

“Another World is Possible”
Sermon by Rev. Joan Javier-Duval
Unitarian Church of Montpelier
April 13, 2025

The delivered sermon may have slight variations from this written manuscript. Video recordings of sermons can be found online at <https://ucmvt.org/category/whats-new/sermons-and-podcasts/>.

Readings

“V’ahavta” by Aurora Levins Morales¹

Excerpt from *The Prophetic Imagination* by Walter Brueggemann

Sermon

Since her untimely death in 2006, Octavia Butler has been celebrated as a brilliant, prophetic writer—someone who broke through the boundaries of science fiction to imagine worlds that once seemed impossible.

In 1993, Butler imagined and then wrote into existence Lauren Oya Olamina, a teenager living in Los Angeles in the years 2024 to 2027. Global climate change as well as economic and political crises have led to chaos. Lauren must learn how to survive in the face of a life-threatening water shortage, a neighborhood full of violent thieves, and the total absence of any political leadership.

She learns to build community right where she is. From the adults around her, she learns the importance of mutual care. She discovers that a garden can be grown anywhere. And she comes to believe that our destiny is “to take root among the stars.”²

Through Lauren’s journey, Butler invites us into a broader truth: that human beings are forced to learn how to survive, and they struggle with how to do so without losing faith in themselves and others. Butler’s vision isn’t idyllic. She wove together the real and the imagined—showing us that the future is shaped by how we reckon with the present.

And just as Butler wrote from the reality of her time, we too must confront our own: the confining, heavy realities of today that threaten the future possibilities of living on a healthy planet with a functional democracy, peaceful international relations, and economic security and justice for all.

¹ <http://www.auroralevinsmorales.com/blog/vahavta>

² Octavia E. Butler, *Parable of the Sower* (Grand Central Publishing, 2019), 77.

These realities didn't just appear out of nowhere. They are built upon someone's imagination. Right now, we are living inside someone else's dream: a dream shaped by of those who treat politics like a video game, who hoard wealth and fantasize about escaping on rocket ships to Mars rather than repairing the world they helped fracture.

The social change theorist, activist, and author, adrienne maree brown has written: "I often feel I am trapped inside someone' else's imagination, and I must engage my own imagination in order to break free."³ She says, "We are in an imagination battle."

Just as people hold conflicting political ideologies or theologies, so too do they hold different social visions that are rooted in wildly divergent values.

Some imaginations have led to war, hunger, and exploitation. But as the poet writes, we can also imagine:

*the exact smell of the summer streets
in which no one has been shot...
the sparkling taste of food when we know
that no one on earth is hungry...
a flock of roofs that keep multiplying their shelter...
and justice [that] rolls down like waters.*

We can imagine what the other side of violence, poverty, and displacement looks like. We can smell it, taste it, feel it in our bones.

To dream of a different future is not to ignore the harsh realities of the present. Often, the vision of universal well-being feels impossibly far away. But our dreams must begin right here—rooted in today's challenges and contradictions.

This is the premise of the anthology, *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*.

Walidah Imarisha, one of the book's editors, writes: "Whenever we try to envision a world without war, without violence, without prisons, without capitalism, we are engaging in speculative fiction. All organizing is science fiction."⁴

³ adrienne maree brown, Emergent Strategy

⁴ Walidah Imarisha, "Introduction," in *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, ed. Walidah Imarisha and adrienne maree brown (AK Press, 2015), 14, Apple Books.

Anytime we allow our minds to paint the picture of a world free of injustice we are conjuring a new world, speculating about what could be possible.

Imarisha continues: “We want organizers and movement builders to be able to claim the vast space of possibility, to be birthing visionary stories. Using their everyday realities and experiences of changing the world, they can form the foundation for the fantastic and, we hope, build a future where the fantastic liberates the mundane.”⁵

In one story in the collection, a young Black boy, Alonzo Ramey, is born with a genetic anomaly that gives people superpowers. Alonzo is put through rigorous training and invited to join the Teen Justice Force, a counterpart to the adult Super Justice Force.

Alonzo is the only person of color on the team. He’s given the superhero name “Black Fist” and often feels tokenized. Despite being a leader among his peers, he receives little recognition—no media spotlight, no endorsement deals, no dedicated comic book series.

After aging out of the team, Alonzo retires, bitter and disillusioned. Soon after, however, he encounters a group of teens on the subway who challenge another group of teens who are harassing passengers. The teens who come to the rescue are all wearing Black Fist t-shirts. Alonzo is taken aback given that there was never any official Black Fist gear made while he was on the Teen Justice Force. He learns that these teens admired Black Fist so deeply that they created their own gear.

Inspired, Alonzo returns to the Super Justice Force with a new mission: to uplift the next generation.⁶

Our imaginations can defy the confines of racial stereotypes. We can create worlds where Black teens have superpowers, and where borders no longer sever our connections to each other.

This reimagining of the border was the impetus for the architect, Ronald Rael’s Teeter Totter Wall. Rael had long been involved with human rights at the border and as a visual artist and architect imagined ways to challenge the presumptions of the border wall between the United States and Mexico.

⁵ Imarisha, *Octavia’s Brood*.

⁶ David F. Walker, “The Token Superhero” in *Octavia’s Brood*.

In 2019, he and his collaborators installed three hot pink teeter totters between the steel slats dividing Puerto de Anapra, Mexico, and Sunland Park, New Mexico. They waited.

Children and families began to gather, and soon children were teetering up and down playing and laughter together across the divide.⁷

This project was part of his work *Borderwall as Architecture* in which he also imagines the Ambos Nogales Binational Library at the U.S.-Mexico border. His design was based on the Haskell Library located in Derby Line, Vermont and Stanstead, Quebec.

The Haskell Library was built in 1904 and allowed for the free movement of people and knowledge across the northern border. It shouldn't be so outlandish to imagine that such a space could exist at the southern border as well except for the limitations of our imagination of who is like us and who is not, of who risks our national security and who does not, of who belongs together and who does not.

And yet—other futures are already being imagined, lived, and fought for every day.

Communities are envisioning new models of care: mutual aid networks that arose during the pandemic and have remained, offering food, medical support, and companionship.

Indigenous water protectors are defending the sacred, not only through protest but by dreaming and practicing relationships with land and water that reach far beyond colonial logic.

In cities across the globe, people are transforming vacant lots into community gardens, planting food where once there was only concrete.

Abolitionists are dreaming and building community-based alternatives to policing and incarceration—choosing healing over punishment, and restoration over retribution.

These are not just fantasies. They are signs that a different future can be made real—if we're willing to imagine it, and work together to bring it into being.

What if our dreams could be made more real than our current reality?

We knew after the worst of the COVID-19 pandemic that there was no going back to what was. Everything had changed. The same is true now.

⁷ <https://news.berkeley.edu/2019/10/08/teeter-totters-as-activism-ronald-rael/>

However we emerge from this multi-faceted crisis, one thing is clear: there will be no going back. We have to start imagining now the world we want to make possible in the future.

And that future is not abstract. It is deeply personal. For some in our community, that will be a world you will no longer live to see—but today’s children, teens, and young adults will inherit. What we imagine today becomes the soil of their tomorrow.

I know that there is grief present when we imagine the world we are leaving for our children. The grief of absence—and the grief of brokenness. The grief of what is, and the ache for what might have been.

But even in our grief, there is something we can offer. One of the most powerful legacies we can pass on is not certainty—but imagination. Not blueprints, but belief. Not finished answers, but the courage to ask bold questions.

We can show the next generation what it looks like to dream together. To hope together. To build together. We can model collective imagination—the kind that is rooted in relationship, grounded in justice, and watered with hope.

As Walter Brueggemann wrote: “It is the vocation of the prophet to keep alive the ministry of imagination, to keep on conjuring and proposing futures alternative to the single one the king wants to urge as the only thinkable one.”⁸

We can all be prophets, and we engage the prophetic imagination together. It is not a single hero’s imagination that will save us. It is the collective, prophetic imagination that will create the possibility for all of us to survive and thrive.

So let’s pause for a moment and ask ourselves: what are we imagining today?

One piece of imagining another world for us as a congregation is imagining the kind of religious community we want to be. We have already begun this work with our Climate Resilience Study Group, and what we can envision for our congregation is broader and bigger than that. The Board is inviting all of you to join in a first conversation and process of imagination this coming Friday evening, and I hope you will be there.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, Second Edition (Fortress Press, 2001), 40.

Let us imagine not just with our minds, but with our whole beings—our grief and our joy, our memory and our dreams, our hands and our hearts.

In her poem “V’ahavta,” Aurora Levins Morales guides us into this kind of fierce, embodied, justice-rooted imagining. She writes:

“Say these words when you lie down and when you rise up,
when you go out and when you return. In times of mourning
and in times of joy. Inscribe them on your doorposts,
embroider them on your garments, tattoo them on your shoulders,
teach them to your children, your neighbors, your enemies...
Another world is possible.”

This is not passive imagining—it is fierce, active, insistent. It is not the kind of hope that closes its eyes to suffering. It is the kind that dares to look at the world as it is, and says: We will not stop imagining what it could be. We believe that another world is possible.

Let us carry these words with us—into our meetings, our organizing, our protests, our parenting, our teaching, our budgeting, our building.

Let us carry them into the work we do as a congregation—to imagine and then to build a community that is both refuge and resistance, a place where joy and justice are practiced with intention.

Let us be a people of imagination—no longer trapped in someone else’s vision, but freed by our own. Let us be accountable to one another, and faithful to the generations yet to come.

And may we, like Lauren Oya Olamina, like Alonzo Ramey, like the prophets of old and the poets of now, take root in the stars—and right here, too—in the soil, in the streets, in the borderlands, in the sanctuary, in the garden, in the home.

Let us keep imagining.

And then—let us get to work.

Amen.