

## The Grandness of Uncentering Ourselves

- a sermon reflection compiled and presented by Dawn Daniels, UUFCM Minister

Sunday, April 8, 2018

“Long ago, when the world was very new... there was a certain lobster who determined that the Creator had made a mistake. So he set up an appointment to discuss the matter. “With all due respect,” said the lobster, “I wish to complain about the way you designed my shell. You see, I just get used to one outer casing, when I’ve got to shed it for another; very inconvenient and rather a waste of time.” To which the Creator replied, “I see. But do you realize that it is the giving up of one shell that allows you to grow into another?”

“But I like myself just the way I am,” the lobster said. “Your mind’s made up?” the Creator said. “Indeed!” the lobster stated firmly. “Very well,” smiled the Creator. “From now on, your shell will not change... and you may go about your business just as you are right now.” “That’s very kind of you,” said the lobster, and left.

At first, the lobster was very content with wearing the same old shell. But as time passed, he found that his once light and comfortable shell was becoming quite heavy and tight. After a while, in fact, the shell became so cumbersome that the lobster couldn’t feel anything at all outside himself. As a result, he was constantly bumping into others. Finally, it got to the point where he could hardly breathe. So with great effort, he went back to see the Creator.

“With all due respect,” the lobster sighed, “contrary to what you promised, my shell has not remained the same. It keeps shrinking!” “Not at all,” smiled the Creator. “Your shell may have gotten a little thicker with age, but it has remained the same size. **What’s happened is that you have changed inside, beneath your shell.**” The Creator continued: “You see, everything changes... continuously. No one remains the same. That’s the way I’ve designed things. And the wisest choice is to shed your old shell as you grow.” “I see,” said the lobster, “but you must admit it is occasionally inconvenient and a bit uncomfortable.” <http://www.bethscib.com/blog/molting>

The parable of the lobster seems a good starting point this morning as we examine together some of the facets of the question “What does it mean to be a people of emergence?” Emergence – from the Latin *emergere* (*im-MAHJ-uray*), “**to bring to light.**” Emergence – a perfect theme and process so brilliantly illustrated for us as we experience the peek-a-boo nature process that is springtime in

Michigan. How many of us find ourselves feeling exasperated and impatient at times with the emergence of spring in this northern climate? In my family – and we are native Michiganders one and all - it is as cyclical as the seasons to have expressions of frustration over snow showers in April followed by reminders of the reality of the springtime process here and requests for patience with the process – as in “I can’t believe it’s snowing” or “it’s so cold and it’s April already” followed by “but it almost always snows in April here” and “Spring is here – this is just what it looks like now.” So much is hidden from view and it seems we are most capable of **a cyclical forgetting** of that truth in the process. We get stuck in our expectations of perfection in the process, and our longing for renewal and rejuvenation overshadows our ability to be present and patient with **what is** in the moment. If it was within our human power, I wonder how many of us would be tempted or would actually attempt - as did the man in our “lesson of the butterfly” story – to cut open the chrysalis of the winter earth to help the verdant spring emerge? The question would then be, as it most often is – whose needs are being served?

It was Quaker teacher, author, and modern-day wise-man Parker Palmer who planted the seed of this morning’s focus with a blog post for Krista Tippett’s *On Being* website titled [“The Grandness of Uncentering Ourselves.”](#) He writes of “Robinson Jeffers, an American poet who was deeply involved in the environmental movement of his time. He was one in the great procession of saints who’ve devoted their lives to trying to end the mindless damage we human beings do to the precious planet we call home.

In his poetry, Jeffers challenges us to “uncenter” ourselves. We must stop imagining that the earth revolves around us, our needs and our greed. We must learn to live lightly on this “sparkling blue and white jewel” floating in space (to quote astronaut Edgar Mitchell).

His clearest expression of this can be found in his poem “Carmel Point”:

The extraordinary patience of things!

This beautiful place defaced with a crop of suburban houses—

How beautiful when we first beheld it,

Unbroken field of poppy and lupin walled with clean cliffs;

No intrusion but two or three horses pasturing,

Or a few milch cows rubbing their flanks on the outcrop rockheads—

Now the spoiler has come: does it care?

Not faintly. It has all time. It knows the people are a tide

That swells and in time will ebb, and all

Their works dissolve. Meanwhile the image of the pristine beauty

Lives in the very grain of the granite,

Safe as the endless ocean that climbs our cliff. — As for us:

We must uncenter our minds from ourselves;

We must unhumanize our views a little, and become confident

As the rock and ocean that we were made from.

“...[H]ow grand it would be if — with that awareness — we could “uncenter” ourselves as Jeffers challenges us to do. How grand it would be if we could put the largeness of life itself, not our egos, at the center of our attention, care, and active concern.”

I hear variations of this call, this challenge to “uncenter” ourselves in the introduction to this month’s theme of emergence crafted by the good folks at the Soul Matters Sharing Circle. They begin with these words by Henri-Frederic Ariel:

**Let mystery have its place in you;** do not be always turning up your whole soil with the plowshare of self-examination but leave a little fallow corner in your heart ready for any seed the winds may bring and reserve a nook of shadow for the passing bird; keep a place in your heart for the unexpected guests, an altar for an unknown God.

Make a bit of room. Leave a little space. **Keep a lookout for the unexpected.** These directions may not sound like anything radical or revolutionary. But it turns out that these are often Life’s favorite ways to help us emerge into something new.

Henri-Frederic Ariel’s reminder about leaving room and letting some things be is especially important as we move into the season of spring. During this time of year, it’s not just farmers but us all who turn to the work of “tilling and turning up our whole soil.” All around us, the culture shouts its heroic talk about striving and perfecting. Struggle is the dominant metaphor of the day. We talk of “fighting” to become all we can be. Images of sprouts breaking through concrete start showing up everywhere. Yet, we need to be careful because, more often than not, emergence and transformation is a much

subtler art. It's about stillness, listening and waiting to be led, not conquering, struggle and taking charge.

In other words, when it comes to emerging into something new, the message of spirituality is **“Be careful with what you've been taught and told because much of it takes us in exactly the wrong direction.”** As a people of emergence, we are called to take a different tack. We've been entrusted with the wisdom that emergence is most often about breathing rather than becoming better, **patience not perfection**, depth not dominance; acceptance not striving, attention not constant improvement.

That part about attention instead of improvement is especially important. **It's so easy to get transformation mixed up with fixing.** And fixing is emergence's biggest foe. Trying to perfect or prove ourselves is the surest way to stay stuck. The pursuit of constant improvement and perfection focuses us on our inadequacy and inferiority, causing us to overlook those unexpected guests that Henri-Frederic speaks of.

And, friends, we don't want to miss those unexpected guests! Those seeds brought by the wind and those passing birds are the partners that make emergence possible. They help us notice new paths. They invite us to walk with a new step. They awaken in us new songs. **They remind us that new life is not something we do alone.** They assure us that transformation doesn't have to be a long and lonely struggle, but instead can be more like learning a new dance with a new friend. All we have to do is trust, take the hand of that “unknown God” and follow its lead. ([Soul Matters Sharing Circle](#))

There is an excerpt from storyteller Laura Simms's book [Our Secret Territory](#) that I have carried in my journal – my commonplace book – for years now, that I think speaks to the kind of presence and patience that is being lifted up here as necessary to a process of emergence and transformation. Simms writes:

To know patience is to come home to the wide-open ears and eyes of unbiased presence. But while patience is the goal of the journey, restraint is the path itself. To remember again and again to pull back from reaction – to wait – strengthens the capacity of the mind to break habitual patterns of intolerance, anger, and hatred.

We discover the ability of our heart and mind to rest naturally regardless of circumstances, and we are weaned from harming both ourselves and others. Restraint gives birth to a trust in oneself and the world so that in the end we can finally fall in love, even with our enemies.

Listening to a story is a secret practice of this path.

In closing, I want to share with you a poem by Alfred K LaMotte titled "What if we truly listen?"

How a deeper love emerges...

You want me to  
give up my story  
so that you can  
tell yours.

I want you to  
give up your story  
so that I can tell mine.

What if we both  
give up our stories  
To hear the waves  
of silence  
grinding our skulls  
into sparkling sand?

To hear the glassy chime  
of seven trillion stars  
in the boundless heart?

What if we drown together  
in the catastrophic emptiness  
of love?

What if we truly listen?

Shalom and Salaam, Blessed be and Amen.