

“Kindred”
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Sermon, part 1: “What happened?”

Today we build on a service from last May. I know it was a while ago and you may have missed that weekend, so here’s a quick re-cap: Our stories—the narratives we inherit and create—matter. Having stories that speak to us and our worlds and being able to share those stories by holding in common some elements of them is important. Stories bind us to each other.

At that service, I also invited everyone to join me in reading the novel *Kindred* by Octavia Butler in preparation for this month’s theme of ancestry. I didn’t know if the idea of an all congregation read would find traction but I have been so excited by how many of you jumped on board and read *Kindred*! Thank you to everyone who showed me for real the power of my words in May, that stories matter and, even more importantly, are meant to be shared. I have treasured the emails, phone calls, impromptu conversations and even an actual handwritten letter about your favorite parts and what you hated and what it all meant to you. Let’s continue this conversation during Congregational Response.

I suspect that the reason this novel resonated with many of you is also why even if you didn’t read it, I don’t think you’ll have trouble following along today and hopefully you too will be able to get something thoughtful out of this service. The reality is that we all have something in our family history that’s hard to digest. It might be something we did or experienced ourselves or it could have happened without our presence, maybe even before we or our parents or their parents were born.

Family secrets can be shameful, scary, confusing, bad. Perhaps all those things together. Burying them might even seem like a good way to prevent them from impacting or changing our lives... for a while, at least. Probably each of us has grappled with our own personal version of the central dilemma experienced by Dana, the main character of *Kindred*, who is forced to confront her hidden family history when it suddenly appears in her life.

We all have histories that culminate in us being who we are. Most of us have to eventually figure out how to make sense of them, heal from them if they are bad or sad and then move on. Facing hard legacies—of mental illness, closeted gender identity and sexual orientation, domestic and sexual violence, poverty, whatever might be within you and in your origin story—is rarely (if ever) fun. Usually people become willing to do so not only because they are

brave (although courage for such an endeavor is certainly part of the equation) but because it gets unavoidable. There are times when we must square with our past in order to understand who we are today, let alone be able to imagine moving forward tomorrow.

Kindred takes this one giant step further. Part time-travel tale and part slave narrative, it was first published in 1979 and remains popular. In fact, the Appleton Area School District just welcomed it into their approved curriculum. The book is the first-person account of a young African-American woman writer, Dana, who finds herself transported back and forth between her California home in 1976 and a pre-Civil War Maryland plantation. There she meets her ancestors: a spoiled, self-destructive white slave owner named Rufus and Alice, the talented, thoughtful black freewoman he forces into slavery and a sexual relationship. As Dana's visits to the past become longer, she becomes part of the plantation community, making hard compromises to survive slavery and to ensure her existence in her own time. She is forced to live as a slave and deal with Rufus until such time as her ancestor Hagar, who is the daughter of Alice and Rufus, is born.

Fantastical as the plot may be, it encourages us readers to reflect on the nature of our own real world relationships to our both our ancestors and future descendants, whether we mean 'descendants' literally or include in our understanding of this those with whom we do not share a bloodline. For me, the question that grabbed me by the throat is whether we, not in a novel but as real people, need to keep alive the worst of us (or of our ancestors) in order to exist? Dana did, certainly. If she killed off Rufus, as she had both opportunity and desire to do at different points in the story, then she probably wouldn't exist. But what about us? Do we have to keep the worst within us alive in order to survive?

I don't know. I do know that it is easy for me to feel intimately connected to the imperfect yet loveable people in my ancestry line. My paternal grandmother Frances—whose life struggles consistently mirror my own in major ways, whose creativity I draw inspiration from and whose love even across death I am so sure of—is easy to claim, easy to call forth and feel called by. Last weekend when we were invited to place mementos of deceased loved ones on the ofrenda, I wore on my dress a cameo that used to belong to Frances as a way to honor her. She loved pretty things and worked so hard so that she could have a few of them in her home and gift them occasionally to others, like me.

Yet I don't often feel a spiritual connection to my maternal grandfather. He was a complicated man, with some positive qualities. He loved art and the human intellect. He refused to have a TV in the house so that he could bring up his family by reading aloud and he encouraged in my mother a whimsical sense of humor.

But he was also an alcoholic who was violent towards my grandmother, a terrorism his children witnessed. He wasn't quite as bad as Rufus, someone who held other people in slavery... although I must admit that there is also that terrible legacy farther back in that side of my family. Before I re-read *Kindred* I had never asked myself if I lived my life in conversation with

my grandfather Irving (who I never actually met) or if he communicated with me from some great beyond.

The Zen Master Thich Nhat Hanh has an interesting perspective here. He—like many others who possess wisdom—believes that healing yourself is important not only for your own sake but because it can benefit others. This is obvious, right? If you work on your own issues then you will be less likely to inflict them on others in the future. But he also teaches the provoking idea that such healing can actually travel backwards.

There is something of the science fiction here, isn't there? Healing backwards has a supernatural element because in order to accomplish it you must summon from the past or the atmosphere an ancestral presence with whom to be in touch. I personally have found that wading through my family of origin muck (for lack of a better term!) can, for example, change how I understand my family story, how I feel about the past and who I am as a result. That's pretty significant, but does that count as healing backwards?

While Dana certainly despises Rufus, she spends a lot of the book trying to understand him. And it isn't necessarily because he deserves it; it's because she is bound to him, their destinies intertwined. Spoiler alert: Rufus doesn't turn out all good. He's not all bad either, I guess, but he is not someone I would want very near anyone I love. There's not a clear message of redemption... in *Kindred* or usually in life. Resolving problematic history isn't typically about it turning out well or poorly. It's about finding your relationship to it and being able to answer the question 'what is your relationship to that history?' with a clear voice and steady hands. It means arriving at answers for the companion questions about what it means in your life to claim your ancestors—whether you disown or love or emulate or hate or blame them.

Through reading *Kindred*, I reflected on my relationship with my grandfather Irving's legacy. He has come to represent for me a very Unitarian Universalist idea, even though he wasn't UU; it's the understanding that within each of us is the capacity for kindness and cruelty. I possess the powerful gift and curse of being able to do good and ill. It is within me every day and all the time, and within us all. I have said and thought this phrase a million times in a million different variations but the more I learn about Irving the more I get it on a gut level.

I don't aspire to be like my grandfather but I am grateful for the spiritual understanding that came through my knowing him, even just through my mother. When I asked her permission to share so personally about our family here she said yes because, "looking back at "dirt" is essential for [the kind of] growth [that helps us] imagine a better future AND past." Can my growth in understanding about him help his spirit heal backwards from the wrong he did? Can that healing spread to my grandmother's spirit too? I'd like to think so but I don't know.

In *Kindred*, Dana has to face all kinds of complexities that she could have no way of knowing about until the magic of time travel introduced her to them. We have another excerpt now, full of some of the really hard stuff, including descriptions of violence and ugly racist language. It's

pretty intense for this setting of worship so take care of yourself however you need to, by leaving the room, tuning out or breathing deeply.

Sermon, part 2: “Maybe a lot like me.”

We are not the only ones to be inspired by *Kindred*. In fact, *Kindred* (the book itself) is an ancestor. It begat, if you will, a book that just came out called *Octavia's Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements*, a collection of stories that explore the connections between radical speculative fiction and movements for social change. I'm in the middle of it and somehow can't put it down so I brought it with me today.

Its co-editors Walidah Imarisha and Adrienne Maree Brown say that organizing is actually science fiction in the sense that those working for social change can only wonder, can only speculate when they imagine the change they desire. They see anyone who envisions a world without war, prisons, sexual violence or capitalism as a producer of speculative fiction.

Organizers and activists dream up and then try to create new worlds all the time, then, like when they push for stronger laws against pollution, when they hang Black Lives Matter banners, when they protest rising school fees or support domestic violence shelters.

Octavia's Brood's stories span different literary genres—it's one of the really cool features of this book—but they are united by their attempt to find new ways for us to understand ourselves, see the world around us, and then explore all the selves and worlds that could be. In this way, it is directly descended from *Kindred*, which even makes a veiled appearance in at least one short story; stay tuned. I'll share that bit in a moment.

In one of my favorite stories in *Octavia's Brood*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs, a self-described black queer feminist troublemaker, imagines a utopian future where a 12 year old girl reads Gumbs' own actual writings. In the story, Gumbs' works are historical artifacts from back when the world was fractured and oppressive. But now, in this piece of speculative fiction, society is more healed and equal and kind. Here is what Gumbs imagines that this young future citizen would write to her (the author) if they could somehow communicate across time and space:

“Ancestor Alexis, I've heard about you... and I'm really interested in what it was like back when you lived... I read a really old story where the character believed that time travel was dangerous because if you change one thing in the past the whole future changes and then you might never get born. [Let me butt in here; this is the *Kindred* reference. And now this 12 year old character continues:]

I am still here writing this though so I think it's okay to tell you that everything works out. That it's okay. And it's not easy all the time, not even here, because so much has been broken,

besides silence, but it is possible, it does feel possible. My friends and I feel possible all the time, so when you get afraid to speak, remember that you all were part of us all learning how to just do it. And most... take it for granted. Except poets like me. I remember you. I feel it."

Kindred and *Octavia's Brood* are both about the mystical ways that change can and always will happen. While *Kindred* is Butler's bestselling book, she was a prolific writer before her mysterious, sudden death in Seattle, Washington in 2006.

She wrote in 1993 a book called *Parable of the Sower*, which I think is my personal favorite of hers. It's set not in the past like *Kindred* but in the future like *Octavia's Brood*, a future where violence, chaos and poverty abound. The main character is a young black woman named Lauren who possesses a gift/curse that Butler calls hyperempathy. It is the ability to feel the pain and other physical and emotional sensations of those around her.

When Lauren's family is murdered, she joins with other survivors and together they start a community centered on a new religion of Lauren's creation. Butler uses this spiritual path to explore this idea that change is at the core of all that we might know, all that we are. After all, even our relationships with our very ancestors can change. Dana's with ancestors she had never heard of but with whom she became intimately acquainted through the magic of fiction. Mine with my beloved grandmother and my complex, disturbed grandfather. A troublemaker in the present who dreams a future that it turns out she helped to make possible. Here is how Butler has Lauren express it:

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

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