

## “See To It”

Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval  
Unitarian Church of Montpelier  
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As a young girl growing up in Pasadena, California, Octavia E. Butler would spend hours reading and dreaming up stories. She was an only child and also shy and socially awkward and so this was a way she could keep herself entertained and keep herself company.

At the age of ten, she realized she was starting to forget some of the stories that had been living in her head since she was a young child and so she began to write them down.

As she wrote in a half-used notebook, her mother came by and asked her what she was doing, and when she told her, her mother said, “Oh. Maybe you’ll be a writer.”

This was a revelation to Butler. At this point, she was being raised by her grandmother and mother. Her mother worked as a maid, and her father, who had died when she was seven, had worked as a shoe shiner.

With those simple words from her mother, “maybe you’ll be a writer,” she realized this was something people did for a living. And she began on her path.

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I first discovered Octavia Butler’s writing in my early 20s when I was part of a book group with other women of color in Washington, DC who also happened to be progressive activists. We shared suggestions with one another of the books we might want to read together, and it turns out, we had an overwhelming interest in social change theory, political science, fiction, and gender studies. To give you a sense of our tastes, I’ll tell you that one of first books we read together was a comparative analysis of the philosophies of Friedrich Nietzsche and Michel Foucault.

Well, another book we read together early on was Octavia Butler’s *Wild Seed*. *Wild Seed* is the story of two African characters, Doro and Anyanwu, who each have supernatural powers. Both are immortal. Doro is able to take over other people’s bodies and to destroy anyone and anything in his path. Anyanwu has the power of healing and can transform herself into any human being as well as any animal. The book unfolds as Doro seeks to continue breeding a race of super humans and he and Anyanwu struggle over the ways they use their powers.

This was my first introduction to Butler’s brand of science fiction which was especially interested in creating black female protagonists and in exploring real-world power structures and dynamics through the imaginary worlds she created. Butler was

an early pillar in the artistic sub-genre called Afrofuturism and a guiding mentor up until her death in 2006.

There was renewed interest in Butler's writing over the last four years. People looked to novels to try to understand the times we were living through and that we're living through now. George Orwell's "1984" and Margaret Atwood's "The Handmaid's Tale" both experienced a resurgence in sales. But, for many, it was Butler's Parable series that showed uncanny prescience, including a presidential candidate with Christian fundamentalist leanings who sought to restore American power and used the slogan "make America great again."

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Some have described Butler's writing as being about much more than fiction. Her beliefs about the nature of humanity and the universe and God are so strong that they come through as theology.

One belief that is apparent in Butler's writing is in the ultimate reality of change and our human agency to affect change.

This belief is encapsulated in the opening lines of her 1993 novel, *Parable of the Sower*.

"All that you touch  
You change  
All that you Change  
Changes you  
The only lasting truth  
Is Change.  
God is Change."

These words are at the heart of a religion called Earthseed, developed by the main character of the novel, 15 year-old Lauren Olamina. Lauren develops this new religion as a response to the dire times she and her community are facing.

It is the year 2024 - not too far into the future for us at this point in time. Global warming has caused devastating effects on the planet - drought as well as rising seawater. People live in gated communities so fearful are they of their neighbors with guns. Government services are failing.

It is a grim vision of the future - written as it was 30-some years ago looking toward to what is now nearly the present.

Unlike in some of her earlier novels such as *Wild Seed*, there are no supernatural beings that use their powers to shape the world and universe to their liking.

Into this landscape, Butler places a set of human characters who must navigate the world they find themselves in with all of its troubles and challenges.

They face losses and harm from others. They use their skills to help one another. They become a community through trial and error and through a fundamental belief in the nature of life as change.

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Butler's writing has been a source of inspiration for those seeking to create social change and bring forth more liberatory realities for people of all ages, races, genders, and class backgrounds. Two such people are adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha. Brown is an activist, educator, and doula living in Detroit and Imarisha is an assistant professor of Black Studies and also a writer and spoken word artist in Oregon. Together, they edited a book called *Octavia's Brood* that sought to bring forward another sub-genre of science fiction called "visionary fiction." They write: "Visionary fiction encompasses all of the fantastic, with the arc always bending toward justice." And, for them, unshackling the imagination is a necessary part of bending the arc towards justice. "Once the imagination is unshackled, liberation is limitless."

In the book, Walidah Imarisha asks, "Are we brave enough to imagine beyond the boundaries of 'the real' and then do the hard work of sculpting reality from our dreams?"<sup>1</sup>

I believe that this is an immensely important question for this moment. And not only, are we brave enough, but where do we find the tools to do this sculpting.

One answer, I think, lies in Octavia Butler's approach to her writing career.

Let me point out that Butler's career was quite remarkable. She was one of the first African American writers in the genre of science fiction. She was the first science fiction writer to be awarded the MacArthur Foundation genius grant. She was hailed as the "Mother of AfroFuturism" and won the PEN American Center lifetime achievement award in writing.

Yet, she also maintained throughout her life a sense of herself as that shy and unsure girl who would hide herself in her big pink notebook. "There," she once wrote, "I could be a magic horse, a Martian, a telepath....There I could be anywhere but here, any time but now, with any people but these."

To overcome this habit of withdrawing inward and seeing herself as less than, Butler developed a practice of writing herself notes to give herself encouragement and affirmation.

One note written in 1975 read:

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<sup>1</sup> *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. adrienne maree brown and Walidah Imarisha, AK Press. (23)

“This is my life. I write bestselling novels. My novels go onto the bestseller lists on or shortly after publication. My novels each travel up to the top of the bestseller lists and they reach the top and they stay on top for months. Each of my novels does this. So be it! I will find the way to do this. See to it! So be it! See to it!”

What a powerful use of imagination to initiate that sculpting of reality to the dream that she held for herself.

But, Butler’s imagination didn’t stop there. She also wrote,

“My books will be read by millions of people!  
I will buy a beautiful home in an excellent neighborhood  
I will send poor black youngsters to Clarion or other writer’s workshops  
I will help poor black youngsters broaden their horizons  
I will help poor black youngsters go to college  
I will get the best of health care for my mother and myself  
I will hire a car whenever I want or need to.  
I will travel whenever and wherever in the world that I choose  
My books will be read by millions of people!  
So be it! See to it!”<sup>2</sup>

Butler also dreamed that her own success could help her help others. Her imagination didn’t stop at her own personal achievements.

We know from her life that Octavia Butler did in fact become a best-selling author as well as a mentor to others. And, she worked hard to make her dreams a reality.

And, I find these lines in her note so compelling. “So be it! See to it!”  
With these lines, Butler brings forward prayer and incantation.  
She brings forward her own agency and power.  
Perhaps one could even call this magic.  
And not the kind of magic that has to do with pulling rabbits out of a hat or making people disappear and reappear.

Unitarian Universalist minister, Victoria Safford, describes it this way: “Magic is a mix of will and intention, courage and hope, imagination which flashes out of nowhere, or nothing we can name except perhaps in retrospect.”<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.openculture.com/2020/06/ behold-octavia-butlers-motivational-notes-to-self.html>

<sup>3</sup> Victoria Safford, “So Be It. See to It.” White Bear Unitarian Universalist Church, April 7, 2019. <https://whitebearunitarian.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/04/04-07-19-sermon.pdf>

In this alchemy of our hopes and dreams and the power of our will and intention is magic. A coming forth of a reality that may be difficult to explain or seemingly impossibly to have come true.

Victoria Safford also stresses that these magical powers do not exist in isolation. She continues, "...our own magical powers to transform our lives or heal the world or help a friend are always, always strengthened in community."

I believe that much of our getting through this pandemic over the last ten plus months has been magical.

It has taken radical imagining to re-envision school and church and theater and family holidays. A year ago many of us couldn't have dreamed of Zoom church or a virtual holiday fair concert or setting a place for your laptop at the Thanksgiving table to video chat with loved ones for the breaking of bread together.

There are those of you who are now speaking more regularly with far flung family than you ever did pre-Covid as you have set intentions for staying connected or repairing relationships.

Some of you have faced major illnesses and the death of dear loved ones and with determination, courage, hopes for better days and lots of help from friends have slogged through medical appointments and treatment and buried loved ones.

Of course, there has been loss and struggle, and still more to come even as we begin to see a light at the end of the tunnel.

But, let us not forget the magic of this time - that is, what our intention, will, courage and imaginations have made possible in the mess and grief of it all.

With this kind of magic, we can imagine beyond the boundaries of the present-day and sculpt reality to our dreams.

I invite you to connect with your own imagination now for a few moments.

*What is it that you imagine for yourself, for your loved ones, for our world in the coming days, weeks, and even years ahead?*

Maybe like Inaugural Poet, Amanda Gorman, you envision a world where we never again sow division.

Or where we lay down our arms so we can reach out our arms to one another.

Maybe you're imagining what that first meal will be when you get to invite over your neighbor or your best friend.

Perhaps you can envision an Earth that isn't experiencing the volatility of climate change but a stability and sustainability of species and landscapes.

I invite you to share in the chat a phrase or sentence that expresses your vision, the radical imagining of your dreams.

I will read as many of these as I can, and I invite you in response to say with me the words of Octavia Butler: So be it! See to it!

[Below is what was shared in the Zoom chat]

*I envision hugging lots of people!*

*physical, emotional, spiritual movement - freedom*

*A congress that works together in harmony and passes legislation to better the welfare of all.*

*I dream of singing again at our UCM Community Lunch!*

*Hugging my mother.*

*a world of peace and justice *

*I imagine the eradication of all voter suppression laws and practices.*

*I envision real hugs to family and friends, and being able to give real things back to the world.*

*Healthy connections. So be it. See to it.*

*game night with friends*

*stay well-connected with the whole family*

*love & Justice*

*respect*

*I imagine systems of community care, protection and support— one without police.*

*A world of sharing*

*peace and Love*

*Surrounded by strangers in a museum*

*Visiting my dear friend in the south of France for a few weeks!*

*A world where opposing points of view listen to each other.*

*Lasting connection to and care for the natural world!*

*Getting to know my 2 year old grand daughter, Maya in Istanbul!*

*I imagine a day when liberals and conservatives can talk calmly together.*

*my ever-blending family finding comfort and joy together*

*Eradication of poverty <3*

*compassion for all regardless of religion, gender and so on*

*connecting and listening instead of vengeance and prosecutions*

*A world where only those who are loved are born, where our earth is cared for by fewer humans who are living in harmony with animals and resources.*

*seeing you all in person for the first time*

*A world where we love nature and feel that love reciprocated.*

*Being together again  
Playdates and sleepovers!  
a trip to Ireland - a pilgrimage in memory of our Dad  
reverence for life in all forms  
having friends over for dinner!  
Worldwide peace and connection  
singing in choir in person and in church again  
Sitting and talking on porches with friends and healthy arguing.  
A world of music in person.  
I hope that we as a culture will have the courage to have a truth and reconciliation  
process to finally address our historic, systemic racism and terrible treatment of  
indigenous North Americans, and make peace with each other.  
walking down the street, running into friends.  
kiddos playing together without fear and rules countering natural joy and connection  
a home for everyone  
A world where racism is no more*

And so, dear ones, let us go with the wisdom and the courage to dream it and to see to it.