

## **“Emerging”**

*A Sermon by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May*

*First Parish in Wayland*

*March 14, 2021*

When growing plants from seed, the appearance of a tender shoot reaching up for light can feel like a wondrous surprise. One day there is the dark surface of soil; the next a sprout is there. But have you ever imagined this transformation from the perspective of the seed?

In today’s reading, David Rynick invites us to consider the thoughts and feelings of a seed as it quietly transforms in darkness before emerging into the light. And, while we may not be tomato seeds, we all know something of uncertainty and change—especially after the year we’ve had.

In Rynick’s imagination, the transformation of the tomato seed begins within the damp earth and with an uncertain longing, a half-remembered dream. A year ago, what we would yet become was also uncertain and only the smallest start of what we have developed.

And yet, from small beginnings comes disruption and transformation. That, after all, is the very nature of change. The small tickle and intimation of something different begets a process of “terror and wonder.”

Life as we have known it begins to dissolve.

To change *is* to lose something...

It is to lose our sense of our edges, of who we are,  
of how we fit in and relate to the world around us.

Like a seed, change can split us open, break us apart.

We no longer are as we were.

To experience such change, such transformation,  
is indeed to face and know terror.

And yet, so often change and transformation is also the stuff of *wonder*.

- We watch a seed become the seedling.
- We watch a caterpillar become a butterfly.
- We watch an infant take a first step.
- We watch ourselves learn to do something new,  
to learn even to do it well.

Both terror and wonder intermingle in the experience of change,

in the tender steps of setting forth in a new direction.  
Like the tomato seed with “scarlet dream[s]” that hint  
of a possible future of robust tomatoes,  
we often only have hints of what may come,  
dreams with foggy images.

As we set out online last year, we certainly had foggy images of what would come. Just as it’s hard to imagine how a tiny tomato seed becomes a seven-or-eight-foot-long vine and dozens of juicy tomatoes, so also we would have struggled to imagine that a year later we’d be here—online, yes, but also confident and creative about how to be online. And while I do not think we could have accepted we would be impacted for this long, I think we’d also be wowed that multiple vaccines were developed, approved, and distributed in record time. Both terror and wonder indeed!

But here we are again. Looking towards a fuzzy horizon of an uncertain year. New questions start to take shape: when will I be vaccinated? When will we reach herd immunity? When will it start to feel “normal” again? *How do we emerge from all this?*

To be honest, when I envisioned today’s sermon, I thought it would be full of optimistic tone and a positive vision of the future. And, yes, there is much to feel hopeful about as vaccine availability rises and infection rates lower. Suggestions that the 4<sup>th</sup> of July might involve a festive backyard gathering bring a smile. We are indeed on a path to emerge into a different place in the coming months.

And yet, perhaps like me, you are still feeling trepidatious about what comes next. With the reverberations of all the changes from this past year still vibrating among and within us, it feels tiring to consider facing another round of questions about changing how we interact with one another, about what is and is not safe to do, about *how* to make something safe and meaningful.

Mindful of this sense of trepidation, I began to reflect on how fragile and difficult emergence can be. I’ll give you some examples.

First, [here’s a video of a grizzly bear, Boo](#), emerging from a winter’s hibernation from his den beneath the snow. While the caretaker of the Refuge where Boo lives may have a lot of energy, Boo appears dazed and sluggish, caught somewhere between sleep and wakefulness, between the darkness of his den and the bright light of a snowy day.



So also, as some of us may have seen this week on our Social list-serv, the bees of our two First Parish hives are thankfully alive. As Ann and Nan wrote,

*“Many, many colonies in New England have died over the winter, but we are thrilled to report that the two First Parish hives are teeming with bees. Like us, they are emerging from a long, dark, cold winter. Some are already collecting pollen and bringing it back to the hive. Spring is springing, even if we can’t yet see much in bloom.”*

And finally, let us consider again the tomato seedling. While there is wonder in the emergence of a green shoot from a round, flat disc beneath the soil, the seedling remains perilously fragile. When but a few inches tall, the slender stem can lean beneath the weight of the new leaves. Any wise gardener will not move tender plants directly outside and into the ground. Rather, they introduce them slowly—first in an area protected from wind and bright sun, then bit by bit to more sun, more exposure. Slowly, slowly the stem grows thicker and the leaves strengthen until the seedlings are ready to take that next step to be planted into the open plot of garden soil.



Given these examples from nature, I wonder then whether we should also expect our emergence to be fragile and in need of tending—both as individuals and as a community.

While part of us may be feeling the simple elation of having made it through this winter like the bees, perhaps another part is feeling foggy and dazed like the bear. And while we may be hopeful at emerging signs of hope and possibility towards a semblance of “normalcy,” we may also be cognizant of the threats that may yet undermine the tender new growth.

In a sense, we are all gardeners of our own spirits. Even as the season moves from late winter to the earliest days of spring, each of us may also be feeling the tickle of change as we move into a place of vaccines and towards a half-remembered dream of a life without the fears with which we have become so intimate. We may feel like we are split, broken open, going up and down at the same time—caught between the now and the not yet. How will we respond to being here? How will we tend to our spirits in this fragile time of emergence?

I suspect we will need to be gentle with ourselves. It will be okay to still be a bit uncertain. As someone who has the privilege of being three weeks past my second vaccine, I have slowly started to act differently. I recently sat in a coffeehouse with a cup of coffee and a journal—a beloved experience that I’ve longed for this last year. While it was a joy, I also remained aware of the number of people and their distance from me. And, rather than linger as I might have in years past, I stayed 15, maybe 20 minutes, before rushing off when the last sip was drunk. That was enough “new” behavior for one day.

Change is terror *and* wonder, Rynick suggests. Re-emergence, I suspect, will harbor elements of both.

In the same way, as a community we too must face questions of re-emergence. Having read through the notes of the visioning sessions, my first impression is that we hold both shared *and* differing points of view—not a big surprise for a UU congregation. Many shared a deep sense of longing to be in-person, to hear the sounds of shared singing and the laughter of children. Many also value the opportunity to be connected into the service online and hope this continues. And while some have loved meeting new people through the randomization of breakout groups, others have missed the connecting by choice to particular people or purposes. While more eyes than mine will yet read, digest, and report on the vision sessions, my initial insight is that the path of re-emergence may once again be a time of learning and uncertainty, experimentation and change.

Like the process of the vision sessions, my hope is that our path of re-emergence will be one of conversation and shared engagement. After all, the nature of First Parish is a self-governing, self-sustaining community. While we hopefully receive many things from our participation in the congregation, we are also the ones entrusted with tending to the health and well-being of the congregation. There is no First Parish without each of you—nor without all of those who may not be logged on to Zoom Sunday mornings, but whom nonetheless are part of the life and work of this community.

And, yes, part of this stewardship is financial. Only because of your financial support are we able to be here for Sunday services, for online programming, for continued care of the buildings *to which we will return*, and for all that is yet to emerge in the coming year and years. While these financial gifts are critical to the continued work of First Parish, so also is your engagement with imagining what we can be . . . and helping to bring those dreams into being. We are here for each other and for those who are yet to walk through these doors in search of what we offer or could offer here. In this shared project, we are asked to give what we are able *and* to freely receive what we need. What we give and what we need will be different and may

change in various stages and times of our lives. That's ok—this variety and these changes reflect that we are *alive* as a congregation. Together we support and sustain First Parish for one another.

We will re-emerge from this pandemic. And, we will have changed because of what we have experienced. While the future may still be fragile and uncertain, we can feel the tickle of change. May we work together to sustain this community for the sake of all that has been and for all that may yet be in the emerging future.

So may it be.

Amen.

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**David Rynick, "I Feel Like a Tomato Seedling" in *This Truth Never Fails***

I feel like a tomato seedling emerging from the earth after many days in the damp darkness of the ground of myself. Those uncounted days are an eternity for the tomato seed.

The unfamiliar tickling of moisture calls to something inside me—the deep ache of longing for something unimaginable. All I know of me is flat and round—a small disc of unremarkable color.

Everything else is a scarlet dream—a picture once glimpsed—a whispered fragment of a story.

Then the terror and wonder starts. The wet coolness of the earth begins to dissolve me. Here are urges I have never felt. I try to resist but am powerless. I can't hold myself together. Saying my last prayers, I allow myself to be split open.

Breaking apart, I discover anew that I am not what I thought. I feel myself going up and down at the same time. The vertical urge toward a power above appears as a single stem whose full function is, as of yet, hidden from me. And in the other direction is a gentler, finer urge downward. Little white threads spreading quietly deeper into the soil to receive necessary nourishment from this unknowing darkness.