

## **Imagining the Best, Imagining the Worst: What Use is fantasy? What Use Apocalypse?**

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We fantasize or imagine in order to stay alive. I want to be able to imagine what I haven't yet been able to imagine.

A journalist for the *New York Times* interviewed people about what they think about doing after the pandemic crisis is over. One imagined a big dance party. One imagined taking her kids to the playground where they could play together with other kids. The journalist, Tariro Mzezewa, writes that

With the [winter](#)'s end nowhere in sight, with coronavirus cases and deaths still high (and a [new variant at large](#) that's more transmissible), and with the Capitol breached and American democracy seemingly hanging in the balance, people have a need to look ahead to the parties they'll host, the hugs they'll give and receive, the conversations they'll have and the trips they'll take, once it's safe.<sup>1</sup>

In order to make it through, we need to be able to imagine what's at the end of the tunnel. Mzezewa interviewed Martin Seligman, a professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and the director of its Positive Psychology Center. The psych professor says

"Imagining the future — we call this skill *prospection* — and *prospection* is subserved by a set of brain circuits that juxtapose time and space and get you imagining things well and beyond the here and now," Dr. Seligman said. "The essence of resilience about the future is: How good a prospector are you?"  
How good a prospector are you? What are you able to imagine?

I love fantasy and science fiction — I love speculative fiction. I have since I was very young. I love the adventure and discovery of it. But mostly I love that moment when I feel like I'm imagining something I hadn't imagined before. I love it when a story brings me to a place that feels revelatory, that puts things together in ways I hadn't thought of before. I love it when I feel that my understanding, but even more: my *feel* for the world is different. The poet Tracy K. Smith says she loves poems because "The world I return to when the poem is over seems fuller and more comprehensible as a result" of the experience of that poem.<sup>2</sup>

I think this is why I treat poems and stories as sacred texts, or at least potentially sacred texts. It's a kind of spiritual experience, and one of the reasons I became a Unitarian Universalist was because ours is a faith tradition that affirms encountering poems and stories in this way. Here I found a community and a faith that joined me in celebrating the literary imagination as spiritually revelatory. Speculative fiction is not explicitly named in the official description of our six sources, but it's in there.

I know that I'm drawn to the ideas of justice doula adrienne maree brown in no small part because she says:

I read sci fi and visionary fiction as political, sacred, and philosophical text, and I engage with others who read it that way. [...] Science fiction, particularly visionary fiction, is where I go when I need the medicine of possibility applied to the trauma of human behavior.<sup>3</sup>

Visionary fiction, speculative fiction, as a source of a medicine of possibility that can be a balm for trauma... I think that's true. Good, visionary imagining is something we need in order to live into wholeness as individuals and as a society.

A couple weeks ago, I shared a quote from adrienne maree brown where she described us as trapped inside the oppressive imagining of others. Framing justice and healing work that way means that visionary imagining is vital. In her book *Emergent Strategy*, she says:

We are living now inside the imagination of people who thought economic disparity and environmental destruction were acceptable costs for their power. It is our right and responsibility to write ourselves into the future. All organizing is science fiction. If you are shaping the future, you are a futurist. And visionary fiction is a way to practice the future in our minds, alone and together.

We need visionary fiction because the imagination is one of the things that gets damaged by living in a society grounded in a foundational story of scarcity and exceptionalism, and some-people-are-worth-more-than-other-people. In that *New York Times* article encouraging us to fantasize, the journalist quotes Peg O'Connor, a professor of ethics at Gustavus Adolphus College in Minnesota, who points out that "A lot of people can't imagine good, joyful hopeful things because they are not able to or their lives have had so much difficulty that it feels foolhardy to."<sup>4</sup> But it's not just individual circumstance that undermines imagining. Brown, writing in this moment to a Black audience, describes imagination as

one of the spoils of colonization, which in many ways is claiming who gets to imagine the future for a given geography. Losing our imagination is a symptom of trauma. Reclaiming the right to dream the future, strengthening the muscle to imagine together as Black people, is a revolutionary decolonizing activity.

In my research for this sermon I learned about a book called *Black Imagination* published in 2020. It is a curated collection of short responses by black folks of all kinds to three questions:

What is your origin story?

How do you heal yourself?

Describe/Imagine a world where you are loved, safe, and valued.<sup>5</sup>

The artist Natasha Marin led the project. The impetus for the project was trauma she experienced after being attacked online after presenting a collaborative art project called *Reparations*. She says that "My genuine naiveté kept me from realizing that the word

‘reparations’ all by itself triggers racists.” The *Black Imagination* project is part of an effort toward imagining her own recovery and healing after that experience.

Many of the young black people she interviewed responded with beautiful imaginings of a world where they are loved and safe and valued. But some had a heartbreaking difficulty with the question. One response is particularly wrenching. Adrienne La Faye from Seattle said that:

Even when I attempted to imagine my made-up world, the magic was fleeting, and that in itself makes me want to weep. I didn’t realize how this question would affect me. I thought it would be fun, until I couldn’t see my possibilities even in my imaginary mind. Processing this question became incredibly more difficult when I thought about how the Black mother has to adjust her children’s perspective at age five, so they can safely attend kindergarten and not be harmed while away from her. I can’t answer this type of question because just the idea makes me feel worse knowing I might not ever achieve a glimpse of the WHAT IF I was loved, valued, and safe ...<sup>6</sup>

Let’s just hold that for a moment in our hearts.

Adrienne La Faye also referenced a verse from the Hebrew Bible: Proverbs 29.18 “When there is no vision, the people will perish.” We need to be able to imagine if we are to live.

And those of us who have no trouble imagining a world in which we are valued and safe and loved, we need to look at our imagining and be sure that the safety and value and love we imagine doesn’t come at the expense of others.

I’ve been reading a lot of visionary fiction written by several black women and one indigenous, Native American author. You’ve been treated to several of their book covers in the slides this morning. Very often, their stories are post-apocalyptic — they start in the wake of a catastrophe — and then the characters struggle their way through toward self-possession and healing. On the way, they explore fundamental questions of what it means to be human, and what does a society of equals look like?

There is a lot of violence on the course of those journeys. I sometimes wonder, from my white male cis-gender perch, why so much violence? Why apocalypse? But maybe recognizing my perch as privileged points me in the direction of answers to that. If we’re trying to imagine our way to resilience and wholeness, let’s not downplay the dangers. Let’s try instead to imagine them visible.

We need to be good at prospecting. We need imagination to live.

Looking for a balm for trauma? Want to stretch your imagination? Read some N.K. Jemisin or Octavia Butler. There are sacred stories in there. You will return to a world that is fuller and more comprehensible.

We need to be able to imagine a future that isn’t like the present or the past, because neither the present nor the past is quite where we want to be. If we simply return to “normal” after the crisis of this pandemic, that will be a failure of imagination.

We can do better, we can do more, we can be more. We can imagine more than we can now imagine.

I'll leave you with one of my favorite pieces in the *Black Imagination* collection. This is the voice of Samantha Hollins of Claymont, Delaware.

Visualization is my sharp sword combating toxic environments. I am in a bubble of brightness that ignites a combustion of zapping pressure anytime hazardous energy invades my atmosphere. I create my personal paradise like a shield that blocks off the street as soon as my body enters zones from my outside world. My inside world is a village of heart-shaped sanity that wraps its arms around my royal dark blue skin. I am crowned with luxurious serenity and blessed with lavish peace of mind when in my safe haven. We teach love (*Namaste*). We teach kindness (à) and pass it around like a contagious condition everyone needs to acquire. My door frame is a trap that zaps all approaching *isms*. My windowpane will blast peeping green eyes to another dimension. Juju beams of light gather ancient hands to remove the residue of haters from my stoop. Sacred space is the eclipse over my holy place.<sup>7</sup>

May we imagine a village of heart-shaped sanity wrapping its arms around dark blue skin. May we imagine blessings of serenity and peace for one another. May we teach love. May your doorframe zap all approaching *isms*. May you imagine six impossible things before breakfast. May our imagining together create sacred space that values the unvalued, celebrates the worth of those treated as unworthy, and brings healing and wholeness to the broken. May we imagine together our world as a place holy beyond our present imagining. As adrienne maree brown says, "We are creating a world we have never seen."<sup>8</sup> May it be so.

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<sup>1</sup> Tariro Mzezewa. "Go Ahead. Fantasize." *the New York Times*. January 16, 2021 <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/16/style/go-ahead-fantasize.html>

<sup>2</sup> Tracy K. Smith. Introduction. *American Journal: Fifty Poems for Our Time*. Edited by Tracy K. Smith. Greywolf Press, 2018.

<sup>3</sup> brown, adrienne maree. *Emergent Strategy: Shaping Change, Changing Worlds*. AK Press, 2017. Kindle Edition.

<sup>4</sup> Mzezewa.

<sup>5</sup> Natasha Marin, curator. *Black Imagination*. McSweeney's, 2020.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> adrienne maree brown. *Emergent Strategy*.