

THE IMPACT OF COVID: EMBRACING THE CHANGE

by

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Four years ago, I wrote an essay after spending months in mourning, numbed by the acts and travesties that we witnessed during the campaign season and the subsequent news that #45 had been elected President. I focused on how the insidious rhetoric, racism, and sexism emanating from the mouth of #45 enraged, angered, and incensed us to galvanize as many people as we could to vote.

During that time of reflection, I was reminded of the dramatic rise in race riots and lynching during the post-Reconstruction era in our country. While the election results were coming in on the evening of November 5, 2016, my students were writing papers on Charles Chestnutt's *The Marrow of Tradition* (Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1901), a historical novel which presents a fictional account of the Wilmington 1898 riots and the impact of the "white backlash" after Reconstruction. They informed me that the parallels between the racial and political climate of the country at the turn of the century and what they were witnessing in the current racial and political climate were incredulous and once again represented a pivotal moment in history.

The results of the 2016 election and the rise in racial incidents subsequent to the election were indeed surreal. We witnessed how people in our nation responded to their perception of a loss in power, changing demographics, and the fact that a Black man had become President of one of the most powerful countries in the world. The post-election fiery campaign rhetoric and racially targeted incidents represented "white backlash in the making."

President Barack Obama's remarks in his farewell speech in January 2017 that "race still remains a potent and often divisive force in our society" foreshadowed the reign of racialized incidents that have continued to pervade our society.

My feelings of despair and anger over the obstacles negatively impacting Black and Brown people and the deadly toll of this devastating virus have resurfaced during this pandemic. Close to 100,000 people have died and the predictions are that there are more to come. I recently participated in a webinar: "Octavia Tried to Tell Us." The seminar focused on Octavia Butler and the belief system of "Earthseed" in Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (Four Walls Eight Windows Press, 1993), and *Parable of the Talents* (Seven Stories Press, 1998). It was a reminder that although we are not in control, we can use these life changing moments to make a difference in our lives and the lives of others. The webinar led by speculative fiction writer Tananarive Due and religious scholar/author Monica A. Coleman explored the ways in which Butler was a visionary.

Our visionaries plant the seeds for "reseeing and reimagining" our world view. Butler's concept of "Earthseed" in both books is based on a belief system that humanity's destiny is to travel beyond Earth and live on other planets in order for humanity to reach adulthood. Lauren, the protagonist in Butler's two novels is a sower of "Earthseed." The principles of "Earthseed" are listed below:

"All that you touch You Change.

All that you Change Changes you.

The only lasting truth Is Change.

God Is Change.

We are experiencing a dramatic change, a shift in our world view. Butler saw the inevitability that change would come. As we search for a new “normalcy” in this pandemic, we must embrace a vision that espouses the necessity of change. Despite the despair and hopelessness we face, there is hope for a brighter future. We have withstood humanitarian and economic disaster before.

In grappling with ways to cope with this pandemic, we have to engage in acts that will feed us spiritually, emotionally, and intellectually. Language, that is talking, reading, and writing is a way to make sense of the world, a way to explore that which frightens, excites, and comforts us. We find this language in our books, our songs, our letters, our diaries, and our journals. Danticat’s *Create Dangerously: Immigrant Writers at Work*, is a book that inspires us to look for ways to survive. Danticat tells the stories of artists who have risked their lives and who create despite the obstacles and horror that drove them from their homelands. *Create Dangerously* highlights the role of an artist for a country in crisis.

Excerpts from my journal entries during this pandemic reflect ways in which I have attempted to comprehend the meaning of this pandemic in our lives.

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Yesterday was better. Slept through the night. Monitoring my watching of the news.

Better to read the paper. Allows for more selectivity.

We are on the brink of a world-wide shift in how we move, live our lives and interact with the world. God has sent us a powerful message.

4/11/2020

The war against the coronavirus makes the war against poverty, homelessness, drugs and the criminal system more visible. It highlights the inequities of our system. It brings those issues into a sharper and clearer focus. It underscores that the war against “terrorism” (as pointed out in *When They Call You a Terrorist* by Patrisse Khan-Cullors and Asha Bandele, St. Martins, 2018), is a war that Black and Brown people face on a daily basis. This war is now starkly visible.

In this time of despair, we can look to our musicians, artists and writers for sustenance. As I continue to witness the endless coverage of this devastating pandemic and think about our future, the signature songs of three artists come to mind: Marvin Gaye’s “What’s Going On,” Curtis Mayfield’s “People Get Ready,” and Pharaoh Sanders’s “Save Our Children.” The words of Marvin Gaye provide a landscape that speaks to the disease that is ransacking our lives and the lives of our families, friends and communities near and far. There are far too many crying and dying, far too much suffering and pain. We need to find a way to bring love, peace, understanding, and hope to ourselves and to those in need. In “People Get Ready,” Curtis Mayfield sows the seeds of hope with words that are uplifting.

People get ready
There's a train a-coming
You don't need no baggage
You just get on board
All you need is faith
To hear the diesels humming
You don't need no ticket
You just thank the Lord

Pharaoh Sanders reminds us that we must save our children and not succumb to the despair and despondency we have all around us. His refrain is “All we need is inspiration”.

Our musical and literary artists bring us together and often act as agents for social change. Through their music and lyrics, they highlight critical issues and suggest ways that we can overcome. They are gifted visionaries, who through their insight, give us words and rhythms that feed our spirit and souls.

We will overcome these devastating times. We have many in our cultural history who have defied the odds and left a legacy informed by resistance and perseverance. Poet, singer, memoirist and civil rights activist Maya Angelou penned the poem “And Still I Rise.” Novelist, activist and screenwriter John O. Killens reminded us that we are long distance runners.

Writers, activists and luminary leaders such as Frances Harper Watkins, Frederick Douglass, Ida B. Wells, W.E.B. Du Bois, Richard Wright, Langston Hughes, Gwendolyn Brooks, Toni Cade Bambara, Audre Lorde and Octavia Butler have laid the foundation for overcoming obstacles of racism and injustice. The National Black Writers Conference at Medgar Evers College has honored many of our literary icons, scholars, public intellectuals, activists, and institution builders whose words and actions document our experiences, inspire us, and effect change. These include among others Amiri Baraka, Gwendolyn Brooks, Edwidge Danticat, Rita Dove, Michael Eric Dyson, Nikki Giovanni, David Levering Lewis, Haki Madhubuti, Toni Morrison, Eugene B. Redmond, Ishmael Reed, Randall Robinson, Sonia Sanchez, Susan L. Taylor, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, Quincy Troupe, Derek Walcott, Cornel West, Colson Whitehead, and August Wilson.

Poet and literary activist June Jordan penned the words “we are the ones we have been waiting for” in a poem that celebrated the South African women who resisted and presented themselves in a bodily protest against the “dompass” that Black people in South Africa were forced to carry during Apartheid. Alice Walker’s book, *We Are the Ones We Have Been Waiting For: Inner Light in a Time of Darkness* (The New Press, 2006), provides essays and meditations that remind us that the universe places us in spaces where we have to pause and reflect on ways that we can be the change. President Barack Obama ended many of his speeches with the words that “we are the ones we have been waiting for.”

We have no control over what is going on but we should keep the faith and remember our children, loved ones, and community. We must feed our inner selves and spirits and look for inspiration among our literary writers and cultural artists. We are indeed the ones we have been waiting for and we will survive.