Works of Theodore Parker, Vol. 2: Sermons, Prayers*, ed. Frances Power Cobb (London: N. Trübner & Co., 1867), 48. <https://books.google.com/books?id=F789AQAAMAAJ>.

² adrienne maree brown, “pep talk for apocalyptic days,” December 19, 2016. Eponymous blog. <http://adriennemareebrown.net/2016/12/19/pep-talk-for-apocalyptic-days/>

³ Marlin Lavanhar, “Shaping Change in a Changing World,” paper presented at Prairie Group (November 2018), 3.

⁴ Elizabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *Wisdom Ways: Introducing Feminist Biblical Interpretation* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 2001), 205. Feminist theologian and biblical scholar Fiorenza defines kyriarchy as “a socio-cultural and religious system of domination... constituted by intersecting multiplicative structures of oppression.”

3. It is not an “oversight⁵” that brown “does not see UUism nor [sic] congregational religious life in America as an essential resource and foundation⁶” for collective liberation. UUism can indeed be liberatory for people from dominant groups unlearning the oppressive systems that benefit us, but it is emphatically *not* a locus of liberation for large numbers of marginalized people.
4. Movement leaders are asking privileged groups to do the spiritual healing required to show up in solidarity without causing further harm, and to leverage our resources in service of their work. In other words, most UUs need to heal the specific wounds kyriarchy causes to the souls of its beneficiaries, and to cultivate a discipline of followership.
5. We can and should admit this without shame. Our goal should be to nurture healing—a practice of harm reduction—as we channel people toward broader movements *that we are not leading, but of which we are a part and to whom we are accountable*. Rather than aspiring to congregations as destinations at which “millions upon millions” of people “will have arrived,⁷” congregations should be channels, not reservoirs. In the words of cultural organizer and artist Ricardo Levins Morales, “Be a wetland. Detoxify what is upstream. Pass on liberation.⁸”

brown cautions us to avoid deconstruction without reconstruction, and to “cultivate the muscle of radical imagination needed to dream together beyond fear.⁹” In that spirit, I risk offering a few ideas about how we might apply emergent strategy principles to the question, “How can UUs be of use to a world on fire?”

What if:

- Our congregations abandoned traditional stewardship, inviting all members into more vulnerable processes of telling our complex stories of class and money? If people developed trust deep enough to disclose the specifics of their financial situations, and supported each other to make transparent commitments—literally sharing dollar amounts—appropriate to individual circumstances and rooted in shared values? If people then gave matching or greater gifts to frontline movements?¹⁰
- Our congregations abandoned the Senior and/or Solo Minister model, instead experimenting with forms of radical collective leadership? What if all staff were not only stewards of mission in their own sphere, but decision-makers about the overall vision? And in that spirit of truly shared power, if everyone—from clergy to administrator to janitor—were paid on a tethered scale, in which the salary of the highest earner were never more than double that of the lowest?¹¹

⁵ Lavanhar, 2

⁶ Lavanhar, 1

⁷ Lavanhar, 14

⁸ Ricardo Levins Morales, “Nourishing the Soil: A Conversation About Hope, Possibility, and Revolutionary Politics” (speech, Minneapolis, MN, September 27, 2018).

⁹ adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2017), 59.

¹⁰ Each of these “what if” practices are linked to elements of brown’s interpretation of Octavia Butler’s core teachings (brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 14-15) and her core principles of emergent strategy (brown, *Emergent Strategy*, 41-42). The following footnotes reflect the teachings and principles I would ascribe to each “what if.” This one, for example, is: (*fractal, intentional adaptation, move at the speed of trust, create more possibilities, interdependence and decentralization*)

¹¹ (*move at the speed of trust, interdependence and decentralization, create more possibilities, find the conversation only these people can have, intentional adaptation, fractal, if you trust the people they become trustworthy*)

- Every UU congregation committed to long-term reparations work, specifically with Indigenous and Black communities? If we effectively mapped the assets of our congregations and reached out to local movement leaders with concrete offers of everything we have to give, right now, in support of their leadership for liberation? If we nurtured relationships with these communities trusting enough to begin not just sharing the plate or offering free use of our facilities, but entering into co-ownership (and eventual return) of land, assets, buildings?¹²
- The entire curriculum of our congregations were an experiment in preparing our people to build transformational partnerships with outside groups leading radical work for police/prison abolition, sustainable food systems, transforming public education, creating Just Transition Economies?¹³
- Every UU congregation committed to giving away its endowment, without conditions, to seed new UU communities led by and for BIPOC/queer/trans/disabled/poor people, and/or local organizations leading systemic change work from within impacted communities?¹⁴
- UU spiritual care were rooted in Healing Justice¹⁵, helping individuals build resiliency and heal from personal trauma while also addressing the spiritual woundedness in those who benefit from kyriarchy? What if we viewed healing personal and systemic trauma in our members as not as simply a private service, but as a collective imperative?¹⁶

Most of these ideas sound ridiculous to me, if I look forward from where we are. But if I listen to what the world is compelling us to become, the question becomes not “Can we?” but “How will we?” Practicing emergent strategy within UUism must begin with the conviction that we are called to be of real use to communities and movements who will never enter our doors.

I have been blessed to experience a few embodiments of emergent strategy in Unitarian Universalism. And because the role of the writer is to make revolution irresistible¹⁷, I will end here by describing one such delicious encounter¹⁸:

¹² *(move at the speed of trust, intentional adaptation, create more possibilities, fractal, nonlinear and iterative, interdependence and decentralization)*

¹³ *(intentional adaptation, fractal, nonlinear and iterative, move at the speed of trust, resilience)*

¹⁴ *(nonlinear and iterative, if you trust the people they become trustworthy, intentional adaptation, interdependence and decentralization)*

¹⁵ Black/Indigenous movement leader Cara Page, one of the founders of what is now known as the healing justice movement, defines healing justice as “a framework that identifies how we can holistically respond to and intervene on generational trauma and violence and to bring collective practices that can impact and transform the consequences of oppression on our bodies, hearts and minds.” Cara Page, “Reflections from Detroit: Transforming Wellness and Wholeness,” August 5, 2010. *INCITE! Women of Color* blog. <https://incite-national.org/2010/08/05/reflections-from-detroit-transforming-wellness-wholeness/>.

¹⁶ *(resilience, interdependence, fractal, creating more possibilities, intentional adaptation, find the conversation that only these people can have)*

¹⁷ Toni Cade Bambara and Thabiti Lewis, “An Interview with Toni Cade Bambara: Kay Bonetti.” In *Conversations with Toni Cade Bambara* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2012), 35.

¹⁸ The following is a description of the 2018 Grounded & Resilient Organizers Workshop, a young adult leadership development and spiritual formation program broadly known within Unitarian Universalism as GROW Racial Justice. The program was sponsored and staffed by the UUA (Sara Green), Side With Love (Elizabeth Nguyen), the UU College of Social Justice (Angela Kelly), and MUUSJA - The MN UU Social Justice Alliance (myself and Danny Givens). See <https://uucsj.org/grow-twin-cities-2018/>.

The nine of us began by honoring the land—occupied ancestral territory of the Dakota, longtime home of the Anishinaabe.

We asked one another, intimately and vulnerably, “What is the medicine you seek? What is the medicine you bring?”

We co-created a healing station—essential oils, handwritten intentions and petitions, photos of ancestors, prayer beads, fresh herbs.

I brought zucchini, tomatoes, mint, basil, sage, lemon balm, squash, chilies from my garden. We made teas and soups and fritattas, discussing pop culture and governance and theology over a rickety stove in the dorm kitchen.

We sang constantly—songs written by healers, organizers, reparations brokers. We named who had taught us these songs, their lineages, the work being done by their authors.

We spent hours with the People’s Movement Center¹⁹, learning about Healing Justice in theory and then allowing bodyworkers to offer us all healing sessions, in a shared space, consenting to the vulnerability of being enfolded and embodied as a part of our development as justice-seekers.

We worshipped with Above Every Name²⁰—singing, weeping, witnessing testimony. We experienced the grace and the discomfort of being welcomed into a religious community both grounded in its own identity and radically open to these strangers in its midst.

Finally, we closed with deep gratitudes, blessing and praying for one another as we moved back into our lives, committed to letting this extraordinary experience catalyze us to both seek out and create more spaces like it.²¹

The world is on fire.

But experiences like these—moments of emergent intimacy and transcendence, in which the texture of living in right relationship feels tangible—can be the cooling water we need.

Afterward, we instinctively look up and ask, “How can we be of use?” And when the answer finds us—recharged, humble, strong, connected—we may just be able to show up, healing and whole, ready to struggle and thrive together in the long-haul work of liberation.

¹⁹ The People’s Movement Center describes themselves as “a collective of people of color and indigenous, of queer and trans practitioners and healers. We believe that our purpose is to heal and be healed, to open space for the healing in justice and the justice in healing.” Read more about their work at <http://www.peoplesmovementcenter.com/about.html>.

²⁰ Above Every Name Ministries is a Black Christian universalist congregation in St. Paul, MN, pastored by Danny Givens and housed at Unity Church-Unitarian. <https://www.facebook.com/aboveevery.nameministries>.

²¹ Debriefing later, we collectively spun the metaphor that our weekend had been like tasting a sun-warmed heirloom tomato for the first time after a lifetime of storebought Romas. Both facilitators and participants were, frankly, surprised—we hadn’t quite believed that something with this texture and flavor was possible in UUism. But once you experience an heirloom tomato, you become chronically dissatisfied with anything less, and “positively obsessed” (to use Octavia Butler’s phrasing) with finding more and more opportunities to taste the sweetness again.

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