



BRAVE NEW WORLDS

Two of our award-winning literary icons reflect on the awesome responsibility we each hold—that of shaping our own destiny

OCTAVIA E. BUTLER

A FEW RULES FOR PREDICTING
THE FUTURE



The science-fiction author looks ahead
at what we can and cannot know

"SO DO YOU REALLY believe that in the future we're going to have the kind of trouble you write about in your books?" a student asked me as I was signing books after a talk. The young man was referring to the troubles I'd described in *Parable of the Sower* and *Parable of the Talents*, novels that take place in a near future of increasing drug addiction and illiteracy, marked by the popularity of prisons and the unpopularity of public schools, the vast and growing gap between the rich and everyone else, and the whole nasty family of problems brought on by global warming.

"I didn't make up the problems," I pointed out. "All I did was look around at the problems we're neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters."

"Okay," the young man challenged. "So what's the answer?"

"There isn't one," I told him.

"No answer? You mean we're just doomed?" He smiled

as though he thought this might be a joke.

"No," I said. "I mean there's no single answer that will solve all of our future problems. There's no magic bullet. Instead there are thousands of answers—at least. You can be one of them if you choose to be."

Several days later, by mail, I received a copy of the young man's story in his college newspaper. He mentioned my talk, listed some of my books and the future problems they dealt with. Then he quoted his own question: "What's the answer?" The article ended with the first three words of my reply, wrongly left standing alone: "There isn't one."

It's sadly easy to reverse meaning, in fact, to tell a lie, by offering an accurate but incomplete quote. In this case, it was frustrating because the one thing that I and my main characters never do when contemplating the future is give up hope. In fact, the very act of trying to look ahead to discern possibilities and offer warnings is in itself an act of hope. ▷

RULES FOR PREDICTING THE FUTURE

Learn From the Past

Of course, writing novels about the future doesn't give me any special ability to foretell the future. But it does encourage me to use our past and present behaviors as 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.

When I was preparing to write *Parable of the Talents*, I needed to think about how a country might slide into fascism—something that America does in *Talents*. So I reread *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* and other books on Nazi Germany. I was less interested in the fighting of World War II than in the pre-war story of how Germany changed as it suffered social and economic problems, as Hitler and others bludgeoned and seduced, as the Germans responded to the bludgeoning and the seduction and to their own history, and as Hitler used that history to manipulate them. I wanted to understand the lies that people have to tell themselves when they either quietly or joyfully watch their neighbors ruined, spirited away, killed. Different versions of this horror have happened again and again in history. They're still happening in places like Rwanda, Bosnia, Kosovo and East Timor, wherever one group of people permits its leaders to convince them that for their own protection, for the safety of their families and the security of their country, they must *get* their enemies, those alien others who until now were their neighbors.

It's easy enough to spot this horror when it happens elsewhere in the world or elsewhere in time. But if we are to spot it here at home, to spot it before it can grow and do its worst, we must pay more attention to history. This came home to me a few years ago, when I lived across the street from a 15-year-old girl whose

grandfather asked me to help her with homework. The girl was doing a report on a man who had fled Europe during the 1930's because of some people called—she hesitated and then pronounced a word that was clearly unfamiliar to her—"the Nay-zees?" It took me a moment to realize that she meant the Nazis, and that she knew absolutely nothing about them. We forget history at our peril.



Last January, when the White House asked Octavia Butler, 52, to write a memorandum to the President outlining her vision of the future, the author chose education as her subject. "I was poor, Black, the daughter of a shoeshine man and a maid," Butler explains. "At best I was treated with gentle condescension when I said I wanted to be a writer. Now I write for a living. Without the excellent, free public education that I was able to take advantage of, I might have found other things to do with my deferred dreams and stunted ambitions." Instead she went on to garner science fiction's highest honors, the Hugo and Nebula awards.

*Butler, a native of Pasadena, California, is the author of 11 critically acclaimed novels. Her loyalists return again and again to the worlds created in such titles as *Patternmaster*, *Imago*, *Kindred* and, most recently, *Parable of the Sower*, a haunting coming-of-age, feminist road novel, and its more hopeful sequel, *Parable of the Talents*. Winner of a 1995 MacArthur Fellowship for her fiction, Butler now lives and works in the Seattle area.*

Respect the Law of Consequences

Just recently I complained to my doctor that the medicine he prescribed had a very annoying side effect.

"I can give you something to counteract that," my doctor said.

"A medicine to counteract the effects of another medicine?" I asked.

He nodded. "It will be more comfortable for you."

I began to backpedal. I *hate* to take medicine. "The problem isn't that bad." I said. "I can deal with it."

"You don't have to worry," my doctor said. "This second medication works and there are no side effects."

That stopped me. It made me absolutely certain that I didn't want the second medicine. I realized that I didn't believe there were any medications that had no side effects. In fact, I don't believe we can do anything at all without side effects—also known as unintended consequences. Those consequences may be beneficial or harmful. They may be too slight to matter or they may be worth the risk because the potential benefits are great, but the consequences are always there. In *Parable of the Sower*, my character put it this way:

All that you touch/You Change
All that you Change/Changes you
The only lasting truth/Is Change
God/Is Change

Be Aware of Your Perspective

How many combinations of unintended consequences and human reactions to them does it take to detour us into a future that seems to

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defy any obvious trend? Not many. That's why predicting the future accurately is so difficult. Some of the most mistaken predictions I've seen are of the straight-line variety—that's the kind that ignores the inevitability of unintended consequences, ignores our often less-than-logical reactions to them, and says simply, "In the future, we will have more and more of whatever's holding our attention right now." If we're in a period of prosperity, then in the future, prosperity it will be. If we're in a period of recession, we're doomed to even greater distress. Of course, predicting an impossible state of permanent prosperity may well be an act of fear and superstitious hope rather than an act of unimaginative, straight-line thinking. And predicting doom in difficult times may have more to do with the sorrow and depression of the moment than with any real insight into future possibilities. Superstition, depression and fear play major roles in our efforts at prediction.

It's also true that where we stand determines what we're able to see. Where I stood when I began to pay attention to space travel certainly influenced what I saw. I followed the space race of the late 1950's and the 1960's not because it was a race, but because it was taking us away from Earth, away from home, away to investigate the mysteries of the universe and, I thought, to find new homes for humanity out there. This appealed to me, at least in part, because I was in my teens and beginning to think of leaving my mother's house and investigating the mysteries of my own adulthood.

Apollo 11 reached the moon in July 1969. I had already left home by then, and I believed I was watching humanity leave home. I assumed that we would go on to establish lunar colonies and eventually send people to Mars. We probably will do those things someday, but I never imagined that it would take as long as it has. Moral: Wishful thinking is no more help in predicting the future than fear, superstition or depression.

Count On the Surprises

I was speaking to a group of college students not long ago, and I mentioned the fear we'd once had of nuclear war with the Soviet Union. The kids I was talking to were born around 1980, and one of them spoke up to say that she had never worried about nuclear war. She had never believed that such a thing could possibly happen—she thought the whole idea was nonsense.

She could not imagine that during the Cold War days of the sixties, seventies and eighties, no one would have dared to predict a peaceful resolution in the nineties. I remembered air-raid drills when I was in elementary school, how we knelt, heads down against corridor walls with our bare hands supposedly protecting our bare necks, hoping that if nuclear war ever happened, Los Angeles would be spared. But the threat of nuclear war is gone, at least for the present, because to our surprise our main rival, the Soviet Union, dissolved itself. No matter how hard we try to foresee the future, there are always these surprises. The only safe prediction is that there always will be.

So why try to predict the future at all if it's so difficult, so nearly impossible? Because making predictions is one way to give warning when we see ourselves drifting in dangerous directions. Because prediction is a useful way of pointing out safer, wiser courses. Because, most of all, our tomorrow is the child of our today. Through thought and deed, we exert a great deal of influence over this child, even though we can't control it absolutely. Best to think about it, though. Best to try to shape it into something good. Best to do that for any child. ♦

30 LIFE LESSONS

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"Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. We are all living in God's grace, and we all have an obligation to 'dance' in that light."

*Judith Jamison, artistic director
Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater*

"My life song has been a challenge to the status quo. I believe that rules are

meant to be broken, and risks are there to be taken. But when I get so far out on a limb that I'm about to fall, I remember the advice I received from Grandmother Rose: A hard head makes a soft behind."

*Julianne Malveaux, economist, author, TV
and radio personality*

"Bloom where you are planted. When you do your best where you are, your excellence will be noticed. This work is the foundation of a solid career and good reputation."

Alexis Herman, U.S. Secretary of Labor

"Be gentle to and forgiving of yourself and others. Life is too short and far too precious to be angry and spiteful. Meanness will destroy your spirit. Each day is unique and offers a lesson, so learn to treasure each one for the gift that it is."

Valerie Wilson Wesley, author

"I made a mess of my life, personally and professionally. I made countless mistakes and hurt lots of people. Even though God graciously forgave me and others forgave me, too, I was unable to forgive others or myself. I was bound in a self-imposed prison of anger and regret, hopelessly held hostage by my depression. Today I am no longer the victim of my circumstances. Whether by the hands of others or my very own, I'm finally free from the past. My philosophy? Let others off the hook! Get yourself off the cross! And take your life off the hold button!"

Jennifer Holliday, singer, actress

"Life, when fully lived, is about lessons. I have found that life is richest when it centers on learning, on exploring the unknown, and rediscovering what is working and what is not working well in our world. I find the ways I can contribute, in some small measure, to making it a better world. I learn the most about myself as I come to understand and respect those who are different from me. And the most profound lesson of all flows from [CONTINUED ON PAGE 266]