



## NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

**So Be It! See To It!**

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Octavia Butler was an African-American writer born in Pasadena in 1947. Despite her family's early admonitions that poverty and race would hold back her aspirations, Butler fell in love with writing at age 12. Her mother, seeing her scribbling furiously, said "Maybe you'll be a writer." And so it was. Butler was classified as a science fiction writer for her interest in imagining the future of Los Angeles, rooted in the social and political landscape of the past and the present day. Her genre-bending work created a new cultural movement Afro-futurism. Her papers are now housed at the Huntington Library, who is planning a 2017 exhibition of her work.

Butler created her characters using a complex medley of source material from science, literature, politics and spirituality. On this anniversary of her death, the Huntington has released images of handwritten notes, affirmations defining her future goals and success. One surfaced online this week worth sharing. On the back of a notebook, she writes:

I shall be a best-selling writer. After *Imago*, each of my books will be on the best seller lists of the LA Times, New York Times, Publishes Weekly, Washington Post, etc. This is my life. I write bestselling novels. My novels go into the bestseller lists and they reach the top and they stay on top for months (at least two.) Each of my novels does this. So be it! See to it! I will find the way to do this. So be it! See to it!!

In a different pen, she writes at the bottom:

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.  
My books will be read by millions of people! So be it! See to it!!

After struggling for decades in relative obscurity, Butler's success came from years of hard work, guided by a force of will. Butler believed she had a hand in shaping her own destiny, and that humankind's future rested on sharing this belief. In the pages of her novel *Parable of the Sower*, she turned her inventive personal spirituality into a fully formed religion, led by a young woman of color named Lauren Olamina, an idealized version of Butler's younger self. As one literary critic put it, "The religion is organized around a central proposition: the inevitability of change, and the consequent need to be adaptable and flexible in response to change."

*God is Power — Infinite, Irresistible, Inexorable, And yet, God is Pliable — Trickster, Teacher, Chaos, Clay. God exists to be shaped. God is Change.*

As it turned out, Butler's work was unfinished, her final novels frozen in draft form by her sudden death. Her new vision for collective life after crisis could never be fully developed. She

was never able to see the day when President Obama would be inaugurated, or to experience the leaps in science and technology that we currently experience as a part of our every day. She would have marveled at the news of the possibility of new planets and delighted in this week's reports of the distant cosmic call of gravitational waves, a confirmation of Einstein's 100 year old theory of general relativity. While Butler's life was cut short, her visions of new worlds continue to inspire and challenge generations of young people, including writers, artists and musicians. I bring in the work of Octavia Butler today as we are commemorating the month being reinvented as the second annual "Black Futures month." Black Lives Matter coined this phrase in place of "Black History Month" as a "deliberate reinterpretation of the resistance and resilience of Black people using creative expression to visualize the future." Today we lift up the inspiration and truth telling of black cultural expression that help us to honor the past, and imagine a future where black lives flourish alongside all existence.

Butler's affirmations are particularly compelling to us as Neighborhood is embarking on a visioning process to imagine the future of our church. One of my favorite exercises of the Vision Casting workshop is a craft project where participants create a magazine cover that symbolizes the future of the church. In the pilot group, the images invoked a future of connection, inclusion and service beyond our walls. After all of the visioning conversations are completed, the board will go on retreat in April to organize all that has been shared into a vision, a compelling story about the future wishes for our church.

A vision is what Rev. Jacqui Lewis of Middle Collegiate Church of New York City, an intentionally multicultural church, names "the preferred reality," — what our life together would look like and feel like if our highest aspirations became reality. A vision statement is written like one of Butler's affirmations: it is worded in language that is already true. Most famously, you might remember that Rev. Dr. Martin Luther coined "beloved community" as a vision for racial, economic and social harmony. King's beloved community is a heaven on earth where "brotherhood is a reality." In King's words:

People relate to one another across those non-rational, psychological barriers which have traditionally separated them in our society, and there is a complete sense of interrelatedness of humanity.

King's call to live as beloved community is a religious vision of the kingdom of God, both a practical mandate for the present and an aspiration for the future. Secular communities and organizations have shared this vision too. In his work on community building and civic engagement, author Peter Block calls this "restored community," where "possibility, generosity and accountability allow a new collective story to be written." We need both a religious and theological vision of why we need change and a process by which we create change together. Our imaginations and our stories are our most important tools in this process. In his book *Community: the Structure of Belonging*, Block writes, "Stories can give us a narrative to guide and instruct us. They are crucial to our knowing who we are; they provide a sense of identity."

We are embarking on a process of telling our stories, stories from the past which will help us define our future. Before she died, Butler published many essays, including a series of rules for creating the future, originally published in Essence magazine in 2000. The first is one we take to heart today:

*Learn From the Past, she said. Our past and present behaviors are 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. We forget history at our peril.*

Some of our most potent stories that will be unearthed in the Vision Casting process are about our past. Unitarian Universalists like to celebrate the best of our history, and to recall the shining moments when our values aligned with our actions. Last year, we celebrated the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the call to the 18 days of Selma civil rights demonstrations, when Unitarian Universalists joined hundreds of activists and religious leaders in Selma. Over the 18 days, nearly 500 Unitarian ministers and lay leaders joined the 30,000 clergy and activists taking part in the Voting Rights demonstrations and marches. Rev. Mark Morrison Reed is the foremost scholar of black Unitarian Universalist history. He writes of Selma:

Selma was about being in authentic relationship to one's values, promises, and hopes, and honoring them by committing one's life even unto death. In giving their selves over to that time and its demands, to their conscience and sense of honor, to their faith and what it stood for, to the future and what they all hoped for, they found redemption. This was the "Spirit of Selma"; in the midst of turmoil, their values and their lives became congruent.

This spirit of connection generated a fierce compassion that changed us as a denomination. In his book *Darkening the Doorways, Black Trailblazers and Missed Opportunities in Unitarian Universalism*, Morrison Reed warns, however, that the shining moments must be followed through with a sustained commitment to create new institutional systems of power and accountability in our congregation.

Rev. Morrison Reed's lessons from history are important for us to consider today. A denominational commitment to live in a way that truly values Black lives requires institutional commitment and discipline, over the long haul. Only a small percentage of religious congregations are racially and ethnically diverse, meaning there is at least 20% non-majority group membership. Ultimately, we need to learn from the stories of the past, both our shining moments and our failures. As Peter Block has written, "Some stories, however, become the limitation to creating anything new." To leave behind a story isn't to forget it, but to continue interpreting our faith in light of the demands of our changing world. What will our new story be?

A monumental shift in our American public life is in process. President Obama, the first African American to hold the highest office in our nation, will be moving into a new chapter. As a hotly contested presidential race takes center stage, it is hard to imagine what the future will hold. How will this chapter and a new one begin?

Do you remember how Obama's presidency began? I will never forget his inauguration day, feeling overcome with emotion as the poet Elizabeth Alexander offered her stunning delivery of her original poem: *Praise Song for the Day*:

What if the mightiest word is love?  
Love beyond marital, filial, national,  
love that casts a widening pool of light,  
love with no need to pre-empt grievance.  
In today's sharp sparkle, this winter air,  
any thing can be made, any sentence begun.  
On the brink, on the brim, on the cusp,  
praise song for walking forward in that light.

We begin here, celebrating black history and imagining black futures, sharing the stories of our spiritual connectedness and mutual respect. We return to our ethical commitment to live out our Seven Principles, and the spiritual commitment of our forebears, a Universalist love which will not let us go.

In Rev. Morrison-Reed's words:

We are deeply and inextricably connected to one another and all that ever was or shall be. We yearn to feel connected—and whole. As we love, are loved, and act out of that love, we are proclaiming 21<sup>st</sup> century universalism with our lives.

We begin here, telling those stories that need to be told about our highest hopes and sharing our deepest fears. Look around this sanctuary, at our beloved gathered community. Can you imagine the stories of our future we will write together? The possibilities are limitless. The love abounds. What is the answer to our query about the future? In Octavia Butler's words, there isn't one. There are many, and "you can be one if you choose to be – the very act of trying to look ahead to discern possibilities – and offer warnings is in itself an act of hope." Let's walk forward in that light.

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