

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.

Emergent Strategy
by adrienne maree brown

- 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 mote 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,²¹ 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.

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

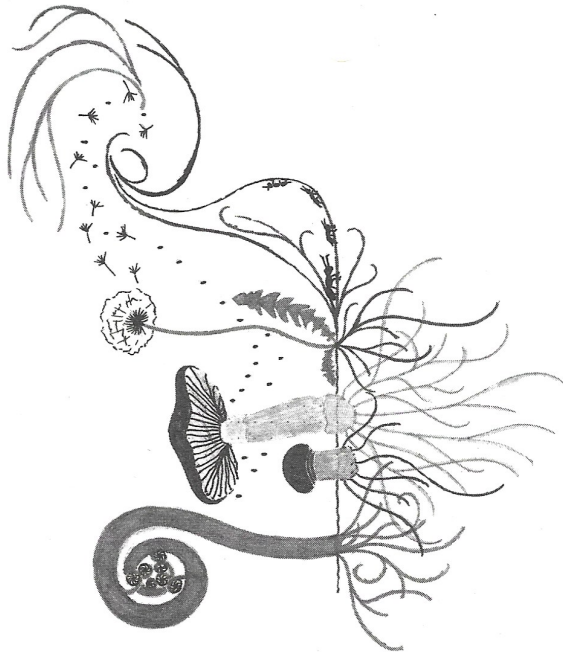
Trust the People. (If you trust the people, they become trustworthy).⁴

Move at the speed of trust.⁵ 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.

ELEMENTS OF EMERGENT STRATEGY



- 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 Mervyn Marciano's remix of Stephen Covey's "speed of trust" concept.

In both workshops and in writing this book, I've noticed that it's pretty impossible to completely separate any one of the elements of emergent strategy from the others.

Or rather, at the same time, each of these elements is distinct and is totally connected to every other element. When I speak about them, they shift in my mouth. In writing this book, seven elements became six, and they rearranged themselves several times to land in this order. It is not random, but it is not right either—it's just where things landed.

I have seen other people learning about emergence and applying it to human systems and social justice systems in the world as well, and they have made good sense to me.

For example, Complex Movements is a Detroit-based artist collective supporting the transformation of communities by exploring the connections of complex science and social justice movements through multimedia interactive performance work. The Complex Movements crew uses an emblem system with ferns, ants, wavicles, mycelium, and more to engage communities in thinking about the formations and movements of the future.

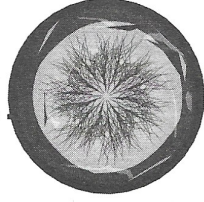
The particular organization of elements I present here is a snapshot of a theory in perpetual motion. This is the current configuration, which gives me the most space to reflect on my experiences in social justice movements, to invite others into conversation about how we work, and to articulate my longing for something different. One of the ways I was able to identify these was by formulating my critique of the ways that social justice movements have felt, and where my longing for something else was strongest.

Grace often said that every crisis is an opportunity, which is amazing theoretically, and requires great emotional fortitude in practice, as well as the maturity to understand that the negative realization of that theory is "disaster capitalism."¹

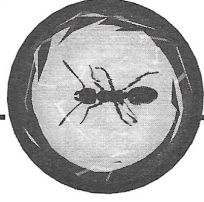
1 Naomi Klein, *The Shock Doctrine: The Rise of Disaster Capitalism* (New York: Picador, 2008).

Complex Movements is also studying the relationship between emergence and movements for social justice. Their emblem system is a gorgeous way of learning properties of nature we can apply to our work.

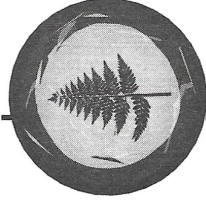
Mycelium is the part of the fungus that grows underground in thread-like formations. It connects roots to one another and breaks down plant material to create healthier ecosystems. Mycelium is the largest organism on earth. Interconnectedness. Remediation. Detoxification.



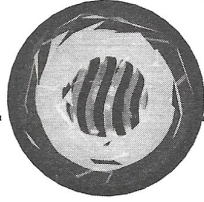
Ants. Ant societies function through individual ants acting collectively in accord with simple, local information to carry on all of their survival activities. Every ant relies on the work of others in producing their own work. Cooperative work. Collective Sustainability.

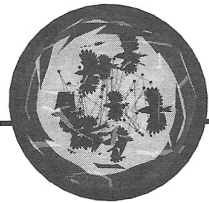


Ferns are a form of fractal. A fractal is an object or quantity that displays self-similarity, which means it looks roughly the same at any scale. Small-scale solutions impact the whole system. Use similar principles to build at all scales.

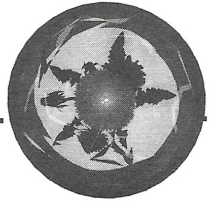


The Wavicle, or wave-particle duality, suggests that all objects exhibit both wave and particle properties. Between observations as it evolves on its own, it behaves like a wave; distributed across space, exploring different intermixing paths to all possible destinations. However, when its location or speed is measured, it appears definite and concrete, like a particle. Its wave nature gives this measurement a curious property: the more certain we are about either speed or position, the more uncertain we become about the other. Uncertainty/doubt. Valuing both process and outcome.





Starlings. *The synchronized movement patterns of a starling flock is also known as a murmuration. Guided by simple rules, starling murmurations can react to their environment as a group without a central leader orchestrating their choices; in any instant, any part of the flock can transform the movement of the whole flock. Collective leadership/ partnership. Adaptability.*



Dandelions. *The dandelion flower head can change into a white, globular seed head overnight. Each seed has a tiny parachute that allows it to spread far and wide in the wind. The entire plant has medicinal properties. Dandelions are often mistakenly identified as weeds, aggressively removed, but are hard to uproot; the top is pulled but the long taproot remains. Resilience. Regeneration. Decentralization.*

Sitting with the questions of how I could transform some of the heartbreak I have experienced in nonprofit work into lessons that could offer other paths forward, I found that part of the opportunity was to pay deeper attention to how the natural world has solved these same problems. I do believe that what we pay attention to grows, so I wanted to stop growing the crises, the critique. The elements in this book are a way to shift my attention to the positive, to what I want to grow.

I like the word *biomimicry*, and I love knowing that the practices of mimicking the natural world have been happening since humans came into existence. This is actually an ancient practice, a recovery rather than a discovery.

"Biomimicry is basically taking a design challenge and then finding an ecosystem that has already

solved that challenge, and literally trying to emulate what you learn. There are three types of biomimicry—one is copying form and shape, another is copying a process, like photosynthesis in a leaf, and the third is mimicking at an ecosystem's level, like building a nature-inspired city."

—Janine Benyus

The elements I explore reference aspects of the natural world operating at each of these levels, though the bulk of examples aim at the systems and processes.

For each of these elements, we spiral from the simple understanding to the more complex ways of thinking about applying the element to our movement work. I define what the element is according to a dictionary, point out some of the places we see this element in nature, then offer up writing I've done on the element, moving from the personal through organizational to movement or collective levels. Towards the end is a brief assessment tool you can use to reflect on how much emergent strategy is showing up in your life and work. Then I share some of the emergent strategy practices and tools I have worked with to create tangible differences in movement work.

I'll add this because of some of the doubt I've seen people experience when approaching these concepts—some people are more comfortable with emergent strategy than others, but I don't think this has to do with personality or intelligence. We are already emergent beings, just by our very existence. But we've been tricked away from it.

Nature vs. nurture is part of this—and then there is what I think of as anti-nurturing—the ways we in a western/US context are socialized to work against respecting the emergent processes of the world and each other:

- We learn to disrespect Indigenous and direct ties to land.

- We learn to be quiet, polite, indirect, and submissive, not to disturb the status quo.
- We learn facts out of context of application in school. How will this history, science, math show up in our lives, in the work of growing community and home?
- We learn that tests and deadlines are the reasons to take action. This puts those with good short-term memories and a positive response to pressure in leadership positions, leading to urgency-based thinking, regardless of the circumstance.
- We learn to compete with each other in a scarcity-based economy that denies and destroys the abundant world we actually live in.
- We learn to deny our longings and our skills, and to do work that occupies our hours without inspiring our greatness.
- We learn to manipulate each other and sell things to each other, rather than learning to collaborate and evolve together.
- We learn that the natural world is to be manicured, controlled, or pillaged to support our consumerist lives. Even the natural lives of our bodies get medicated, pathologized, shaved or improved upon with cosmetic adjustments.
- We learn that factors beyond our control determine the quality of our lives—something as random as which skin, gender, sexuality, ability, nation, or belief system we are born into sets a path for survival and quality of life.
- In the United States specifically, though I see this most places I travel, we learn that we only have value if we can produce—only then do we earn food, home, health care, education.
- Similarly, we learn our organizations are only as successful as our fundraising results, whether the community impact is powerful or not.

- We learn as children to swallow our tears and any other inconvenient emotions, and as adults that translates into working through red flags, value differences, pain, and exhaustion.
- We learn to bond through gossip, venting, and destroying, rather than cultivating solutions together.
- Perhaps the most egregious thing we are taught is that we should just be really good at what's already possible, to leave the impossible alone.

Lots of people and organizations have been and are critical of these ways we socialize each other, and have offered solutions—I think here of Harriet Tubman, Ella Baker, Frantz Fanon, Karl Marx, Augusto Boal, Malcolm X, the Zapatistas, and others throughout history who I believe have felt the thrum of emergence in their systems and moved what was possible in their lifetimes such that their impacts reverberate in my life and the work of my generation.

We are still mostly misdirected, turned away from the wisdom that is our inheritance. Joanna Macy speaks of the “great turning,” a collective awakening and shifting direction, away from the wanton destruction of this planet and each other, away from those practices of separation and competition listed above, towards life and abundance.² I like this visual of turning and evolving, as opposed to destroying the systems in place now.

When Wheatley visited Detroit on a learning journey, she said systems built on greed eventually collapse on themselves, topple under their own top-heavy weight.

Matter doesn't disappear, it transforms. Energy is the same way. The Earth is layer upon layer of all that has existed, remembered by the dirt. It is time to turn capitalism into a fossil, time to turn the soil, turn to the horizon together.

² To learn more about Joanna Macy's work, I recommend visiting her website, <http://www.joannamacy.net/thegreatturning.html>.

If, as you are engaging these elements, a clearer framework appears, or an additional piece, that's good news. Let's all be conduits of the wisdom of this planet. I think any efforts to engage the emergent brilliance of our world will help with this turning, will help with liberating humanity from its current role as a virus Earth should shake off.

So, without further ado, the elements:

Element	Nature of Element
Fractal	The Relationship Between Small and Large
Adaptive Interdependence and Decentralization	How We Change Who We Are and How We Share
Non-linear and Iterative Resilience and Transformative Justice	The Pace and Pathways of Change How We Recover and Transform
Creating More Possibilities	How We Move Towards Life

FRACTALS:

the relationship between small and large

A **fractal** is a never-ending pattern. Fractals are infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales. They are created by repeating a simple process over and over in an ongoing feedback loop.

grounding in nature

"The micro reflects the macro and vice versa—Fibonacci patterns show up from space to cauliflower. The tiniest most mundane act reflects the biggest creations we can imagine."

—Kat Aaron

Tune in to the prevalence of spiral in the universe—the shape in the prints of our fingertips echoes into geological patterns, all the way to the shape of galaxies. Then notice that the planet is full of these fractals—cauliflower, yes, and broccoli, ferns, deltas, veins through our bodies, tributaries, etc.—all of these are