

# SHAPING CHANGE

SHAPING CHANGE, CHANGING WORLDS

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## INTRODUCTION

**First and foremost, thank you for opening this book. I hope you enjoy reading it as much as I have enjoyed living, learning, and gathering it.**

Whenever you are beginning this, take a deep breath and notice how you feel in your body, and how the world around you feels.

Take a breath for the day you have had so far.

And a breath for this precious moment, which cannot be recreated.

Now, another for the day and night coming.

Here you are, in the cycle between the past and the future, choosing to spend your miraculous time in the exploration of how humans, especially those seeking to grow liberation and justice, can learn from the world around us how to best collaborate, how to shape change.<sup>1</sup>

As I am gathering and writing this book, there is a trail of ants moving along the ceiling of my room, and the sounds of a small jungle town coming in and out of the screened open windows, birds cawing, laughter, children's delight emerging from that, then tears. A car backfires and I flinch, a lizard

<sup>1</sup> I've developed my ideas of "shaping change" in conversation with Octavia Butler's concept of "shaping God," which is introduced in the Parthseed verses of her *Parable of the Sower* (New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 1993).

peeks at me from the door. It's been raining for a few days and the air feels thick.

I feel good. I've been meditating, picking up my yoga practice, biking the two miles to the beach when the sun comes out. Something is injured in my knee, but I am feeling alive against my limits.

I came to this edge of Mexico to pull a book together because, a few years ago, it was here, near this tiny portion of the massive ocean, that I began to realize how important emergent strategy, strategy for building complex patterns and systems of change through relatively small interactions, is to me—the potential scale of transformation that could come from movements intentionally practicing this adaptive, relational way of being, on our own and with others.

The waves drifting me towards and then away from the shore, seabirds of all kinds flocking over the salty blue, pelicans dropping down and scooping schools of tiny fish into their big mouths. Diving under the moving surface to see how everything humans leave in the water is repurposed as an ecosystem. Laying in a hammock and watching mosquito mamas approach me, wait for my attention to wander so they can feed on my blood.

I love the scene at the end of *The Matrix* where Neo sees everything in green-on-black code. Emergent strategy is a way that all of us can begin to see the world in life-code—awakening us to the sacred systems of life all around us. Many of us have been and are becoming students of these systems of life, wondering if in fact we can unlock some crucial understanding about our own humanity if we pay closer attention to this place we are from, the bodies we are in.

The world is full of beauty, magic, miracles, and patterns that induce wonder. This book is a collection of essays, speeches, spells, interviews, conversations, tools, profiles, and poems sharing my learning processes in the face of that wonder. You are basically holding a book of me saying, "Wow, everything's so amazing!" Or, "That's not wow... Why not go with the wow option?"

Emergence is one of the best concepts I have learned for discussing this wow, this wonder. "Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions."<sup>2</sup>

It is another way of speaking about the connective tissue of all that exists—the way, the Tao, the force, change, God/dess, life. Birds flocking, cells splitting, fungi whispering underground.

Emergence emphasizes critical connections over critical mass, building authentic relationships, listening with all the senses of the body and the mind.

With our human gift of reasoning, we have tried to control or overcome the emergent processes that are our own nature, the processes of the planet we live on, and the universe we call home. The result is crisis at each scale we are aware of, from our deepest inner moral sensibilities to the collective scale of climate and planetary health and beyond, to our species in relation to space and time.

The crisis is everywhere, massive massive massive. And we are small.

But emergence notices the way small actions and connections create complex systems, patterns that become ecosystems and societies. Emergence is our inheritance as a part of this universe; it is how we change. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for.

### *A few words on what this book is and is not*

I am offering this content as a cluster of thoughts in development, observations of existing patterns, and questions of how we apply the brilliance of the world around us to our efforts to coexist in and with this world as humans, particularly for those of us seeking to transform the crises of our time, to turn our legacy towards harmony.

<sup>2</sup> Nick Obolensky, *Complex Adaptive Leadership: Embracing Paradox and Uncertainty* (Burlington, VT: Gover, 2014).

This book is for people who want to radically change the world.<sup>3</sup> To apply natural order and our love of life to the ways we create the next world. To tap into the most ancient systems and patterns for wisdom as we build tomorrow.

This book is not one that will teach you all about hard science, as I am not a scientist. As Octavia Butler said, "I would never have been a good scientist—my attention span was too short for that."

My style is more "Ooh ah wow how??" than "Empirical data proves that..." I am writing this book primarily for other people like myself, who crinkle our brows and lean away when someone starts speaking math, who fall asleep almost immediately when attempting to read nonfiction, but who get spun into wonder about the natural world and want to know things, who feel and know more than we can say or explain, and want to know how knowing those things can transform the ways we approach changing the world.

I'm sure there are science people who could write a contrarian book to anything in here.<sup>4</sup> The natural world actually supports any worldview—competitive, powerless, isolationist, violent.

For instance, humans so far have generally defied and aligned with the "king" of the jungle or forest—lions, tigers, bears. And yet so many of these creatures, for all their isolated ferocity and alpha power, are going extinct. While a major cause of that extinction is our human impact, there is something to be said for adaptation, the adaptation of small, collaborative species. Roaches and ants and deer and fungi and bacteria and viruses and bamboo and eucalyptus and squirrels and vultures and mice and mosquitos and dandelions and so many other more collaborative life forms continue to proliferate, survive, grow. Sustain.

3 "Radical simply means 'grasping things at the root.'"—Angela Davis, "Let Us All Rise Together" Address, Spelman College, reprinted in

*Women, Culture and Politics* (New York, Random House, 1989).

4 If that's you, then yay! I bet you're hella smart—help get us all free!

I want to understand how we humans do that—how we earn a place on this precious planet, get in the "right relationship" with it.<sup>5</sup> So I am focusing on the ways creatures and ecosystems function together in and with the natural world.

I am open to critiques of course, if they are offered in the spirit of collective liberation. Staying focused on our foundational miraculous nature is actually very hard work in our modern culture of deconstruction. We are socialized to see what is wrong, missing, off, to tear down the ideas of others and uplift our own. To a certain degree, our entire future may depend on learning to listen, listen without assumptions or defenses. So I am open to hearing what doesn't work about this book, as long as you promise to stay open to what does work.

We all learn differently, and this book favors those who learn like me, through inspiration, through late-night conversations, personal revelations, experience, and reflection. I hope it will inspire and engage your interest in complex sciences, and in being of a miraculous world.

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"Exercise your human mind as fully as possible, knowing it is only an exercise. Build beautiful artifacts, solve problems, explore the secrets of the physical universe, savor the input from all the senses, feel the joy and sorrow, the laughter, the empathy, compassion and tote the emotional memory in your travel bag."  
—Ryan Power, *Making Life*

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This is not a book to displace all the strategic processes in play in social justice movements, or to discount the work

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"The mountains, streams, valley's, oceans, deserts, and all things are related to our thoughts and actions. All things are in relationship with each other."—Jasmine Wallace, a Tsalagi (Cherokee) medicine woman, <https://certified.naturallygrown.org/producers/4166>.

that has happened up until now—there have been effective movements towards justice and liberation throughout the history of human existence—I am thrilled by how humans have continuously stood up against our own weaknesses. I think throughout history we have done our best given what we knew, and we will continue to do so. I also know that there are so many brilliant strategists out there who turn data into action and policy, and I respect that work. I see this offering as a noticing that can shape our next steps, as more water joining the river. And as a way to get aware of what we have learned so far, so that we can move forward from there, instead of repeating lessons we have already learned.

While my default position is wonder, I am not without critique, disappointment, frustration, and even depression when I contemplate humanity. Especially our social justice movements, where my expectations are (foolishly) higher. I promise to be honest about the ways that those aspects of personal movement crisis show up in my longing and searching for other ways of being.

Octavia Butler, one of the cornerstones of my awareness of emergent strategy, spoke of the fatal human flaw as a combination of hierarchy and intelligence.<sup>6</sup> We are brilliant at survival, but brutal at it. We tend to slip out of togetherness the way we slip out of the womb, bloody and messy and surprised to be alone. And clever—able to learn with our whole bodies the ways of this world.

My hope is that this content will deepen and soften that intelligence such that we can align our behavior, our structures and our movements with our visions of justice and liberation, and give those of us co-creating the future more options for working with each other and embodying the things we fight for—dignity, collective power, love, generative conflict, and community.

I will be satisfied if this book sparks conversations, new practices, and projects where people keep noticing, observing,

and learning about emergence and liberation. If people see their experimental work affirmed by this content. And if I hear of people's self and collective transformation journeys related to emergent strategy, whether people use that exact terminology or not. I hope it is part of our (r)evolutionary journey.

I hope that this book is clear enough that people feel free to play with all of these observations and their own, add to it, discard what doesn't serve, and keep innovating. I don't want to be the owner of this, just a joyful conduit.

Throughout the book I weave together thoughts and theories I have learned in the past decades of study and obsession with original content, tools, spells, poems, examples, lists, assessments—everything I can think of that could be helpful for those interested in this work.

As I was finishing the book it felt like it was missing something. I realized that it was because the way I have learned about emergent strategy is in conversation with others, so I asked a bunch of people I consider to be teachers in my life to get in conversation with me. And as their words poured in, in poems and quotes and stories and testimonials, all of a sudden the book became really alive and exciting to me. It also grew to nearly five-hundred pages. I slowed down and started weaving and listening. Now you get to hear from a variety of people who are doing emergent strategy work—in their own words, in hybrid interview/conversations, in love stories and moments of wow. Some of this content is in these pages, and some of it is on the Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute site.<sup>7</sup>

The book can be engaged nonlinearly! There is an assessment section, you can start there and let that determine where you dive in. You can just go straight to the tools at the end and start facilitating and experimenting with them. Or you can start with a review of the principles and elements of

6 Octavia Butler, *Dawn* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 1987).

7 Emergent Strategy Ideation Institute's website can be found at <http://www.alliedmedia.org/esii>.

emergent strategy, which are in conversation with each other and can stand alone or cluster.

You can read the book with others, assess each other and assess the groups and circles you move in. Come up with new words and new observations for all of this, notice how it connects and echoes other theoretical frameworks. Underline everything that moves you and then give it to someone younger than you. Come up with workshops and retreats around this work. Take it, run, go, grow, innovate, emerge.

You can also just like the idea of this book. I often like an idea that I don't have time or attention to fully engage. I won't be mad! I believe we are all actually already aware of these things, we just have the volume turned down. May this serve as a turn up of our awareness of our place in the miraculous.

There are a million paths into the future, and many of them can be transformative for the whole.

### The Beginning of My Obsession

We have lived through a good half century of individualistic linear organizing (led by charismatic individuals or budget-building institutions), which intends to reform or revolutionize society, but falls back into modeling the oppressive tendencies against which we claim to be pushing. Some of those tendencies are seeking to assert one right way or one right strategy. Many align with the capitalistic belief that constant growth and critical mass is the only way to create change, even if they don't use that language.

There are new strategies emerging, or being remembered—many would describe this as a shift from a masculine to feminine (or patriarchal to feminist) leadership. I see that, and I think it is also about something beyond all of our binaries—evolving in relationship with our hierarchical tendency.

At this point in my life, I am not against hierarchy. I notice hierarchies in my life and attention all the time, inside my own preferences for whom I spend my waking hours

and how I like to spend my time. I also deeply value experience and natural affinity for things—I am oriented towards healing and not math, so I don't offer myself up to create budgets for people. I follow other people's leadership around math, I offer leadership around healing, which comes more naturally to me. That give and take creates room for micro-hierarchies in a collaborative environment.

One of my favorite questions today is: How do we turn our collective full-bodied intelligence towards collaboration, if that is the way we will survive?

My favorite life forms right now are dandelions and mushrooms—the resilience in these structures, which we think of as weeds and fungi, the incomprehensible scale, the clarity of identity, excites me. I love to see the way mushrooms can take substances we think of as toxic, and process them as food, or that dandelions spread not only themselves but their community structure, manifesting their essential qualities (which include healing and detoxifying the human body) to proliferate and thrive in a new environment. The resilience of these life forms is that they evolve while maintaining core practices that ensure their survival.

A mushroom *is* a toxin-transformer, a dandelion *is* a community of healers waiting to spread... What are we as humans, what is our function in the universe?

One thing I have observed: When we are engaged in acts of love, we humans are at our best and most resilient. The love in romance that makes us want to be better people, the love of children that makes us change our whole lives to meet their needs, the love of family that makes us drop everything to take care of them, the love of community that makes us work tirelessly with broken hearts.

Perhaps humans' core function is love. Love leads us to observe in a much deeper way than any other emotion. I think of how delightful it is to see something new in my lovers' faces, something they may only know from inside as a feeling.

If love were the central practice of a new generation of organizers and spiritual leaders, it would have a massive impact

on what was considered organizing. If the goal was to increase the love, rather than winning or dominating a constrict opponent, I think we could actually imagine liberation from constrict oppression. We would suddenly be seeing everything we do, everyone we meet, not through the tactical eyes of war, but through eyes of love. We would see that there's no such thing as a blank canvas, an empty land or a new idea—but everywhere there is complex, ancient, fertile ground full of potential.

We would organize with the perspective that there is wisdom and experience and amazing story in the communities we love, and instead of starting up new ideas/organizations all the time, we would want to listen, support, collaborate, merge, and grow through fusion, not competition.

We would understand that the strength of our movement is in the strength of our relationships, which could only be measured by their depth. Scaling up would mean going deeper, being more vulnerable and more empathetic.

What does depth require from us, from me? In my longing for depth I have been re-rooting in the earth, in myself and my creativity, in my community, in my spiritual practices, honing in on work that is not only meaningful but feels joyful, listening with less and less judgment to the ideas and efforts of others, having visions that are long term.

Another part of walking this path has been the practice of humility—enough humility to learn, to be taught, to have teachers. As a military brat, I've always rebelled against anyone I perceived as an authority. It's been hard and rewarding work to relinquish some of that resistance in order to let wisdom in.

The Sufi poet Hafiz said, "How do I listen to others? As if everyone were my Teacher, speaking to me (Her) cherished last words."<sup>8</sup>

I am listening now with all of my senses, as if the whole universe might exist just to teach me more about love. I listen

<sup>8</sup> Hafiz, *The Gift: Poems by Hafiz, the Great Sufi Master*, trans. Daniel Ladinsky (New York: Penguin Books, 1999).

to strangers, I listen to random invitations, I listen to criticisms, I listen to my body, I listen to my creativity and to the artists who inspire me, I listen to elders, I listen to my dreams and the books I am reading, I notice that the more I pay attention, the more I see order, clear messages, patterns, and invitations in the small or seemingly random things that happen in my life.

In all these ways, I meditate on love.

This practice lets me connect to the part of myself that is divine, aligned with the universe, and the place within myself where I can be a conduit for spiritual truth—I don't know what else to call it. What comes forth, as lessons and realizations and beliefs—doesn't feel political, or even about organizing. It feels like spirit leading me to the truth.

Things like:

- The less I engage in gossip, the less I harbor suspicion, the more space I find within myself for miraculous experiences.
- When I fear the universe, I fear myself. When I love and am in awe of the universe, I love and am in awe of myself? Imagine then, the power when I align with the universe.
- Nothing is required of me more than being, and creating. Simultaneously being present with who I am, who we are as a species... and creating who we must become, and within that who *I* must become.

When these truths come to me, it reminds me of how so many past leaders have humbled themselves, or been forced—through prison sentences, exile, or other punitive measures—to live simple lives, spending time in prayer and

<sup>9</sup> Though I wrote this before the Queen released Her album, I would be pleased if you thought I was referencing the lyric "love god herself" from "Don't Hurt Yourself" on Beyoncé's masterpiece *Lemonade* (2015).

meditation and reflection. It reminds me that they all seem to have this solid core of truth within themselves that cannot be shaken by external pressures. Those truths resonate with me when I read or hear about them, even without the context of their whole spiritual journey. But I know that to truly understand, to truly be able to transform myself and develop that own unflappable core, I cannot vicariously live their spiritual lessons: I must walk my own path.

Our generation must walk the spiritual path that is available to us only in this time, with its own unique combination of wisdom and creation.

I think there are many ways to find that simple path within ourselves, and I think that those of us who wish to see a truly, radically different world must demand of ourselves the possibility that we are called to lead not from right to left, or from minority to majority, but from spirit towards liberation. So I suppose it is time to come out as a spiritual leader, in my own way.

Which means—everyone is my teacher.

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"You weren't starving before you got here. You were born full."

—Chani Nicholas

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To write this book, I have had to get intimate with what I don't know, with my fears and doubts, with my restlessness. I was very young the first time I felt this restlessness, this sense that how things are isn't right, isn't enough, is empty even. Even as a child this sense made me nauseous, like dancing around a black hole, praying it is a portal and not a nothingness. As I get older, I understand that it is the unknown, and it is where the most exciting parts of life happen. This is my leap into the unknown.

### What is Emergent Strategy?

"Emergence is the way complex systems and patterns arise out of a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions"—I will repeat these words from Nick Obolensky throughout this book because they are the clearest articulation of emergence that I have come across. In the framework of emergence, the whole is a mirror of the parts. Existence is fractal—the health of the cell is the health of the species and the planet.

There are examples of emergence everywhere.

Birds don't make a plan to migrate, raising resources to fund their way, packing for scarce times, mapping out their pit stops. They feel a call in their bodies that they must go, and they follow it, responding to each other, each bringing their adaptations.

There is an art to flocking: staying separate enough not to crowd each other, aligned enough to maintain a shared direction, and cohesive enough to always move towards each other. (Responding to destiny together.) Destiny is a calling that creates a beautiful journey.

Emergence is beyond what the sum of its parts could even imagine.

A group of caterpillars or nymphs might not see flight in their future, but it's inevitable.

It's destiny.

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.

Cells may not know civilization is possible. They don't amass as many units as they can sign up to be the same.

No—they grow until they split, complexify. Then they interact and intersect and discover their purpose—I am a lung cell! I am a tongue cell—and they serve it. And they die. 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 in the iterative process. It's all data.

Octavia Butler said, "civilization is to groups what intelligence is to individuals. It is a means of combining the intelligence of many to achieve ongoing group adaptation."<sup>10</sup>

She also said "all that you touch you change / all that you change, changes you."<sup>11</sup> We are constantly impacting and changing our civilization—each other, ourselves, intimates, strangers. And we are working to transform a world that is, by its very nature, in a constant state of change.

Janine Benyus, a student of biomimicry, says "Nature/Life would always create conditions conducive to life."<sup>12</sup> She tells of a radical fringe of scientists who are realizing that natural selection isn't individual, but mutual—that species only survive if they learn to be in community.

How can we, future ancestors, align ourselves with the most resilient practices of emergence as a species?

Many of us have been socialized to understand that constant growth, violent competition, and critical mass are the ways to create change. But emergence shows us that adaptation and evolution depend more upon critical, deep, and authentic connections, a thread that can be tugged for support and resilience. The quality of connection between the nodes in the patterns.

Dare I say love.

And we know how to connect—we long for it.

<sup>10</sup> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> Janine M. Benyus, *Biomimicry: Innovation Inspired by Nature* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2002).

### Octavia Butler

*All successful life is*

*Adaptable,*

*Opportunistic,*

*Tenacious,*

*Interconnected, and*

*Fecund.*

*Understand this.*

*Use it.*

*Shape God.*

(amb)

(Fractal)

(Adaptive)

(Nonlinear/Iterative)

(Resilient/Transformative Justice)

(Interdependent/Decentralized)

(Creates More Possibilities)

(Scholarship, Reflection)

(Practice/Experiment)

(Intention)



Together we must move like waves. Have you observed the ocean? The waves are not the same over and over—each one is unique and responsive. The goal is not to repeat each other's motion, but to respond in whatever way feels right in *your* body. The waves we create are both continuous and a one-time occurrence. We must notice what it takes to respond well. How it feels to be in a body, in a whole—separate, aligned, cohesive. Critically connected.

I would call our work to change the world “science fictional behavior”—being concerned with the way our actions and beliefs now, today, will shape the future, tomorrow, the next generations.

We are excited by what we can create, we believe it is possible to create the next world.

We believe.

For me this might be because I was born to a trekkie—meaning one who watches *Star Trek*. Obsessively.

My dad watched *Star Trek* in a way that seems logical to me now. He watched this “post-racist” narrative as Black man from the deep south bringing multiracial children into a racist world—eyes wide, faith bubbling up.

We all watched it together, as his military career took our family from place to place. My parents intentionally took us away from the United States for our early years and I think they believed that by the time we came back here things would have changed on the race front.

That didn't happen, and the time came to return to the US—my father was stationed in Georgia. I think what I experienced there, the casual and constant presence of white supremacy, the knee-jerk assessments of my intelligence and humanity, is one of the foundational catalysts for my study of sci fi, apocalypse and post-apocalypse, emergence and complexity.

I thought then, and I think now: This can't be all. No one survives this way, not long term. This can't be the purpose of our species, to constantly identify each other as “other,” build walls between us, and engage in both formal and informal wars against each other's bodies.

I felt, and feel, miraculous. It's confusing to feel so miraculous when so many people hate my skin and my history. I see the miraculous in others—even those who hate me have heartbeats, and, I generally assume, have people they love. Why can't they love me? Should I love them anyway? How can I hold these massive contradictions?

I started reading sci fi obsessively, looking for options, for other worlds where I wasn't dismissed as an idealist or an inferior.

On that path I discovered Octavia Butler. Decades before my birth, she was working these same edges in her heart, pendulum swinging between curiosity, possibility, and hopelessness. Because if we can't articulate more viable futures, and adapt, our human future is pretty hopeless.

Octavia wrote novels with young Black women protagonists meeting aliens, surviving apocalypse, evolving into vampires, becoming telepathic networks, time traveling to reckon with slave-owning ancestors. Woven throughout her work are two things: 1) a coherent visionary exploration of humanity and 2) emergent strategies for being better humans.

A visionary exploration of humanity includes imagination. Octavia spent her life working through complex ideas of the future on behalf of humans.

As long as we operate in time the way we currently do—remembering the past, observing and acting in the present, imagining the future—there will be divergent paths that are moving in and out of alignment, in and out of conflict. Imagination is shaped by our entire life experience, our socialization, the concepts we are exposed to, where we fall in the global hierarchies of society.

Our ideas of right and wrong shift with time—right now it's clear to me that something is wrong if it hurts this planet. But if we don't claim the future, that sense of loyalty to earth, of environmentalism, could become outdated. Kenny Bailey<sup>13</sup> helped me understand this—that justice, rights,

13 Kenny Bailey is one of the founders of the Design Studio for

things we take for granted, are not permanent. Once there were kings and queens all over the earth. Someday we might speak of presidents and CEOs in past tense only.

It is so important that we fight for the future, get into the game, get dirty, get experimental. How do we create and proliferate a compelling vision of economics and ecologies that center humans and the natural world over the accumulation of material?

We embody. We learn. We release the idea of failure, because it's all data.

But first we imagine.

We are in an imagination battle.<sup>14</sup>

Trayvon Martin and Milke Brown and Renisha McBride and so many others are dead because, in some white imagination, they were dangerous. And that imagination is so respected that those who kill, based on an imagined, racialized fear of Black people, are rarely held accountable.

Imagination has people thinking they can go from being poor to a millionaire as part of a shared American dream. Imagination turns Brown bombers into terrorists and white bombers into mentally ill victims. Imagination gives us borders, gives us superiority, gives us race as an indicator of capability. I often feel I am trapped inside someone else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free.

All of this imagining, in the poverty of our current system, is heightened because of scarcity economics. There isn't enough, so we need to hoard, enclose, divide, fence up, and prioritize resources and people.

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Innovation, a Boston-based artistic research and development outfit that serves civil society.

<sup>14</sup> The goddess-writer Claudia Rankine (author of the award-winning book, *Citizen*) and Terry Marshall (of Intelligent Mischief, a creative intelligent design lab) each speak of this in different ways in their work. They have both inspired me and transformed my understanding of the importance of creative work.

We have to imagine beyond those fears. We have to ideate—imagine and conceive—together.

We must imagine new worlds that transition ideologies and norms, so that no one sees Black people as murderers, or Brown people as terrorists and aliens, but all of us as potential cultural and economic innovators. This is a time-travel exercise for the heart. This is collaborative ideation—what are the ideas that will liberate all of us?

The more people that collaborate on that ideation, the more that people will be served by the resulting world(s).

Science fiction is simply a way to practice the future together. I suspect that is what many of you are up to, practicing futures together, practicing justice together, living into new stories. It is our right and responsibility to create a new world.

What we pay attention to grows, so I'm thinking about how we grow what we are all imagining and creating into something large enough and solid enough that it becomes a tipping point.

Ursula Le Guin recently said, "It's up to authors to spark the imagination of their readers and to help them envision alternatives to how we live."<sup>15</sup>

I agree with her. As Toni Cade Bambara has taught us, we must make just and liberated futures irresistible.<sup>16</sup> We are all the protagonists of what might be called the great turning, the change, the new economy, the new world.

And I think it is healing behavior, to look at something so broken and see the possibility and wholeness in it. That's how I work as a healer: when a body is between my hands, I let wholeness pour through. We are all healers too—we are creating possibilities, because we are seeing a future full of wholeness.

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<sup>15</sup> From the November 2014 acceptance speech for the National Book Foundation's medal for Distinguished Contribution to American Letters.

<sup>16</sup> From interview with Kay Bonetti, 1982.

I suspect this is, in part, because we are practicing emergent strategies.

My mentor Grace Lee Boggs first raised the concept of emergence with us in Detroit after reading Margaret Wheatley's work about biomimicry and mycelium magic.<sup>17</sup> Grace started asking us what our movements would look like if we focused on critical connections instead of critical mass.

We need each other. I love the idea of shifting from "mile wide inch deep" movements to "inch wide mile deep" movements that schism the existing paradigm.<sup>18</sup>

Now, I've said what emergence is. *Strategy* is a military term simply meaning a plan of action towards a goal.<sup>19</sup>

In our movements for social change (and in every other space I've ever been in), we generally use the word "strategy" in a positive sense. We say, "oh wow s/he's so strategic," and we mean that this person is smart, calculating, practical—a winner! But the word is actually not that discerning. Horrible, racist, sexist, ableist, patriarchal, outdated, inflexible plans can be pitched as strategic. We must be more precise.

Emergent strategies are ways for humans to practice complexity and grow the future through relatively simple interactions. This juxtaposition of emergence and strategy was what made the most sense to me when I was trying to explain the kind of leadership I see in Octavia's books.

<sup>17</sup> Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (Oakland: Berrett-Koehler Publishers, 1992).

<sup>18</sup> I first experienced this "inch wide mile deep" language when it was used to speak about the work of the Detroit Future Youth program at Allied Media Projects. I've since heard it used to speak of work that prioritizes depth in community organizing, and understands that meaningful scale depends on deep transformative work, rather than surface widespread work.

<sup>19</sup> Confession: As the first daughter of a colonel in the US Army, I cut my political teeth in conversation with my father, who served as the Chief of War Plans while I was in college.

It isn't just that her protagonists are Black, female, or young leaders... Or maybe it is because of all of those things: who leads matters. But what I noticed is that her leaders are adaptive—riding change like dolphins ride the ocean. Adaptive but also intentional, like migrating birds who know how to get where they're going even when a storm pushes them a hundred miles off course.

Humans? Some of us are surviving, following, flocking—but some of us are trying to imagine where we are going as we fly. That is radical imagination.

Octavia's protagonists were also interdependent, often polymorous. I suspect that Octavia understood from her own feelings of loneliness, desire, and pleasure that the personal is political, and that pleasure evokes change—perhaps more than shame. More precisely, where shame makes us freeze and try to get really small and invisible, pleasure invites us to move, to open, to grow.

At this point, we have all of the information we need to create a change; it isn't a matter of facts. It's a matter of longing, having the will to imagine and implement something else. We are living in the ancestral imagination of others, with their longing for safety and abundance, a longing that didn't include us, or included us as enemy, fight, other.

Octavia played with what emerged from a Black woman or girl—what longings, what pleasure, what communities and connections, what philosophies and divinities. The strategies that played out in Octavia's books included adaptability and interdependence—often through the practice of repeated vulnerability.

Right now there is an organization called Black Organizing for Leadership and Dignity (BOLD), which is cultivating a safe space for Black leaders to practice being vulnerable, being in mutual support, with a goal of countering the usual model of leader isolation.<sup>20</sup> We all need a place where we can

<sup>20</sup> BOLD is a national Leadership Training Program designed to help rebuild Black (African-American, Caribbean, African, Afro-Latino) social

weep and be held and feel our feelings and figure out how those feelings can direct our next evolution.

I am now part of the training team for BOLD, and I can honestly say that after a period of movement heartbreak and disillusionment, the focus on love and relationship at BOLD is what brought me back to justified and tangible hope, opening up inside me the generosity of time and gifts that is necessary for movements to grow. I wanted to be a part of movement again because it was a pleasure to be in the Black spaces that BOLD was creating.

What amazes me is that, in the space of such constant Black trauma, we get together and celebrate and love on each other, we laugh, we find the pleasure of community, of interdependence. It feels good together.

Octavia's leaders were also decentralized, and they were generative—resilience and solutions came from that decentralization; the collective response was possible because no one person held the power.

Ferguson, Baltimore, Minneapolis, Chicago show us the power of individuals willing to act without a single leader, and their leaderfull examples are inspiring others to stand up in real time, offline and online, to change legislation and perception.

Octavia was concerned with scale—understanding that what happens at the interpersonal level is a way to understand the whole of society. In many of her books, she shows us how radical ideas spread through conversation, questions, one to one interactions. Social movements right now are also fractal, practicing at a small scale what we most want to see at the universal level. No more growth or scaling up before actually learning through experience.

Rather than narrowing into one path forward, Octavia's leaders were creating more and more possibilities. Not one

justice infrastructure in order to organize Black communities more effectively and to re-center Black leadership in the US social justice movement. More information available at [www.boldblackorganizing.org](http://www.boldblackorganizing.org).

perfect path forward, but an abundance of futures, of ways to manage resources together, to be brilliant together.

In trying to place Octavia into a context that non-sci fi people could understand, I kept finding resonance in emergence and complex sciences, the ideas that Grace had brought onto my radar. I started to pay more attention to the magic of the world, the small collective creatures who were humble and abundant and resilient.

And now I have become obsessed with how we can be movements like flocks of birds, underground power like whispering mushrooms, the seashell representation of a galactic vision for justice—small patterns that avoid useless predation, spread lessons, and proliferate change.

Emergent strategies let us practice, in every possible way, the world we want to see.

### So, ok, but what EXACTLY is emergent strategy?

Emergent Strategy:

- was, initially, a way of describing the adaptive and relational leadership model found in the work of Black science fiction writer Octavia Butler (and others).
- then it grew into plans of action, personal practices and collective organizing tools that account for constant change and rely on the strength of relationship for adaptation. With a crush on biomimicry and permaculture.

**Biomimetics** or **biomimicry** is the imitation of the models, systems, and elements of nature for the purpose of solving complex human problems.

**Permaculture** is a system of agricultural and social design principles centered around simulating or directly utilizing the patterns and features observed in natural ecosystems.

- which evolved into strategies for organizers building movements for justice and liberation that leverage relatively simple interactions to create complex patterns, systems, and transformations—including adaptation, interdependence and decentralization, fractal awareness, resilience and transformative justice, nonlinear and iterative change, creating more possibilities.
- and now it's like...ways for humans to practice being in right relationship to our home and each other, to practice complexity, and grow a compelling future together through relatively simple interactions. Emergent strategy is how we intentionally change in ways that grow our capacity to embody the just and liberated worlds we long for.
- and maybe, if I'm honest, it's a philosophy for how to be in harmony and love, in and with the world.

#### a complex movement

over and over again  
 it becomes known  
 the peace we seek  
 is seeking us  
 the joy a full bud  
 awaiting our attention  
 justice in our hands  
 longing to be practiced  
 the whole world  
 learning  
 from within  
 this thrilling more in the universe  
 laboratory  
 labyrinth  
 internalize demands  
 you are the one

you are waiting for  
 externalize love  
 bind us together into  
 a greater self  
 a complex movement  
 a generative abundance  
 an embodied evolution  
 learn to be here  
 critique is a seductress  
 her door is always open  
 so what if you get some  
 we are going further  
 past reform, to wonder  
 this requires comprehension  
 that cannot fit in words  
 out beyond our children  
 beyond the end of time  
 there is a ceaseless cycle  
 a fractal of sublime  
 and we come to create it  
 to soil our hands and faces  
 loving loving and loving  
 ourselves, and all our places

#### Lineage of Emergent Strategy

Lineage is both important for me to name, and impossible to track. I've come across these concepts in so many ways and places, primarily in the natural world, in my own body, in the development of my nibblings,<sup>21</sup> in movements (including the Movement for Black Lives and Occupy), in stories of how my paternal grandmother survived and created life in Pendleton, South Carolina, in stories of how my ancestors survived slavery.

<sup>21</sup> Yes! A gender-neutral term for the children of my siblings, learned from Chicago-based healer/writer Tanuja Jagernauth.

Every time I have worked with Indigenous communities that have been able to sustain their cultural practices through the onslaught of colonialism and imperialism, as I listen, I hear emergent strategy—being in right relationship with the natural world, learning from the ways change and resilience happen throughout this entire interconnected complex system. Some Indigenous and First Nations friends and teachers have patiently listened to my “discoveries” around being humble in the face of the unknown, listening closely to all that is within and beyond our human ways of knowing. Honoring the changes that come through longing, honoring the very small things that create the largest shifts in the world.

I am the first child of two people who created a large shift for themselves from small actions, actions of love, weighed with the context of their time—a Black man and white woman finding lifelong, life-changing commitment in the context of white supremacy and racism, external and internal. And it was quick—a noticing each other, a flirting without words, talking, laughing, and, four months later, eloping. I showed up a year and a half later. Love overcame racist socialization, creating more possibilities between two people who had been taught the other was dangerous.

After family, there is a certain convergence of thinkers and conversations that has sharpened this particular set of concepts into something I could name and share. Most of this particular lineage happened on worn down couches and over kitchen tables in Detroit from 2008 to 2014.

In 1992, Margaret Wheatley published a book called *Leadership and the New Science*, based on her work with organizations and leaders on what is effective, through a lens of quantum physics, biology, and chaos theory. Her key learnings were that:

- everything is about relationships, critical connections;

- chaos is an essential process that we need to engage;
- the sharing of information is fundamental for organizational success; and
- vision is an invisible field that binds us together, emerging from relationships and chaos and information.

Wheatley has continued developing her thinking on how transformation happens, how communities learn and evolve. She has published a series of books, in which she explores and shares her learning—including how we listen to each other, and what communities around the world are doing to generate life, to generate cooperation and future together. When we met and worked together on a gathering of organizers in Detroit, I got the sense that she’s a little over *Leadership*, so I encourage you to read it for the references—it is a foundational text—and then read everything else she is working on.

Grace Lee Boggs, Detroit-based American revolutionary, my late mentor and friend, read *Leadership* and began to incorporate some of the ideas into speeches and her own writing in the last decade of her one-hundred year, one-hundred day life. As a thinker, I would say Grace was a voracious, efficient beast, and philosophy was her hunting ground. She stayed curious and relevant until the end, asking metaphorical questions on her deathbed. And she was usually ahead of her time—she was creating visionary fiction with Bunyan Bryant in the 1970s.<sup>22</sup>

During the years of our mentorship and friendship, Grace would sit in her armchair and encourage everyone who came through her doors to develop as an organic intellectual who could take these concepts into daily life and community work.

<sup>22</sup> “Visionary fiction” is a term coined by my *Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction from Social Justice Movements* co-editor Walidah Imarisha to describe the work of people who use fiction to advance justice and liberation.

Grace taught me dialectical humanism—the cycle of collective transformation of beliefs that occurs as we gather new information and experiences, meaning that, over time, we can understand and hold a position we previously believed to be wrong.<sup>23</sup>

In Grace's work, that cycle of transformation was foundational, something to cultivate in young people, in communities. In addition, she resonated with Wheatley's idea that critical connections are more important in a long-term transformation process than critical mass.

Relationships are everything.

Invincible/ill Weaver, a Detroit-based artist-organizer, heard about the book and concepts from Grace, and became a student of emergence, naming their music and media work after the concept and generating an award-winning multi-media interactive album/project called *Complex Movements*<sup>24</sup> around these and other concepts at the intersection of complex science and social justice.

I was reading Black, science fiction writer Octavia Butler's work over and over during that time. I was also visiting and eventually moving to Detroit, in large part due to my relationship with ill. As I've mentioned, I was looking for language and frameworks to use when exploring the kind of leadership Butler's protagonists practiced, and found them in conversations with ill and Grace about emergence—interdependence, iteration, being in relationship with constantly changing conditions, fractals.

<sup>23</sup> "Organic intellectuals" comes from Antonio Gramsci and refers to intellectuals outside of traditional academic institutions, intellectuals who develop organically in counter relationship to the dominant culture. For more on Grace's concept of "dialectical humanism"—and its relationship to Karl Marx's dialectical materialism—see the Boggs Center website at <http://www.boggscenter.org/>.

<sup>24</sup> *Invincible* should write a book about emergence—they do much more rigorous research on the science of things than I seem capable of. For more about the amazing work of Complex Movements check out <https://emergencemedia.org/pages/complex-movements>.

Emergence, particularly as it applies to change, was a thrilling match.

ill and I now have a work soulmateship—they are family, a chosen sibling, an idea confidante. Detroit's movement and arts scenes are actually a complex network of such familial relationships, cultivated through sharing resources, loving the city, and conversing as we learn together. I am a nomad who also feels rooted here because of this network.

Wheatley's work speaks of relationship—the depth of relationship between the individuals in a system determines the strength of the system. Butler, Wheatley, ill, Grace, myself, and many others have been growing a strong system of relationships for considering emergence as a game-changing approach to movement work.

### *Ok, But Who Are You?*

Right. I'm adrienne maree brown. I am an auntie, sister, daughter, woe,<sup>25</sup> writer, facilitator, coach, mentor, mediator, pleasure activist, sci-fi scholar, doula, healer, tarot reader, witch, cheerleader, singer, philosopher, queer Black multiracial lover of life living in Detroit.

For this book, I am drawing most heavily on my facilitation, mediation, and coaching experiences—I have been facilitating social justice movement work formally since 2001, and before that, in high school and college, I did student organizing in which I often found myself in what I later came to understand as the facilitation role. Inside of that work I have been asked to mediate everything from organizational beef to break-ups, and have coached people through personal and professional transformation along the way.

<sup>25</sup> I learned *woe* from the artist/rapper Drake, and I am deeply grateful for it. Actually, I owe gratitude to the Toronto rapper and producer Devontee who uses it to refer to his crew—who are always "working on excellence." It passed from him to fellow Canadian rapper Drake before I picked up on it. I use this term all the time and thank these men profusely.

# PRINCIPLES OF EMERGENT STRATEGY

In the study and practice of emergent strategy, there are core principles that have emerged and that guide me in learning and using this idea and method in the world. I gather them here with the expectation that they will grow. Small is good, small is all. (The large is a reflection of the small.)

Change is constant. (Be like water).<sup>1</sup>  
There is always enough time for the right work.  
There is a conversation in the room that only these people at this moment can have.<sup>2</sup> Find it.  
Never a failure, always a lesson.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 "You must be shapeless, formless, like water. When you pour water in a cup, it becomes the cup. When you pour water in a bottle, it becomes the bottle. When you pour water in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Water can drip and it can crash. Become like water my friend," Bruce Lee, *Bruce Lee: A Warrior's Journey* (Warner Home Video, 2000).
- 2 Idea articulated by Tai James in the cofacilitation of environmental justice resource redistribution initiative Building Equity and Alignment's inaugural meeting in 2013.
- 3 Rihanna has this concept tattooed on her chest.

Trust the People. (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy).<sup>4</sup>  
Move at the speed of trust.<sup>5</sup> Focus on critical connections more than critical mass—build the resilience by building the relationships.  
Less prep, more presence.  
What you pay attention to grows.

- 4 This is an inversion of the quote "If you don't trust the people, they become untrustworthy," from Stephen Mitchell's translation, Lao Tzu, *Tao Te Ching* (New York: HarperCollins, 1988).
- 5 This is communications strategist Meryn Marcano's remix of Stephen Covey's "speed of trust" concept.