

## **Predicting the Future with Octavia Butler**

**January 2, 2022**

**Rev Lucy Bunch**

### Reading #1

Octavia Butler was an author of moving and prophetic science fiction novels. She has won the Hugo award, the Nebula award and in 1995, she became the first science-fiction writer to be awarded a John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation genius award.

Her novel *the Parable of the Sower*, written in 1993 is currently on the NYT best seller list. This dark apocalyptic novel written almost 30 years ago, offer important commentary on our world today.

The following three readings come from an essay she wrote in 2000 for *Essence Magazine*. In it she teaches us the capacity we must understand the future, as well as our limitations.

### **Learn From the Past**

Of course, writing novels about the future doesn't give me any special ability to foretell the future. But it does encourage me to use our past and present behaviors as guides to the kind of world we seem to be creating. The past, for example, is filled with repeating cycles of strength and weakness, wisdom and stupidity, empire, and ashes. To study history is to study humanity. And to try to foretell the future without studying history is like trying to learn to read without bothering to learn the alphabet.

When I was preparing to write *Parable of the Talents*, I needed to think about how a country might slide into fascism—something that America does in *Talents*. So I reread *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and other books on Nazi Germany. I was less interested in the fighting of World War II than in the prewar story of how Germany changed as it suffered social and economic problems, as Hitler and others bludgeoned and seduced, as the Germans responded to the bludgeoning and the seduction and to their own history, and as Hitler used that history to manipulate them. I wanted to understand the lies that people have to tell themselves when they either quietly or joyfully watch their neighbors mined, spirited away, killed. Different versions of this horror have happened again and again in history. They're still happening in places like Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor, wherever one group of people permits its leaders to convince them that for their own protection, for the safety of their families and the security of their country, they must get their enemies, those alien others who until now were their neighbors.

It's easy enough to spot this horror when it happens elsewhere in the world or elsewhere in time. But if we are to spot it here at home, to spot it before it can grow and do its worst, we must pay more attention to history. This came home to me a few years ago, when I lived across the street from a 15-year-old girl whose grandfather asked me to help her with homework. The girl was doing a report on a man who had fled Europe during the 1930's because of some people called—she hesitated and then pronounced a word that was clearly unfamiliar to her—“the Nayzees?” It took me a moment to realize that she meant the Nazis, and that she knew absolutely nothing about them. We forget history at our peril.

## Reading #2

### **Respect the Law of Consequences**

Just recently I complained to my doctor that the medicine he prescribed had a very annoying side effect.

“I can give you something to counteract that,” my doctor said.

“A medicine to counteract the effects of another medicine?” I asked.

He nodded. “It will be more comfortable for you.”

I began to backpedal. I hate to take medicine. “The problem isn't that bad.” I said. “I can deal with it.”

“You don't have to worry,” my doctor said. “This second medication works and there are no side effects.”

That stopped me. It made me absolutely certain that I didn't want the second medicine. I realized that I didn't believe there were any medications that had no side effects. In fact, I don't believe we can do anything at all without side effects—also known as unintended consequences. Those consequences may be beneficial or harmful. They may be too slight to matter or they may be worth the risk because the potential benefits are great, but the consequences are always there.

## Reading #3

### **Count On the Surprises**

I was speaking to a group of college students not long ago, and I mentioned the fear we'd once had of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. The kids I was talking to were born around 1980, and one of them spoke up to say that she had never worried about nuclear war. She had never believed that such a thing could possibly happen—she thought the whole idea was nonsense.

She could not imagine that during the Cold War days of the sixties, seventies and eighties, no one would have dared to predict a peaceful resolution in the nineties. I remembered air-raid drills when I was in elementary school, how we knelt, heads down against corridor walls with

our bare hands supposedly protecting our bare necks, hoping that if nuclear war ever happened, Los Angeles would be spared. But the threat of nuclear war is gone, at least for the present, because to our surprise our main rival, the Soviet Union, dissolved itself. No matter how hard we try to foresee the future, there are always these surprises. The only safe prediction is that there always will be.

So why try to predict the future at all if it's so difficult, so nearly impossible? Because making predictions is one way to give warning when we see ourselves drifting in dangerous directions. Because prediction is a useful way of pointing out safer, wiser courses. Because, most of all, our tomorrow is the child of our today. Through thought and deed, we exert a great deal of influence over this child, even though we can't control it absolutely. Best to think about it, though. Best to try to shape it into something good. Best to do that for any child.

## Sermon

In that same Essence article from 2000 Octavia Butler tells this story:

“SO DO YOU REALLY believe that in the future we’re going to have the kind of trouble you write about in your books?” a student asked me as I was signing books after a talk. The young man was referring to the troubles I’d described in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, novels that take place in a near future of increasing drug addiction and illiteracy, marked by the popularity of prisons and the unpopularity of public schools, the vast and growing gap between the rich and everyone else, and the whole nasty family of problems brought on by global warming.

“I didn’t make up the problems,” I pointed out. ‘All I did was look around at the problems we’re neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters.’

“Okay,” the young man challenged. “So what’s the answer?”

“There isn’t one,” I told him.

“No answer? You mean we’re just doomed?” He smiled as though he thought this might be a joke.

“No,” I said. “I mean there’s no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There’s no magic bullet. Instead, there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be.”

Octavia Butler chose to be one of the answers to our future problems by helping us to see through her novels the inevitable result of our inaction.

Born in Southern California, she raised by her widowed mother who by cleaned houses for a living. Shy and bullied as a child, Octavia spent a lot of time reading at the Pasadena library and became interested in science fiction at a young age. At the age of 10, Butler begged her mother to buy her a Remington typewriter, on which she "pecked stories two fingered. At 12, she watched the telefilm *Devil Girl from Mars* (1954) and concluded that she could write a better story. And she did.

She had a gift for envisioning a future – and setting down her intentions about what that future could look like. This is evident not only in her books but in her personal life as well.

Throughout her life Butler kept a notebook to write down her ideas. On the inside of one of her notebooks, is a list of intentions she made early in her career. The first on the list – I will be a bestselling author. This came to pass after her death when *Parable of the Sower* made the NYT best seller list in 2020 – 14 years after her death in 2006.

But there were also intentions for others:

I will send poor black youngster to Clarion or another writer's workshop. (Clarion was a workshop that helped launch her career)

I will help poor black youngsters broaden their horizons

I will help poor black youngsters go to college

As once a poor black youngster herself she understood that living into your dreams required support and encouragement from those who have the power to help you. And she understood that investing in youth was helping to create a positive future.

You heard in the readings her thoughts about predicting the future.

All of this wisdom was poured in her books, particularly the trilogy, the *Parable of the Sower/ Parable of the Talents*. The third book of the series – *Parable of the Trickster* was outlined but never written. These books were a shift for her as most of her books were fantasies based in other times or other planets. This series was inspired by what she heard on the news.

These books, called the Earth seed trilogy –written in 1993 and 1996, are dark, despairing, violent and prescient. They depict a future apocalypse in – brace yourself 2024- when the US is in chaos and hitting bottom. Butler does not envision an apocalypse from a huge disaster, but rather an accumulation of challenges that are left unattended - climate change, economic inequality, corporate greed, fascist leadership, you get the picture.

Here is quote from one of the narrators in the second book of the series, *Parable of the Talents*: he is writing from a time after this period of chaos named the Pox shorthand for apocalypse.

“I have read that the Pox was caused by accidentally coinciding climactic, economic, and sociological crises. “It would be more honest to say that the Pox was caused by our own refusal to deal with obvious problems in those areas. We caused the problems: then we sat and watched as they grew into crises.” The United States of America suffered a major nonmilitary defeat. It lost no important war, yet it did not survive the Pox. Perhaps it simply lost sight of what it once intended to be, then blundered aimlessly until it exhausted itself.”

Ouch.

Despite their despair, these books provide beacons of hope, hope that springs from an empowering theology expressed by the main character, a young woman named Lauren Oya Olamina. Lauren lives a life of despair, but dreams of creating a better future for herself and the next generation. And in striving she creates a new religion, called Earthseed.

In the reading that Karen shared, Butler talked about the law of consequences – that everything we do has consequences, good and bad. That everything we do has an impact. As UU's we can see this idea as consistent with our seventh principle – the interdependent web. But it is a stronger statement than our principle, a more active statement. In an interdependent web of existence what you do has implications for others as well as for yourself.

Butler use these ideas of consequences and interconnection in framing the religion that Lauren creates. As expressed in her journal entries one of the most powerful lines goes like this:

All that you touch/You Change  
All that you Change/Changes you  
The only lasting truth/Is Change  
God/Is Change

How would you imagine living your life if this was your theology? If you carried with you the awareness of the consequences of your actions on both yourself and on others? What would you do differently? How would you be different?

The Earthseed stories are incredibly popular right now – NYT best seller list. People are calling out Butler for being a visionary, for accurately naming what could come to be if we stay on our current path.

But what makes the Earth seed story for powerful is not just the accuracy of Butlers vision, but it is the transformation of her heroine, as she comes into her own power and gives life to her vision. She is a beacon of hope, that offer hope to us as well.

In another passage from Earth seed Lauren says:

“God is Change, and in the end, God prevails. But God exists to be shaped. It isn't enough for us to just survive, limping along, playing business as usual while things get worse and worse. If that's the shape we give to God, then someday we must become too weak – too poor, too hungry, too sick – to defend ourselves.”

If God is change, and we are the change agents, what shape are you giving to God? Butler would say that the shape we give to God depends on our perspective. Are you predicting doom and despair? Are you living as if that prediction had already come to pass?

Or can you envision something different, something more lifegiving and sustaining? Butler says that considering the future we must be aware of our own perspective. She says where we stand determines what we're able to see. When we are discouraged or fearful and make a linear projection to the future, we will shape what is to come by our actions and attitude.

If our actions have consequences and if the future is predicated on our actions, then the way that we envision the future will affect what future will come about.

In these books Butler offers us racial hope. This quote from an article by Lavelle Porter from the web site Black essence says it just right.

The radical hope that Octavia Butler offers is not based on inevitable, linear progress, but in the belief in our own agency in the matter—that through our present actions, with planning and persistence, we can lay the foundations for a better tomorrow.

So how do we start to envision and create a different future that our current path suggests? I have two suggestions to offer.

Find someone to inspire you. Someone visionary and unafraid.

I am delighted to have discovered Octavia Butler.

I have not read her parable books – and I won't because I am extremely sensitive to violence.

But I have been incredibly inspired by her, her life, her choices her vision, her commitment.

And I follow one of her disciples – Adrienne Marie brown author of emergent strategies and other inspiring books. Those us who are white can learn so much about shaping the future from African Americans who have had to create a path of hope despite centuries of oppression.

Maybe you are inspired by Elon Musk the person of the year in time magazine. A visionary and a disrupter, challenging and imperfect. The auto industry had been resistant to electric vehicles for decades, and he blew it all open. His current effort is to change the process of mining minerals needed for the batteries to make it less wasteful, and more earth honoring. Visionary and disruptor. Charting a different future.

Who is the visionary that inspires you? Desmond Tutu? Your grandmother? Ruth Bader Ginsburg? Is it your immigrant ancestor who had the courage and the vision to start a new life and create a new future for their family? Let their life and their words seep into you, inspire you to envision a better future.

Number 2 – find and use your power.

To get out of the mess we have created requires us all to find our own power to change the shape of the future. Your power – your gift to make a difference.

Butler was at first uncomfortable about being so blatant about power in her novels – after many of us have become averse to the idea of using power – our political landscape has tainted this idea. However, she came to appreciate that power is a tool – and it is what you do with it that matters.

One positive benefit of all of our superhero movies is that people are asking the question – what is your superpower? I ask you that – what is your power to make a difference? Lauren in Parable of the Sower had the vision and the ability to inspire others to follow her – to create a new religion that gave people a frame for living in a compassionate and sustainable manner. That is what kept her community going even when they were oppressed.

What is your power to make a difference? Don't be shy. The world does not need shy right now, we need people who are willing to step up. Your power doesn't have to be that of a visionary, it could be that of a caretaker, love generator, data cruncher, a fixer of broken things, or creator of beauty. Whatever makes you come alive.

We have our inspiration and our power. Then what? I think in previous sermons I would have said – go forth and change the world. But Octavia Butler has helped me to see that before we can act, we must have a different vision for the future than our current trajectory. If you take away one point from the sermon, makes it this: If our actions have consequences and if the future is predicated on our actions, then the way that we envision the future will affect what future will come about.



Every morning I do a chi gong routine that includes a form called drawing the bow to shoot an arrow. As I was taught this form, as you pull the arrow, your eye looks out- as far as you can imagine seeing. I took this in a fanciful way and thought – I can see Japan, or the north pole. But when I took it seriously imagining the house next store, the one after that the end of the street, the next block. I realized how this visioning really increased my focus.

I was doing the same thing in thinking about the future – vague ideas of Beloved Community, bending the arc of the universe. We must envision the future with more intention and more focus as individuals and as a community. If our actions have consequences and If the future is predicated on our actions, then the way that we envision the future will affect what future will come about.

It is time – we don't have the luxury of waiting or sitting by as the world crumbles. We must envision the world as we dream it, set our intention, and use our power to create it. As Octavia Butler said "there is no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead, there are thousands of answers—at least. we can be one of them if we choose to be."

May it be so.