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Parable of the Sower

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Parable of the Sower

Octavia E. Butler

Contents

2024

PRODIGY IS, AT ITS essence, adaptability and persistent, positive obsession. Without persistence, what remains is an enthusiasm of the moment. Without adaptability, what remains may be channeled into destructive fanaticism. Without positive obsession, there is nothing at all.

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

by Lauren Oya Olamina

1

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

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Saturday, July 20, 2024

I HAD MY RECURRING dream last night. I guess I should have expected it. It comes to me when I struggle—when I twist on my own personal hook and try to pretend that nothing unusual is happening. It comes to me when I try to be my father's daughter. Today is our birthday—my fifteenth and my father's fifty-fifth. Tomorrow, I'll try to please him—him and the community and God. So last night, I dreamed a reminder that it's all a lie. I think I need to write about the dream because this particular lie bothers me so much.

I'm learning to fly, to levitate myself. No one is teaching me. I'm just learning on my own, little by little, dream lesson by dream lesson. Not a very subtle image, but a persistent one. I've had many lessons, and I'm better at flying than I used to be. I trust my ability more now, but I'm still afraid. I can't quite control my directions yet.

I lean forward toward the doorway. It's a doorway like the one between my room and the hall. It seems to be a long way from me, but I lean toward it. Holding my body stiff and tense, I let go of whatever I'm grasping,

whatever has kept me from rising or falling so far. And I lean into the air, straining upward, not moving upward, but not quite falling down either. Then I do begin to move, as though to slide on the air drifting a few feet above the floor, caught between terror and joy.

I drift toward the doorway. Cool, pale light glows from it. Then I slide a little to the right; and a little more. I can see that I'm going to miss the door and hit the wall beside it, but I can't stop or turn. I drift away from the door, away from the cool glow into another light.

The wall before me is burning. Fire has sprung from nowhere, has eaten in through the wall, has begun to reach toward me, reach for me. The fire spreads. I drift into it. It blazes up around me. I thrash and scramble and try to swim back out of it, grabbing handfuls of air and fire, kicking, burning! Darkness.

Perhaps I awake a little. I do sometimes when the fire swallows me. That's bad. When I wake up all the way, I can't get back to sleep. I try, but I've never been able to.

This time I don't wake up all the way. I fade into the second part of the dream—the part that's ordinary and real, the part that did happen years ago when I was little, though at the time it didn't seem to matter.

Darkness.

Darkness brightening.

Stars.

Stars casting their cool, pale, glinting light.

"We couldn't see *so* many stars when I was little," my stepmother says to me. She speaks in Spanish, her own first language. She stands still and small, looking up at the broad sweep of the Milky Way. She and I have gone out after dark to take the washing down from the clothesline. The day has been hot, as usual, and we both like the cool darkness of early night. There's no moon, but we can see very well. The sky is full of stars.

The neighborhood wall is a massive, looming presence nearby. I see it as a crouching animal, perhaps about to spring, more threatening than

protective. But my stepmother is there, and she isn't afraid. I stay close to her. I'm seven years old.

I look up at the stars and the deep, black sky. "Why couldn't you see the stars?" I ask her. "Everyone can see them." I speak in Spanish, too, as she's taught me. It's an intimacy somehow.

"City lights," she says. "Lights, progress, growth, all those things were too hot and too poor to bother with anymore." She pauses. "When I was your age, my mother told me that the stars—the few stars we could see—were windows into heaven. Windows for God to look through to keep an eye on us. I believed her for almost a year." My stepmother hands me an armload of my youngest brother's diapers. I take them, walk back toward the house where she has left her big wicker laundry basket, and pile the diapers atop the rest of the clothes. The basket is full. I look to see that my stepmother is not watching me, then let myself fall backward onto the soft mound of stiff, clean clothes. For a moment, the fall is like floating.

I lie there, looking up at the stars. I pick out some of the constellations and name the stars that make them up. I've learned them from an astronomy book that belonged to my father's mother.

I see the sudden light streak of a meteor flashing westward across the sky. I stare after it, hoping to see another. Then my stepmother calls me and I go back to her.

"There are city lights now," I say to her. "They don't hide the stars."

She shakes her head. "There aren't anywhere near as many as there were. Kids today have no idea what a blaze of light cities used to be—and not that long ago."

"I'd rather have the stars," I say.

"The stars are free." She shrugs. "I'd rather have the city lights back myself, the sooner the better. But we can afford the stars."

2

A gift of God
May sear unready fingers.

EARTHSEED: THE BOOKS OF THE LIVING

Sunday, July 21, 2024

AT LEAST THREE YEARS ago, my father's God stopped being my God. His church stopped being my church. And yet, today, because I'm a coward, I let myself be initiated into that church. I let my father baptize me in all three names of that God who isn't mine any more.

My God has another name.

We got up early this morning because we had to go across town to church. Most Sundays, Dad holds church services in our front rooms. He's a Baptist minister, and even though not all of the people who live within our neighborhood walls are Baptists, those who feel the need to go to church are glad to come to us. That way they don't have to risk going outside where things are so dangerous and crazy. It's bad enough that some people—my father for one—have to go out to work at least once a week. None of us goes out to school any more. Adults get nervous about kids going outside.

But today was special. For today, my father made arrangements with another minister—a friend of his who still had a real church building with a real baptistery.

Dad once had a church just a few blocks outside our wall. He began it before there were so many walls. But after it had been slept in by the homeless, robbed, and vandalized several times, someone poured gasoline in and around it and burned it down. Seven of the homeless people sleeping inside on that last night burned with it.

But somehow, Dad's friend Reverend Robinson has managed to keep his church from being destroyed. We rode our bikes to it this morning—me, two of my brothers, four other neighborhood kids who were ready to be baptized, plus my father and some other neighborhood adults riding shotgun. All the adults were armed. That's the rule. Go out in a bunch, and go armed.

The alternative was to be baptized in the bathtub at home. That would have been cheaper and safer and fine with me. I said so, but no one paid attention to me. To the adults, going outside to a real church was like stepping back into the good old days when there were churches all over the place and too many lights and gasoline was for fueling cars and trucks instead of for torching things. They never miss a chance to relive the good old days or to tell kids how great it's going to be when the country gets back on its feet and good times come back.

Yeah.

To us kids—most of us—the trip was just an adventure, an excuse to go outside the wall. We would be baptized out of duty or as a kind of insurance, but most of us aren't that much concerned with religion. I am, but then I have a different religion.

"Why take chances," Silvia Dunn said to me a few days ago. "Maybe there's something to all this religion stuff." Her parents thought there was, so she was with us.

My brother Keith who was also with us didn't share any of my beliefs. He just didn't care. Dad wanted him to be baptized, so what the hell. There wasn't much that Keith did care about. He liked to hang out with his friends and pretend to be grown up, dodge work and dodge school and dodge church. He's only twelve, the oldest of my three brothers. I don't like him much, but he's my stepmother's favorite. Three smart sons and one dumb one, and it's the dumb one she loves best.

Keith looked around more than anyone as we rode. His ambition, if you could call it that, is to get out of the neighborhood and go to Los Angeles. He's never too clear about what he'll do there. He just wants to go to the big city and make big money. According to my father, the big city is a carcass

covered with too many maggots. I think he's right, though not all the maggots are in LA. They're here, too.

But maggots tend not to be early-morning types. We rode past people stretched out, sleeping on the sidewalks, and a few just waking up, but they paid no attention to us. I saw at least three people who weren't going to wake up again, ever. One of them was headless. I caught myself looking around for the head. After that, I tried not to look around at all.

A woman, young, naked, and filthy stumbled along past us. I got a look at her slack expression and realized that she was dazed or drunk or something.

Maybe she had been raped so much that she was crazy. I'd heard stories of that happening. Or maybe she was just high on drugs. The boys in our group almost fell off their bikes, staring at her. What wonderful religious thoughts they would be having for a while.

The naked woman never looked at us. I glanced back after we'd passed her and saw that she had settled down in the weeds against someone else's neighborhood wall.

A lot of our ride was along one neighborhood wall after another; some a block long, some two blocks, some five. … Up toward the hills there were walled estates—one big house and a lot of shacky little dependencies where the servants lived. We didn't pass anything like that today. In fact we passed a couple of neighborhoods so poor that their walls were made up of unmortared rocks, chunks of concrete, and trash. Then there were the pitiful, unwalled residential areas. A lot of the houses were trashed—burned, vandalized, infested with drunks or druggies or squatted-in by homeless families with their filthy, gaunt, half-naked children. Their kids were wide awake and watching us this morning. I feel sorry for the little ones, but the ones my age and older make me nervous. We ride down the middle of the cracked street, and the kids come out and stand along the curb to stare at us. They just stand and stare. I think if there were only one or two of us, or if they couldn't see our guns, they might try to pull us down and steal our bikes, our clothes, our shoes, whatever. Then what? Rape? Murder? We

could wind up like that naked woman, stumbling along, dazed, maybe hurt, sure to attract dangerous attention unless she could steal some clothing. I wish we could have given her something.

My stepmother says she and my father stopped to help an injured woman once, and the guys who had injured her jumped out from behind a wall and almost killed them.

And we're in Robledo—20 miles from Los Angeles, and, according to Dad, once a rich, green, unwalled little city that he had been eager to abandon when he was a young man. Like Keith, he had wanted to escape the dullness of Robledo for big city excitement. L.A. was better then—less lethal. He lived there for 21 years. Then in 2010, his parents were murdered and he inherited their house. Whoever killed them had robbed the house and smashed up the furniture, but they didn't torch anything. There was no neighborhood wall back then.

Crazy to live without a wall to protect you. Even in Robledo, most of the street poor—squatters, winos, junkies, homeless people in general—are dangerous. They're desperate or crazy or both. That's enough to make anyone dangerous.

Worse for me, they often have things wrong with them. They cut off each other's ears, arms, legs. … They carry untreated diseases and festering wounds. They have no money to spend on water to wash with so even the unwounded have sores. They don't get enough to eat so they're malnourished—or they eat bad food and poison themselves. As I rode, I tried not to look around at them, but I couldn't help seeing—collecting—some of their general misery.

I can take a lot of pain without falling apart. I've had to learn to do that. But it was hard, today, to keep pedaling and keep up with the others when just about everyone I saw made me feel worse and worse.

My father glanced back at me every now and then. He tells me, "You can beat this thing. You don't have to give in to it." He has always pretended, or perhaps believed, that my hyperempathy syndrome was something I could shake off and forget about. The sharing isn't real, after all. It isn't some

magic or ESP that allows me to share the pain or the pleasure of other people. It's delusional. Even I admit that. My brother Keith used to pretend to be hurt just to trick me into sharing his supposed pain. Once he used red ink as fake blood to make me bleed. I was eleven then, and I still bled through the skin when I saw someone else bleeding. I couldn't help doing it, and I always worried that it would give me away to people outside the family.

I haven't shared bleeding with anyone since I was twelve and got my first period. What a relief that was. I just wish all the rest of it had gone away, too. Keith only tricked me into bleeding that once, and I beat the hell out of him for it. I didn't fight much when I was little because it hurt me so. I felt every blow that I struck, just as though I'd hit myself. So when I did decide that I had to fight, I set out to hurt the other kid more than kids usually hurt one another. I broke Michael Talcott's arm and Rubin Quintanilla's nose. I knocked out four of Silvia Dunn's teeth. They all earned what I did to them two or three times over. I got punished every time, and I resented it. It was double punishment, after all, and my father and stepmother knew it. But knowing didn't stop them. I think they did it to satisfy the other kids' parents. But when I beat up Keith, I knew that Cory or Dad or both of them would punish me for it—my poor little brother, after all. So I had to see that my poor little brother paid in advance. What I did to him had to be worthwhile in spite of what they would do to me.

It was.

We both got it later from Dad—me for hurting a younger kid and Keith for risking putting "family business" into the street. Dad is big on privacy and "family business." There's a whole range of things we never even hint about outside the family. First among these is anything about my mother, my hyperempathy, and how the two are connected. To my father, the whole business is shameful. He's a preacher and a professor and a dean. A first wife who was a drug addict and a daughter who is drug damaged is not something he wants to boast about. Lucky for me. Being the most vulnerable person I know is damned sure not something I want to boast about.

I can't do a thing about my hyperempathy, no matter what Dad thinks or wants or wishes. I feel what I see others feeling or what I believe they feel. Hyperempathy is what the doctors call an "organic delusional syndrome." Big shit. It hurts, that's all I know. Thanks to Paracetco, the small pill, the Einstein powder, the particular drug my mother chose to abuse before my birth killed her, I'm crazy. I get a lot of grief that doesn't belong to me, and that isn't real. But it hurts.

I'm supposed to share pleasure *and* pain, but there isn't much pleasure around these days. About the only pleasure I've found that I enjoy sharing is sex. I get the guy's good feeling and my own. I almost wish I didn't. I live in a tiny, walled fish-bowl cul-de-sac community, and I'm the preacher's daughter. There's a real limit to what I can do as far as sex goes.

Anyway, my neurotransmitters are scrambled and they're going to stay scrambled. But I can do okay as long as other people don't know about me. Inside our neighborhood walls I do fine. Our rides today, though, were hell. Going and coming, they were all the worst things I've ever felt—shadows and ghosts, twists and jabs of unexpected pain.

If I don't look too long at old injuries, they don't hurt me too much. There was a naked little boy whose skin was a mass of big red sores; a man with a huge scab over the stump where his right hand used to be; a little girl, naked, maybe seven years old with blood running down her bare thighs. A woman with a swollen, bloody, beaten face. …

I must have seemed jumpy. I glanced around like a bird, not letting my gaze rest on anyone longer than it took me to see that they weren't coming in my direction or aiming anything at me.

Dad may have read something of what I was feeling in my expression. I try not to let my face show anything, but he's good at reading me. Sometimes people say I look grim or angry. Better to have them think that than know the truth. Better to have them think anything than let them know just how easy it is to hurt me.

Dad had insisted on fresh, clean, potable water for the baptism. He couldn't afford it, of course. Who could? That was the other reason for the four extra kids:

Silvia Dunn, Hector Quintanilla, Curtis Talcott, and Drew Baiter, along with my brothers Keith and Marcus. The other kids' parents had helped with costs. They thought a proper baptism was important enough to spend some money and take some risks. I was the oldest by about two months. Curtis was next. As much as I hated being there, I hated even more that Curtis was there. I care about him more than I want to. I care what he thinks of me. I worry that I'll fall apart in public some day and he'll see. But not today.

By the time we reached the fortress-church, my jaw-muscles hurt from clinching and unclinching my teeth, and overall, I was exhausted.

There were only five or six dozen people at the service—enough to fill up our front rooms at home and look like a big crowd. At the church, though, with its surrounding wall and its security bars and Lazor wire and its huge hollowness inside, and its armed guards, the crowd seemed a tiny scattering of people. That was all right. The last thing I wanted was a big audience to maybe trip me up with pain.

The baptism went just as planned. They sent us kids off to the bathrooms ("men's," "women's," "please do not put paper of any kind into toilets," "water for washing in bucket at left. …") to undress and put on white gowns. When we were ready, Curtis's father took us to an anteroom where we could hear the preaching—from the first chapter of Saint John and the second chapter of The Acts—and wait our turns.

My turn came last. I assume that was my father's idea. First the neighbor kids, then my brothers, then me. For reasons that don't make a lot of sense to me, Dad thinks I need more humility. I think my particular biological humility—or humiliation—is more than enough.

What the hell? Someone had to be last. I just wish I could have been courageous enough to skip the thing altogether.

So, "In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Ghost. …"