

# FRACTALS:

## the relationship between small and large

[from adrienne maree brown, *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*, Chicago: AK Press, 2017]

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 echoes of themselves at the smallest and largest scales. Dandelions contain an entire community in each spore that gets blown on children’s breath.

**How we are at the small scale is how we are at the large scale. The patterns of the universe repeat at scale.**

There is a structural echo that suggests two things: one, that there are shapes and patterns fundamental to our universe, and two, that **what we practice at a small scale can reverberate to the largest scale.**

I first became aware of fractals in 2004 when I was doing electoral organizing, though I didn’t have the word for it. We were trying to impact the federal election, to get George W. Bush out of office. And what I saw clearly was that, at a local level, we—Americans—don’t know how to do democracy. We don’t know how to make decisions together, how to create generative compromises, how to advance policies that center justice. Most of our movements are reduced to advancing false solutions, things we can get corporate or governmental agreement on, which don’t actually get us where we need to be. It was and is devastatingly clear to me that until we have some sense of how to live our solutions locally, we won’t be successful at implementing a just governance system regionally, nationally, or globally.

This awareness led me to look at organizations more critically. So many of our **organizations working for social change are structured in**

ways that reflect the status quo. We have singular charismatic leaders, top down structures, money-driven programs, destructive methods of engaging conflict, unsustainable work cultures, and little to no impact on the issues at hand. This makes sense; it's the water we're swimming in. But it creates patterns. Some of the patterns I've seen that start small and then become movement wide are:

- Burn out.
- Overwork, underpay, unrealistic expectations.
- Organizational and movement splitting.
- Personal drama disrupting movements.
- Mission drift, specifically in the direction of money.
- Stagnation—an inability to make decisions.

These patterns emerge at the local, regional, state, national, and global level—basically wherever two or more social change agents are gathered. There's so much awareness around it, and some beautiful work happening to shift organizational cultures. And this may be the most important element to understand—that *what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system*.

Grace articulated it in what might be the most-used quote of my life: *"Transform yourself to transform the world."* This doesn't mean to get lost in the self, but rather to *see our own lives and work and relationships as a front line*, a first place we can practice justice, liberation, and alignment with each other and the planet.

In my own life this understanding has created major shifts. Once upon a time I was a burnt out executive director, tied to my technology and my sense of my own importance. When I was with friends, family, lovers, I was still working. I thought I was awesome at multitasking. I would say urgency, obligation, and specialness were the driving forces in my life. I was using food, drink, sex, and work to numb my way through life. My work was reactive; there was often a sense of time scarcity and sprinting, of hopelessness, of not being appreciated, feeling no trust, of working with a confused vision.

My family intervened in a variety of ways, primarily by noticing aloud how little they felt me. I had gotten this feedback from others as well, that when I wasn't "on" it was hard to feel me. When I was "on" I could fill a room.

**Commented [1]:** I have experienced these patterns on my skin, as the co-director of a grassroots, volunteer-led arts organisation called CUNTemporary (which we incorporated in 2012 and dissolved in 2022).

CUNTemporary was an exercise in thinking and creating otherwise (from the patriarchal heterosexist art system). However, retrospectively, I can see how our queer-feminist critique had its limitations since it replicated the colonial, ableist system it aimed to be part of. More introspection, more time and relating deeper would have avoided its abrupt implosion, caused by a personal drama intensified by burnout, overwork, underpay and unrealistic expectations.

I am deeply grateful for the lessons learnt in this process and to everyone who has been part of it.

**Commented [2]:** I know it might sound like a paradox, when you are so deeply involved in social justice projects... but I very much relate to this. I wonder how many other social-justice 'warriors' (especially feminists) have felt the same way?

This reminds me, once again, that queer-trans-feminist organising needs crip and decolonial approaches to be sustainable. Decoloniality and crip theory have taught me how to move beyond the hopelessness of accelerationist and linear capitalist time, and reconnect instead to the time and needs of the land, and of the body-as-land. We need to make space for presence, feelings and relations.

My coworkers also let me know how frustrating it was to work with me when I was so clearly unhappy.

In 2012 I took a sabbatical, and I realized that I wasn't upholding my end of the sacred bargain: My life is a miracle that cannot be recreated. I can never get these hours, weeks, years back. In a fractal conception, I am a cell-sized unit of the human organism, and I have to use my life to leverage a shift in the system by how I am, as much as with the things I do. This means actually being in my life, and it means bringing my values into my daily decision making. Each day should be lived on purpose.

This has meant increasing my intentionality about being with others. Adapting to the changes of life, yes, but with a clear and transparent intention to keep deepening with my loved ones and transforming together.

I struggle with putting the phone/devices down like most people in my generation or younger, but I am learning to savor the quality of time spent without them, in real life with other people, with my writing, being present. Or using the Internet and cellular data to build trust and connection, rather than to echo chamber deconstruction and destruction.

It has meant getting in touch with my body and feelings in real time, and learning to express them. I am learning to engage in generative conflict, to say no, to feel my limits, taking time to feel my heartache when it comes—from living in America, from interpersonal trauma or grief, from movement losses.

It has meant learning to work collaboratively, which goes against my inner "specialness." I am socialized to seek achievement alone, to try to have the best idea and forward it through the masses. But that leads to loneliness and, I suspect, extinction. If we are all trying to win, no one really ever wins.

I am beginning to revel in the increased capacity that comes from working with and trusting others. I sleep, I center, I travel, I share. I have offered more room in my life to love, family, creating. Each day I feel more authentic, and more capable. I don't experience failure much these days; I experience growth.

I have increased my practices of collaboration and storytelling as ways to share analysis, engaging and facilitating deep small transformations that pick up and echo each other towards a tipping point, organizing based in love and care rather than burnout and competition.

Commented [3]: I am doing the same exercise of savouring my time off the phone as I read this text.

When I read/study, I MUST put down the phone to concentrate (for this, I am even using a technique called 'pomodoro' which I suggest to check out, especially if you have ADHD).

Reading/studying, for me, has become a privilege since I obtained my (funded) PhD last year. It is a privilege because it is unpaid, and therefore I consider it 'unproductive work'. On the other hand, 'productive' work (which can bring money into my bank account) gets more attention in my daily life.

Since last year, however, have challenged myself to add more unproductive hours of work in my weekly schedule, and dedicate time to my self-development or self-care. But I am still struggling to find a balance.

Commented [4]: One of the first workshops during my PhD studies was about 'managing time'.

I was surprised by the wellbeing-centred approach of the facilitators. One of the exercises required a person to propose a job to someone else, which they then had to refuse. Even in this exercise, I was unable to refuse...

At a collective level, this is the invitation to practice the world we wish to see in the current landscape. Yes, resist the onslaught of oppression, but measure our success not just by what we stop, but by how many of us feel, and can say:

I am living a life I don't regret  
A life that will resonate with my ancestors,<sup>41</sup>  
and with as many generations forward as I can imagine.  
I am attending to the crises of my time with my best self,  
I am of communities that are doing our collective best  
to honor our ancestors and all humans to come.

It's lifework, with benefits. I regularly check in with my vision for our collective future and make adjustments on how I am living, what I am practicing, to be aligned with that future, to make it more possible.

That's a little testifying and spell casting on how fractal work feels on a personal level. Here are two explorations of it in organizing work—couching fractals in the idea of what movements need today followed by a piece about how Ruckus, a small and mighty organization, shifted its practices to be aligned with its values.

"The only way to deal with an unfree world is to become so absolutely free that your very existence is an act of rebellion."  
—Albert Camus

### Notes from "Intersecting Worlds: The One We've Got, The One We're Building, The Ones We Imagine"<sup>42</sup>

My vision is changing our *how*, more than seeing clearly our *what*. I see a how where we are all much more comfortable with change, and with our personal power to change conditions.

Some people are comfortable believing—in heaven, in socialism, in someone else's thinking. That's never quite worked for me. I learn experientially. I am so far only convinced that change is divine and constant.

Octavia Butler said, "Belief initiates and guides action—Or it does nothing."<sup>43</sup> In her twelve novels and her short stories, she created case studies that teach how to lead inside of change, shaping change. I've been calling what I learn from her work emergent strategy. Based in the

**Commented [5]:** This is a great t-shirt slogan! It reminds me of performance artist and writer Alok Vaid-Menon (whom I call 'my queer guru').

Freedom is such a basic concept, but we are also so much trapped in society's structures and categories that it is so hard to reach it.

science of emergence, it's relational, adaptive, fractal, interdependent, decentralized, transformative. I'm applying it in facilitation and organizational development work.

It unleashes more of the power of each person.

Because some are comfortable deferring the work of vision to others—or being the visionary talkers (I am guilty of being a visionary talker for years! Forgive me.<sup>44</sup>). I think, and have been gathering proof in sci fi writing workshops with organizers and activists, that we each have important pieces of the whole, so I concentrate my work on the generation of vision, the strengthening of the muscle of looking forward together.

One major emerging lesson: We have to create futures in which everyone doesn't have to be the same kind of person. That's the problem with most utopias for me: they are presented as mono value, a new greener more local monoculture where everyone gardens and plays the lute and no one travels... And I don't want to go there!<sup>45</sup>

Compelling futures have to have more justice, yes; and right relationship to planet, yes; but also must allow for our growth and innovation. I want an interdependence of lots of kinds of people with lots of belief systems, *and* continued evolution.

Right now we don't know what's right so much as we know what's wrong, and what we've tried. And based on how constantly surprised I still am by life every day, I suspect that will likely continue to be the case, and hopefully, perpetually resolving these major issues continues to be interesting. My mentor Grace Lee Boggs is still curious on the eve of her ninety-ninth birthday, so I'm hopeful.

Nothing that has existed so far was the right way for everyone, but there are pieces out there we can begin to imagine together. This is why Gar Alperovitz's writing speaks to me—what's between capitalism and socialism?<sup>46</sup> Because whatever we build will stand on the foundations of those economic experiments. This is why Gopal Dayaneni's work appeals to me—what are the strategies we need to learn, with appropriate fear and wonder, to move our movements into right relationship with the planet?<sup>47</sup> Let's learn.

I want a future where we are curious, interested, visionary, adaptive.

The community in Detroit, to which I am still a newcomer, has been in transition for decades. We are learning about tolerating, even recently—a few years ago foundations were investing in us, now they aren't as much, and it has impact. Generally we have to let go of the success that we feel, as individuals and organizations, when capitalism works for us.

Gopal convinced me years ago that we need to have a level of dystopian consideration. Certain climate realities are no longer wild imaginings, they are happening, and they are coming. (*Game of Thrones* watchers? Winter is here, and it's balmy.) Octavia Butler appeals to me because she wanted to prepare us for inevitable consequences of human behavior.

That is the context in which I enter this conversation. I don't have answers, but I am sitting with these questions:

Change is coming—what do we need to imagine as we prepare for it?

What is compelling about surviving climate change?

What is a just transition economy?<sup>48</sup>

What is an economy for the phase of transition from this way of relating to Earth and resources, to the way we might relate on a watered Earth, or a frozen Earth?

How do we prepare not just for suffering, but for sharing and innovation?

How do we resource the local and still honor our nomadic tendency, our natural migration patterns (which we deny by trying to stay in only one place), our global interconnectedness?

How do we prepare the children in our lives to be visionary, and to love nature even when the changes are frightening and incomprehensible? To be abundant when what we consider valuable is shifting from gold to collard greens?

How do we articulate a compelling economic vision to sustain us through the unimaginable, to unite us as things fall apart?

How do we experience our beauty and humanity in every condition?

Commented [6]: It is scary to see how Octavia Butler's dystopic future has almost aligned with present-day Trump's politics, and its impact on the environment and the LGBTQ+, migrant, Black and other communities.

These are the questions that sustain my work. I believe all of you hold answers.

We hone our skills of naming and analyzing the crises. I learned in school how to deconstruct—but **how do we move beyond our beautiful deconstruction? Who teaches us to reconstruct?**

How do we cultivate the muscle of radical imagination needed to dream together beyond fear? **Showing Black and white people sitting at a lunch counter together was science fiction.**

**We need to move from competitive ideation, trying to push our individual ideas, to collective ideation, collaborative ideation. It isn't about having the number one best idea, but having ideas that come from, and work for, more people.**

When we speak of systemic change, we need to be fractal.

**Fractals**—a way to speak of the patterns we see—move from the micro to macro level. The same spirals on sea shells can be found in the shape of galaxies. We must create patterns that cycle upwards. We are microsystems. **(We each hold contradictions**—my shellac nails vs. my desire that no one do the toxic work of nail painting, my family travel vs. my desire not to use fossil fuels, etc.). Our friendships and relationships are systems. Our communities are systems. Let us practice upwards.

And then—what happens when we succeed? New problems? Detroit filmmaker Oya Amakisi once shared with me the words of General Baker, a Detroit labor organizer and leader, who said, “You keep asking how do we get the people here? I say, what will we do when they get here?”

Maya Angelou’s “On the Pulse of Morning” feels incredibly relevant here today:

Each new hour holds new chances  
For new beginnings.  
Do not be wedded forever  
To fear, yoked eternally  
To brutishness.  
The horizon leans forward,  
Offering you space to place new steps of change<sup>49</sup>.

41 Mary Hooks of Southerners on New Ground and #blacklivesmatter Atlanta offers a mandate for Black people that moves me as I

**Commented [7]:** It is interesting how the author speaks about patterns as both potentially negative (e.g. burnout) or positive, when pursued through the power of the collective 'fractal'.

In conclusion, we should remember to multiply ourselves by working collaboratively (without centring our ego) and to be fully aware of our contradictions. When possible, we should try to voice these contradictions and work through them by holding ourselves accountable (to our community and Gaia, the land). As Ubuntu philosophy says, 'I am because we are'.

We are also not just speaking to the arts and humanities, or to academia, but to any human living and labouring on this Earth.

build towards this life of no regrets: “To avenge the suffering of my ancestors, to earn the respect of future generations, and to be transformed in the service of the work.” I have been using this mandate in my work for Black liberation

(<http://southernersonnewground.org/2016/07/themandate/>).

42 This section is based on notes I wrote before a keynote panel at the New Economy Coalition’s CommonBound conference in June 2014. My fellow panelists were Gar Alperovitz and Gopal Dayaneni, and we were facilitated by Rachel Plattus. You can see the whole discussion at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n0eI9JRGyk>.

43 Butler, Parable of the Sower.

44 See “Confessions of a Charismatic Leader” later in this book.

45 Paraphrasing Liz Lemon, 30 Rock (NBC, 2011).

46 To read more about Gar Alperovitz’s exploration of the space between capitalism and socialism, visit

<http://garalperovitz.com/ifyoudontlike/>.

47 To read more about Gopal Dayaneni’s work with the other brilliant members of the Movement Generation team, visit <http://movementgeneration.org/>.

48 Movement Generation taught me that economy simply means the management of home, of the resources of home. A functional economy is a universal concern.

49 Maya Angelou, *On the Pulse of Morning: The Inaugural Poem* (New York: Random House, 1993).