

First Unitarian Church

September 17, 2023

In the 1993 science fiction book *Parable of the Sower*, Octavia Butler describes a United States of the future. It is the year 2024 in this futuristic book and social inequality has continued to grow. The climate has been irreparably changed by humans; water supplies have been depleted by mismanagement and overuse; addiction and homelessness have overrun cities, with the streets full of people with nowhere to go, some so wrecked they look like zombies; assault, theft, and property damage are constant threats; and those who have homes live in gated enclaves in the middle of it all.

The book, which again was written thirty years ago, also has an extremist conservative presidential candidate who whips up violence with his rhetoric and whose slogan is to “make America great again.”

When asked how she came up with all that, Octavia Butler said she just looked at the direction things were going—things like climate change (which we were only barely beginning to hear about in the early 90’s), mass incarceration, the widening gap between rich and poor, big pharma, gun violence, and the tech industry— and where that overall trajectory was likely to lead. Butler, a black woman who was born in 1947, also believed that social progress could be reversed. She predicted that as people faced unraveling social systems, change, and an uncertain future, racism would become more overt again.

Butler died in 2006. The eerie accuracy of many of her predictions reminds us that the seeds of today were sown a long time ago.

We live in anxious times. Some big things are going off the rails. Some other big things are wobbly.

Wobbly: American democracy. Civil rights.

Off the rails: climate change; water running out in the southwest; a for profit healthcare system that routinely bankrupts the sick, if they can even access it; mass incarceration; homelessness, drug abuse, and crime in our city. Here at the church, we are predicted to exceed our budget for campus security this year by thousands of dollars, mostly due to vandalism, property damage, and attempted break ins.

At one point this summer, our Director of Facilities came to the church in the middle of the night due to an alarm going off. He met the security company here, out on the south side of campus, but he says when he came around the corner into the courtyard, he saw a crowd of people, people in the middle of the night just standing around on this campus. Based on what we see all over the city during the day, it’s not so hard to imagine. Last month we had five or six windows broken one after the other, some by rocks and some by BB’s, including my office window.

We’ve got a presidential election coming up, and some right-wing candidates have been sowing distrust in our elections system. Meanwhile, in the months since the attack on our nation’s capital, openly racist, violent neo-fascist groups like the Proud Boys have set their sights on trans and gender nonconforming people.

Trans and gender nonconforming people, and people desperate to access abortion care, are fleeing conservative states, uprooting their lives, moving heaven and earth to come to places like New Mexico, where we may be desperately short on doctors, but at least health care is legal; and while it's not exactly safe, there is less overt hostility.

Maybe I should have a seat and just let Peter play some more music. Or can we watch fat bear week now? I tuned into the National Park Service's bear cam and had it on my TV in the background while I was writing this sermon. "Openly racist violent neo fascists." Big fat happy bear with salmon in mouth. I saw a huge bear do a full pounce like a cat and catch a fish.

We cope.

I'm talking about these big, difficult things because I know they are on your mind, too. Many of you have asked about security. First Unitarian openly supports –and in fact many of us are—the people being targeted by extremists. When will our *church* be targeted? The thought is frightening. And that is what extremists want.

The goal of violent extremists is to cause fear. Terrorists inspire terror. They make people afraid. When a racist mass shooting occurs, when synagogues are attacked, when a car drives into a group of protesters, or a drag queen story hour is canceled because armed men have promised to show up, that inspires terror. When extremists publish the personal info, the home address and phone numbers, of progressive leaders online to inundate them with threats of death and sexual violence, that inspires terror.

Recently, some UU congregations have had their services disrupted by right wing protesters, some received threatening mail, and one was firebombed several weeks ago.ⁱ Luckily, only the building was damaged.

UU congregations are having to plan for security, and we have taken some steps too. We only unlock certain entry doors in the mornings, for example, so we can monitor everyone who comes in. We don't leave front doors unattended. We keep the blinds lowered. We've fenced and reinforced parts of our campus that were attracting trouble. We recently held a de-escalation training for staff and lay leaders, and we've held other kinds of trainings in the past. We have security patrols. Just to name a few.

It's important to remember that those who want to terrorize are a small minority of the population. They are the *far* right. They are vastly outnumbered by people who disagree with them. That's why they resort to terror to exert control. But they are real, and very loud and, yes, scary.

In the face of all that, and an uncertain future, and the distressing changes we must cope with now, where do we get courage?

We're taking some chances in this church: trying to make a difference when the odds seem stacked against us; siding with love when hate is so threatening; and stepping up to hard work when people can always just opt out. Where do we get the courage?

I think one way to get at the answer is, paradoxically, to ask an even scarier question: What if we knew the world was ending? What if we knew, for example, that we only had five years? Before the end of the world.

There would be some freaking out. For sure. But beyond that, we'd have some real clarity. Over the last thirty years—since around the time Octavia Butler wrote that book—I've spent time with many people who knew they were at the ends of their lives, first as a caregiver and then as a minister, and I've seen this kind of clarity happen more times than I can count.

Facing the end, we'd know we have to focus on what matters. I'll bet, more than ever, we'd want to come together and sing. Just like today. We'd want to be thoughtful, contemplative, so we don't skim across the surface of our remaining time. We'd want depth. We'd want to look at each other's faces. We'd want to light candles. We'd want to have the kids in our congregation as close to us as possible. We'd want them right under our wings. If they offered us a blessing, like they did last Sunday in the courtyard, the line would stretch around the block. We would feed each other and our neighbors. We would refuse to tolerate, for one more day, the lie that there's nothing we can do about the hundreds of thousands of people who are forced to live on the streets while others hoard billions of dollars.

We would affirm, we would say out loud, louder than ever that life is precious and wondrous, and diversity is inherently sacred, and we would want to be in the circle with *everybody* because we'd know now is the time to love like we were always meant to.

We would do many of the things we already do, but we'd do them even more.

We'd plant flowers and visit those who are sick. We'd say I love you.

There's your answer. Fear can distract us, can paralyze us. But it can also be incredibly clarifying. That clarity gives us the courage to do what we know matters most. What makes live worth living.

Fear can put us in touch with what we know to be worthy deep down. Worthy, by the way, is related to the word worship. Worship is *worth-ship*. When we worship, we honor that which is most worthy.

What those who terrorize do not understand is that what we cannot be scared away from that which we hold at the center of our worship. That thing that we know is most worthy. That love.

In 2018, the Rev. Dr. Sofia Betancourt preached here. She is now the newly elected president of our denomination. This is her second time in that office. She served a three-month interim co-presidency in 2018, shortly before she visited First Unitarian. She is, as I have mentioned, an out, queer woman of color. And she's the national president of the Unitarian Universalist Association, a spokesperson and advocate on behalf of our progressive values and positions. She is right out in front. I can only imagine the courage that takes right now.

In her sermon, she shared from the Hebrew scriptures, from the prophet Habbakuk. This prophet is found in both the Jewish and Christian bibles. Habbakuk wrote almost 3000 years ago. He lived in a time of intense violence. His community was devastated by oppression. In his writings, he cries out to God—yells, really. Destruction and violence are everywhere, he says. "The law is paralyzed, and justice never prevails. The wicked hem in the righteous." They block them. Habbakuk compares his people to fish, and the oppressors to fishermen with huge nets. Everyone is dragged up in them, the reach of the oppressors is so overwhelming. What use is

God, what use is worship, what use is anything, Habbakuk is wondering. How will they go on? Where *is* God?

Finally, Habbakuk receives a reply. Habbakuk is a prophet, remember. So he is writing about anguish and injustice, and about the answer he perceives from God. That's what prophets do. Somehow in modern thought we came to imagine that a prophet is someone who sees the future. But no, what a prophet sees is their present. Any future they describe is kind of like what Octavia Butler did. She saw her present time more clearly than most, didn't she?

Thank goodness for the prophets. They write down the wisdom of the ancestors for us. Spiritual wisdom, hard won.

Habbukuk hears a reply and it is, "Make the vision plain. Write it down so that everyone who reads it can run." Running in this ancient Hebrew context doesn't mean running away or even running on legs at all. It means moving forward in accordance with God. In harmony with the divine. It may take a while, God tells Habbakuk, but the vision will not prove false.

Sofia Betancourt said, "We might say to one another that holding forth a powerful vision, holding forth our liberating message of love and justice, shows us how to move through the world in right relationship – in ways that bring us closer to our highest resolve."

In the face of fear, we get clarity. And by holding that vision right in front, together, we are guided on our path. We know what to do.

It matters, it is worthy, it is an act of worship, that we be who we are *together*. It is saving. It is salvific. We provide spiritual and physical shelter. We provide spiritual and physical nourishment. We hold up the thing that is also already happening, already being made true: an unshakable vision of love, equality, and community. A vision we can take up and run.

This too is sowing seeds.

Sometimes I get a little scared, too. But there is no other world I want than the one in which we are here, doing this, and we can look around at each other's faces and know who is going with us into this new church year, and we know that in other places here in town and across the country, others have found their courage too.

There is no world more worthy than this one in which we sing, and speak out, and sow good seeds, and bless each other.

We can do this.

I love you.

¹ <https://sidewithlove.org/responding-to-threats>