



“Forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable.”
— Octavia Butler*

Dear Faithful Reader,

To be honest: I don’t really feel like writing a newsletter today.

This month I’m working on a big project to move my entire coaching operation to another platform. Plus I need to kick a memoir I’m writing for a friend into high gear, so I can finish it and start in on a parable I’ve committed to writing for *another* friend. And hey, it’s December, which means Christmas, etcetera. You know?

So, yes: this morning there are multiple commitments tugging me in other directions. Yet here I am, doing none of those things, and instead sitting down to write to you. Why?

The main reason, frankly, is *you*. I know that by the time I’ve finished these musings, rewritten them two or three times (or five, or eight), formatted and sent them, there’ll be you, on the other end, reading them.

And how can I address you each month in good faith as “Dear Faithful Reader” if I don’t show up each month as “Sincerely Yours, Faithful Writer”?

A friend and colleague once gave me this definition: “A *professional* is someone who shows up whether they feel like it or not.”

First time I heard that I immediately related, because for years I was a practicing cellist, and there had been hundreds, thousands of days when I didn’t especially feel like picking up the bow and practicing ... but hey, isn’t that what “practicing” means?

In *The Go-Giver Marriage* Ana and I wrote, “Love is a practice.” Here is another way of saying the same thing:

Love is a habit.

I know, doesn't sound very romantic, does it? But it's true.

The word "habit" means "a repeated or routine way of doing things" — but it also means "a garment worn by a member of a religious order." By repeating a given behavior over and over again, you *put on* that action and all its implications, like a garment of faith.

A habit is a kind of devotion.

Why else do people frequent a house of worship on a given day of the week? Is it because God only appears on Sundays, the way Taylor Swift shows up at the stadium only on the day of the concert? Do Muslims pray at five specific times of day because Allah is busy all the other times? Do Jews hold Shabbat services from sundown Friday through Saturday evening because that's the only time the Almighty is available?

Ana and I have long had the habit of going for walks. We don't know what we're going to talk about, but whatever it is, the walk gives it a chance to reveal itself. We *put on the habit* of walking. We *inhabit* it.

We talk about this, and we talk about that, and we find ourselves sharing thoughts and feelings, urgencies and conundrums, little (or even not so little) struggles and triumphs we sometimes didn't even know were brewing inside — and we always come away from the walk feeling more connected, more *whole* than before. It is our confession, it is our communion.

For us, going for a walk is a kind of going to church.

And so I sit down to write this, as I do every month.

In fact, I sit down to write *every day*, at about 5:30 in the morning, when the world is a hush and the quietest thoughts are easier to hear. The habit creates an opening. Sitting back in my favorite chair with a cup of hot coffee and a blank pad of paper, as I'm doing right now, is how I go to church — the church of writing.

A question: In what areas of your life do you find you "go to church"? (I mean, aside from attending an actual house of worship. I'm speaking in the metaphorical sense.) What habits do you put on to more deeply experience some particular aspect of your life? To *inhabit* your life? (If you trust me enough to share this, [REPLY HERE](#) — I would love to read your answer!)

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote about this in his 1841 essay *Compensation*:

"The law of nature is, Do the thing and you shall have the power: but they who do not the thing have not the power."

I don't sit down to write because I've had an idea; I sit down to write *in order to* have an idea.

Note that Emerson's is not a reversible philosophy. You can't first go get the power and *then* do the thing. Although people do try. As the mentor Pindar puts it in *The Go-Giver*:

The majority of people operate with a mindset that says to the fireplace, "First give me some heat, then I'll throw on some logs." Or that says to the bank, "Give me interest on my money, then I'll make a deposit." And of course, it just doesn't work that way.

Here is the secret to becoming a writer: Be here, actively immersed in the daily practice, sitting down with a blank pad of paper, a year from now. Clothe yourself in the habit.

It is exactly as Octavia Butler, the acclaimed master of science fiction, says:

"Forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you're inspired or not."

To write a book, build a relationship, build (or recover) your health, learn to play an instrument, master a craft or a trade, grow a closer connection to your Creator ... *put on the habit*. Clothe yourself in the faithfully repeated action that opens that particular door.

And hey, have you noticed something? For someone who started out saying he didn't especially feel like writing a newsletter this morning, I sure have enjoyed doing it.

My December wish for you: that you spend a little time every day putting on the habit of whatever is most important to you.



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*** ABOUT THE WRITER**

It is ironic, even astonishing, that it would be she who said "Forget inspiration" — because you'd be hard put to find anywhere across the vast space/time continuum a writer more infused with inspiration than Octavia Butler.

Butler was a genuine visionary. The first science fiction writer to be awarded a MacArthur "genius" grant (other "genius" grant writers have included Cormac McCarthy, [Richard Powers](#), and [Leslie Marmon Silko](#)), she won every one of science fiction's highest honors, including the Nebula and the Hugo (she was the first Black woman to win either), the Locus, the Solstice, induction into the Science Fiction Hall of

Fame and National Women's Hall of Fame, a PEN for Lifetime Achievement, and the first-ever Infinity Award by the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers Association (given to those who died before having a chance to be given a Grand Master award). Her books appear on university syllabuses and high school reading lists. NASA named a Mars landing site after her.

Her influence, enormous during her lifetime, has grown only greater since her death in 2006. During the early months of the pandemic in 2020 her novel *Parable of the Sower*, which follows its teenage protagonist through a California landscape besieged by climate change and socio-economic crises, became so popular it hit the *New York Times* bestseller list — a dream of Butler's that she never quite achieved during her lifetime.

Part of the reason her work looms so large is that, as a Black woman emerging from a background of poverty, she smashed so many barriers and blazed trails hitherto untraveled. But perhaps an even bigger part of the reason for her thundering influence is that she wrote about a future that increasingly, uncomfortably, appears to be coming real. As the MacArthur Foundation said, in awarding her their grant:

“Her imaginative stories are transcendent fables, which have as much to do with the future as with the present and the past.”

Octavia Estelle Butler was born in the summer of 1947, the only child of a maid and a shoeshine man who died when she was an infant. As a child, she often accompanied her mother to her cleaning jobs; the two would enter the wealthy white women's homes through the back door.

Octavia was mildly dyslexic, which made schoolwork a torture, and paralyzingly shy, which kept her more or less in permanent social exile among her peers. She later recalls believing that she was "ugly and stupid, clumsy, and socially hopeless."

By the age of 5 she had begun making up stories, which she would tell to her mother, who became a source of constant encouragement. Her mother (also named Octavia) walked her to the local branch of the Los Angeles Public Library and got her a card, which became young Octavia's passport to other worlds.

“I'm a writer [she later wrote] at least partly because I had access to public libraries.”

She became a fixture at the Peter Pan Room, the children's section of the Pasadena Central Library, where she lost herself (or more accurately *found* herself) in books. At age 10 she begged her mother to buy her a typewriter and began typing out her stories two-finger style.

Late one night when she was 12, she recalls watching a campy science fiction B movie called *Devil Girl from Mars*. Sitting in the ghostly blue glow of their spanking new TV set, young Octavia had a revelation: this thing she was watching was spectacularly bad.

Someone got paid to write this! she thought. She could do better, and she knew it.

At 13 a well-intentioned aunt gently told her, “Honey ... Negroes can’t be writers.” Up to that point it had never occurred to her that her color (let along her gender) could be a barrier. She set out to prove her aunt wrong. Years later, in a 1980 letter, she would write:

“I am the only black woman writing science fiction (there are three black men).”

In 1965, in her first year at community college, she won a short-story contest, earning her first \$15 as a writer. Her talent soon caught the eye of one of her teachers, the legendary science fiction writer Harlan Ellison, who encouraged her, bought one of her stories for an anthology (then unpublished), and went on to become a lifelong friend and champion.

Yet success as a writer eluded her. Urged by her mom to take a secretarial job, she refused: she knew that if she gave in to full-time work, the writing would suffer. Instead, for the next dozen-plus year she took on lesser temp jobs that she could work around her own schedule, so she could continue getting up at 2 or 3 in the morning to write.

During those years she began writing the novels that would become known as the *Patternist* series, a centuries-spanning epic that follows power struggles within humanity’s transformation into three genetic groups. Survival amidst oppression would become a theme she pursued throughout her career. As she later wrote:

“I began writing about power because I had so little.”

In the late seventies she took an idea she’d had back in college and spun it into what would in time become her bestselling novel.

At the time, she’d been struck by the comments of a classmate who was involved in the Black Power movement and loudly criticized past generations of African Americans for being subservient to whites. Butler’s response to his diatribe became an epic time-travel story that offered a historical perspective, suggesting that what appeared as “subservience” could in fact be a courageous pathway of survival.

In *Kindred*, Dana Franklin, a struggling young Black writer in contemporary California, is suddenly sucked through a mysterious seam in time back to a working plantation in the antebellum South. A bit like Vonnegut’s Billy Pilgrim (who famously became “unstuck in time”), Dana is yanked back and forth between the two eras and locations throughout the novel.

The *Los Angeles Herald* raved about the book, calling it a “shattering work of art with much to say about love, hate, slavery, and racial dilemmas, then and now.” Harlan Ellison hailed it as “that rare magical artifact ... the novel one returns to again and

again,” and Walter Mosely described it as “everything the literature of science fiction can be.”

(If you’re brand new to Octavia Butler’s writing, *Kindred* is a good place to start.)

With the success of *Kindred* and the early *Patternist* novels, Butler was finally able to quit the relentless series of “horrible little” temporary jobs and begin supporting herself as a writer.

She went on to write over a dozen novels, including several more in the *Patternist* series (*Patternmaster*, 1976; *Mind of My Mind*, 1977; and *Survivor*, 1978, were followed by *Wild Seed*, 1980, and *Clay’s Ark*, 1984), and the two novels of the *Parable* series (*Parable of the Sower*, 1993, and *Parable of the Talents*, 1998).

Her stories often portray the abuse of hierarchical power and humanity’s recurring and self-destructive tendency toward domination of the weak by the strong, whether aliens, vampires, superhuman beings, or slave masters.

Within these bleak landscapes Butler weaves characters, often wily, disenfranchised underdogs, who survive and even triumph through their wits and capacity to endure, persevere, and adapt.

Butler’s own struggles with the writing process were an epic unto themselves.

She had a plan to write four more novels in the *Parable* series (*Parable of the Trickster*, *Parable of the Teacher*, *Parable of Chaos*, and *Parable of Clay*) but after a few failed efforts she finally gave up the attempt. She was so unhappy with one of her early novels (*Survivor*), she withdrew it from reprint.

An early hint of these later struggles appeared in this self-portrait she offered as part of her bio for a writers convention back in 1979:

Octavia Butler is a hermit, living in the middle of Los Angeles, a pessimist (if she isn’t careful), a feminist, a quiet egotist, a former Baptist, an oil-and-water combination of ambition, laziness, insecurity, certainty and drive.

In 1993, three years before her death, Butler penned an essay to aspiring writers, *Furor Scribendi*, a Latin phrase meaning “a frenzy [or madness] of writing” or “the irresistible urge to write,” which included these two paragraphs:

“First forget inspiration. Habit is more dependable. Habit will sustain you whether you’re inspired or not. Habit will help you finish and polish your stories. Inspiration won’t. Habit is persistence in practice.

“Forget talent. If you have it, fine. Use it. If you don’t have it, it doesn’t matter. As habit is more dependable than inspiration, continued learning is more dependable than talent.”

Above all else, Octavia Butler cultivated the habit of choosing what stories she told herself, about herself — a practice I encourage all the writers [in my coaching program](#) to adopt. (In fact, it’s part of our very first module.)

Throughout her life she honed the discipline of writing in her private journals. Here is part of [a note she handwrote to herself](#) in 1988:

“I shall be a bestselling writer. This is my life. I write bestselling novels. I will find a way to do this! So be it! See to it!

“I will send poor black writers to Clarion or other writer’s workshops.

“I will help poor black youngsters broaden their horizons.

“I will help poor black youngsters go to college.

“I will travel whenever and wherever in the world that I choose.

“My books will be read by millions of people!

“So be it! See to it!”

And so it was.

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