



UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST

CONGREGATION OF FREDERICK
Spirituality · Community · Justice

**Orwell, Atwood, Butler:
Reading for Resistance & Resilience**

The Rev. Dr. J. Carl Gregg

27 August 2017

frederickuu.org

When I first mentioned the idea of a three-part summer book discussion series here at UUCF on “[Reading for Resistance & Resilience](#)” to my wife Magin, who is an English professor at Frederick Community College, she was intrigued. But she also cautioned that George Orwell’s 1984, Margaret Atwood’s *The Handmaid’s Tale*, and Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Talents* “**might be the most depressing list of beach reading I’ve ever heard.**” I appreciate those of you who have persevered with me!

In retrospect, from the insights that have emerged from these book discussions, it seems clear to me that hosting these three Congregational Conversations on dystopian fiction was a good decision. To quote the contemporary author Ben Winter about the potential insights that can come from reading and discussing novels:

Fiction has a power to clarify, to galvanize, to prophesy, and warn. Fiction allows us to take big picture questions, big issues, big moral and socio-political changes and see how they play out on real people’s lives, with real individuals.

In that spirit, I would like to invite us reflect on some highlights from this series on “Reading for Resistance & Resilience.”

But before I plunge in fully, a caveat may be in order. In these trying times in our nation’s history, allow me to be clear that my intent is not politically partisan. The underlying motivation for this summer series of “Reading for Resistance & Resilience” is not about resisting one or another political party, it is about **wrestling with novels that show us what our present and**

future can look like if we allow our democratic and Constitutional norms to be undermined. And that is very much at the heart of our Unitarian Universalist living tradition, in which our 5th Principle is “The right of conscience and the use of the democratic process within our congregations and in society at large.”

That being said, when we describe Unitarian Universalism as a “liberal religious movement,” that is a reference not to a political party, but to the much older philosophical tradition of Liberalism, from the Latin root *liber*, meaning *free*. At the heart of Unitarian Universalism is the *freedom* for individuals to choose for themselves, based on the dictates of their conscience. We seek to be *liberal* in the best sense of the word: open to new ideas, generous, openhanded, open-hearted, and open-minded. And that means **there is room within our big tent for those who are *conservative* in the best sense of the word:** caring about the conservation of nature, upholding the beauty of traditions and rituals which have accrued deep meaning through time—reminding us of the importance of individual responsibility, community, authority, sanctity, and loyalty.

The other side of that coin is that there are morally repugnant points of view—anti-Semitism, racism, xenophobia, Islamophobia—which are beyond the pale even of our big tent. And our summer book discussion series has precisely been about **resistance and resilience in the face of movements which are anti-democratic, authoritarian, and opposed to the freedom, diversity, and tolerance that are core values in an open society.**

Now, as those of you who have been part of one or both of the previous two book discussions know, there is a lot to say about all these novels. But I will limit myself for now to only one highlight from each.

Our central discussion question for George Orwell’s *1984* was **“How is resistance and resilience cultivated in response to gaslighting, Big Brother and the Thought Police?”** Gaslighting attempts to make someone question their own sanity by telling them that they are wrong—despite all evidence to the contrary. It is a form of lying that is particularly manipulative and abusive. One of the ways this dynamic plays out in Orwell’s *1984* world of “Alternative Facts” is through the structure of the totalitarian regime in which the “Ministry of Truth”

produces *propaganda*, the “Ministry of Peace” wages *war*, and the “Ministry of Love” *imprisons* dissidents. The regime’s gaslighting slogan is that:

WAR IS PEACE

FREEDOM IS SLAVERY

IGNORANCE IS STRENGTH (91-92).

Along these lines, the single quote that has stuck with me the most from Orwell’s *1984* is: “**The heresy of heresies was common sense.... The Party told you to reject the evidence of your eyes and ears. It was their final, most essential command.**” (162-3).

But here’s the twist. In the end, these books are not about hopelessness and despair. They are cautionary tales, but they also expose paths of resistance and resilience. If we read Orwell’s *1984* against the grain, we can begin to see that if the party’s “final most essential command” is to “reject the evidence of your eyes and ears,” then we should redouble our efforts to *do precisely the opposite*: Don’t believe the dictator’s propaganda about “fake news” and against science. **Trust the evidence of your eyes and ears about what is actually going on; trust the facts from the overwhelming consensus of scientists.**

Our second book was Margaret Atwood, *The Handmaid's Tale*. If you haven’t watched the television series on Hulu, I recommended it. (It stars Elisabeth Moss, who also played Peggy Olson on *Mad Men*—as well as Zoey Bartlet on *West Wing*. I found myself occasionally thinking, “Don’t do that to Peggy/Zoey!”) It is not an easy watch, but it is powerful and ultimately hopeful. Our central discussion question for Atwood’s classic novel was, “**How can the lenses of patriarchy and feminism inform and empower movements of resistance and resilience?**” I am probably most haunted by Atwood’s own reflection that her novel is “An imagined account of what happens when not uncommon pronouncements about women are taken to their logical conclusions.” From the novel itself, the line that has stuck with me the most is from the protagonist Offred’s observation about Serena Joy, the wife of the couple who hold her captive. Serena’s character is based on real life figures like Phyllis Schafly, who during the movement to pass the Equal Rights Amendment, made an incredibly ironic argument *in public* that women should not participate in *public* life outside the home. In the book, Offred thinks to herself, “**How furious she must be, now that she’s been taken at her word.**” Again, reading

against the grain, we can see the vital importance of denouncing sexism and helping build a world of gender equality.

And if there were but “world enough and time,” there are so many other relevant dystopian novels that we could read and discuss. If you want to continue reading on your own, other top contenders I considered were:

- Philip Roth’s *The Plot Against America*,
- Robert Graves’s *I Claudius*, and
- Starhawk’s *The Fifth Sacred Thing*.

Related to the upcoming class on Bioethics I’ll be teaching this fall here at UUCF, the best supplemental novel to read would likely be Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*. But in preparing for the third and final part of our summer discussion series, I was interested to see that last month, The New Yorker joined a growing chorus of voices declaring that, **“In the ongoing contest over which dystopian classic is most applicable to our time, Octavia Butler’s ‘Parable’ books may be unmatched.”**

This sentiment is echoed in the central discussion question that will frame our Congregational Conversation later today about Octavia Butler’s *Parable of the Talents*: **What lessons might we learn from a novel published in 1998—almost twenty years ago—in which a populist, authoritarian zealot is elected President of the United States using the campaign slogan “Make American Great Again”?** *The New Yorker* calls her book prescient. Tragically, Butler is unable to speak for herself because she died in 2006 from a fall near her home at the far too young age of 58. But she is on the record in a brilliant speech at MIT from around the time *Parable of the Talents* was published saying, “This was not a book about prophecy; this was an if-this-goes-on story. This was a cautionary tale, although people have told me it was prophecy. All I have to say to that is, ‘I certainly hope not.’”

As Gerry Canavan details in his excellent book about Octavia E. Butler for the “Modern Masters of Science Fiction” series from University of Illinois Press, when Butler calls her novel an “if-this-goes-on story, she is explicitly referring to some of the worst trends of the Reagan era: greed, selfishness, war-mongering, race-baiting, and skepticism toward science (110).

I should hasten to add, however, that Butler was interested not only in dystopian cautionary tales, but also in the utopian imagination. To build a better world, we first have to dream “what might be.” And **Octavia Butler is a fascinating example of someone who lived deeply within that tension between dystopian realism and utopian hope.** To explore some of what we might learn from her writings and worldview, let me tell you a little more about her life.

Octavia Butler was born in 1947 in Pasadena, California. She was only a toddler when her father died, and was raised primarily by her grandmother and her mother, who was a housecleaner. Butler confesses to sometimes feeling ashamed of her mother, but she came to see her mother quite differently. In Butler’s words: “I didn’t have to leave school when I was ten, I never missed a meal, always had a roof over my head, *because* my mother was willing to do demeaning work.” Indeed, commentators have noted that, “Many of Butler’s most-beloved heroines would be women quite like her mother, **women who struggled and compromised, not because they were ‘frightened or timid or cowards’ but who made the best of no-win situations because ‘they were heroes.’**” And although her mother did not understand her daughter’s aspiration to be a professional writer, she nevertheless scraped together the money to buy Octavia her first typewriter and to fund attendance at her first science fiction writers’ workshop (14).

And although Butler wrote stories from a very young age, her call to write science fiction came when she was twelve years old, and saw a mediocre film titled *Devil Girl from Mars*. She later said:

As I was watching this film, I had a series of revelations. The first was that, “Geez, I can write a better story than that.” And then I thought, “Gee, anybody can write a better story than that.” And my third thought was the clincher: **“Somebody got paid for writing that awful story.”** So I was off and writing, and a year later I was busy submitting terrible pieces of fiction to innocent magazines. (15)

But it was a long journey from being a young African-American girl in the racially-segregated 1950s, dreaming of being a professional writer, to winning the MacArthur Foundation “genius grant” almost four decades later in 1995 (141).

As you can perhaps guess, she was given some pretty racist advice along the way, but it is powerful to witness the ways she persevered in bringing her experience of being both black and a woman to a science fiction field that at the time was almost exclusively dominated by white men. To give you one example, when she was told that race was an unwelcome topic in a genre allegedly best suited for “escapism,” she asked about *Star Wars*: **“Violence, kidnapping, and planetary destruction [are] all in good fun—but ‘the sight of a minority person? Too heavy? Too real?’”** (77).

Her best-known novel is *Kindred*, which turns on the idea that time traveling can be a very different prospect for a person of color who might find themselves returning to a time of legalized enslavement (62-63). And some of you may have seen the news that director Ava Duvernay—known for directing *Selma* (2014), *13th* (2016), and *A Wrinkle in Time* (2018)—has signed on to adapt for TV the first part of what may be Butler’s best work, her *Lilith’s Brood* trilogy. Those novels tell the story of **“a black woman named Lilith who, 250 years after humanity nearly incinerates itself in a nuclear war, works with aliens to restart the human race — primarily by mixing with aliens.** As you might expect, some other humans don’t take to the idea as quickly as Lilith” and therein lies the tale (5).

Regarding why science fiction matters beyond entertainment, Butler once wrote that,

We write about aliens because we can’t stop creating them out of each other.

We want aliens to be real so that we are not alone in a universe that cares no more for us than it does for stones or suns or any other fragments of itself. And yet we are unable to get along with those aliens who are closest to us, those aliens who are of course ourselves. (174)

And part of what makes Butler’s writing so compelling is that she does not write naïve utopian dreams. Her experiences as *woman in a sexist society* and as a *black person in a racist society* deeply inform her speculations about what the future might hold. In her words, **“I don’t write utopian science fiction because I don’t believe imperfect humans can form a perfect society”** (120-121).

In the Congregational Conversation, we’ll explore some specifics about the Earthseed communities that Butler’s characters dreamed about in response to rising political

authoritarianism and religious fundamentalism. And in the notes we have from her estate about the sequels she never had a chance to write, we will consider the twists and turns of how these utopian dreams may have played out. The upshot is that **Butler speculated that we humans might only choose solidarity across our differences in the face of extreme adversity** (151).

In a similar vein, as I have been reflecting on the science fiction of Octavia Butler, I was reminded that we recently passed the fiftieth anniversary of a sermon from another dreamer: The Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King. Fifty years ago last Wednesday, Dr. King delivered his famous sermon, later published as “Where Do We Go from Here: Chaos or Community?” **Some of our current leaders seem to know only how to lead us into chaos. But Dr. King, Octavia Butler, and so many other progressives called us in a different direction: toward beloved community.** Within our spheres of influence, may we each do our part—individually and collectively—to turn our dreams of beloved community into *deeds*.