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## Clore Leadership-AHRC Online Research Library Paper *Notes toward a personal manifesto of uncertainty*

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## Notes Towards a Personal Manifesto of Uncertainty

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

In 1993, Octavia E. Butler published *Parable of the Sower*, a dystopian climate fiction novel, set in the not-so-distant future of the 2020s. In 2020, 27 years after its original publication, *Parable of the Sower* made it onto the New York Times' bestseller list. The book follows Lauren Oya Olamina, a Black teenager who lives in a speculative (but eerily familiar) California amid climate crisis, rampant capitalism and utter annihilation of the social contract. Hope is presented through this teenage protagonist who builds a self-sufficient rural community based on principles of protection, adaptability and care. Taking matters into her own hands, she attempts to build a different, more resilient future, a practice of ideas she calls "Earthseed." Taking matters into her own hands, she attempts to build a different, more resilient future.

Lauren's approach to survival is underpinned by making active change through which, Butler suggests, we might be able to salvage the little good this world has left. As we witness Lauren's journey we learn kindness, mercy, and survival against the odds. Nothing is truly the end for Lauren if she just keeps moving. Lauren's actions are led by Earthseed, her religion centered on the theory that 'God is Change'. Someone she shares it with tells her that 'it's too . . . straightforward. If you get people to accept it, they'll make it more complicated, more open to interpretation.' But maybe that's the point - when your 'God is Change', your concept of God must be fluid. Change is the only constant and we do not have to worship it, but we do need to prepare for it, work with it and in some cases, do what we can to reverse it. In creating this world, Butler poses many questions that we should ask ourselves to build a better future, but one of the core things that sits with me is simple; what we practice shapes us and the world around us. What we practice is what we are.

Our practices take many forms and are shaped by our traditions, technologies, relationships and the structures we exist within and build for ourselves. In *Returning to Benjamin*, Victor Burgin recounts Chinese philosopher Zhuangzi's imagined confrontation between a disciple of Confucius and a Daoist gardener. "Having watched the gardener laboring with a rudimentary and inefficient means of watering his plants, the Confucian informs him that a machine exists that can water a hundred fields in a day with much less effort. The gardener replies that whoever uses such a machine will have a mind like a machine, and that whoever views the world with such a mind will lose oneness with the world." (Burgin 2022, 13) Our practices shape

our environments, starting with our minds and experiences. “As much as we speak language, language speaks us” (Burgin 1982, 145).

Throughout her life, Lauren develops Earthseed, a religion centered on the theory that ‘God is Change’. Someone she shares it with tells her that ‘it’s too . . . straightforward. If you get people to accept it, they’ll make it more complicated, more open to interpretation.’ But maybe that’s the point - when your ‘God is Change’, your concept of God must be fluid. Change is the only constant and we do not have to worship it, but we do need to prepare for it, work with it and in some cases, do what we can to reverse it. Inspired by Lauren Olamina, resisting the terrible momentum of a society decayed to shape her destiny, I have become interested in how her Earthseed verses can inform my practices to resist the hypnosis of the normal, and weather (harness?) the precarity of uncertainty.

In their essay *With All Caveats*, Julian Hanna and Simone Ashby write on the role of the manifesto as a form fit for the challenges of our times, capable of sketching new visions and open discussions, without ducking uncertainty. Manifestos can challenge narratives and norms, provoke new conversations, and encourage critical reflection – using ambivalence or ambiguity to their advantage. Hanna and Ashby cite one example, Romanian poet Tristan Tzara’s 1918 ‘Dada Manifesto’ which declares: “I am writing a manifesto and I don’t want anything ... I am on principle against manifestos, as I am also against principles”.

So please consider these Notes towards a Personal Manifesto of Uncertainty in a similar vein; capricious, volatile, and subject to change (or be changed)

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**Earthseed**  
**Cast on new ground**  
**Must first perceive**  
**That it knows nothing.**

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The twentieth century has seen technological and scientific revolutions exponential in speed and scale. The latest frontiers of quantum mechanics, chaos theory and its sibling complexity science are eliminating established ideas and philosophies of a deterministic and objective universe into schools of science and theory that are yet to be fully fathomed. These ideas sit far beyond our humanistic senses and experience of the world, yet rapid advances in computing and science are nonetheless shaping and driving changes in our systems of living, connecting, learning and interacting with one another. They have changed the context of leadership, faster than we have changed our assumptions about *what* leadership is.

In *Complex Adaptive Leadership* Nick Obolensky plots notions of volatility in financial markets against knowledge, to reveal a parallel curve that implies the more knowledge we gather, the more uncertain times seem to be. The increase of knowledge in the world is matched by an increase of uncertainty. Knowing more does not necessarily increase certainty.

As adrienne maree brown writes; “make room for many possibilities (...) learn to tolerate many paths in the pursuit of best options, versus reducing to less satisfying solutions in the rush to end the discomfort of the unknown.”

I will make room for many possibilities.  
I will release perfection and relinquish judgment.  
I will cultivate a more flexible and open approach towards myself and others; to be open to influence and the unexpected.  
I will be ready to find myself in the wrong; to know I am not necessarily right.  
I will commit to habitual self-doubt.

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**A gift of God**  
**May sear unready fingers.**

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If, as Obolensky argues, increased knowledge does not necessarily increase certainty, how else can we ready ourselves to thrive in times of precarity and uncertainty?

Perhaps intuition is as important, if not more so; less preparation, more presence. And perhaps what you *know* is not as important as what you *do*. The strategies you employ as a leader are more important than what you know - this is not to say that knowledge is unimportant, but it is

not enough. How you show up invites a quality of presence from others, and can help reveal the many ways to grow, to move forward, to change you couldn't prepare for.

I will bring my attention to presence, and the allotment of potential.

I will be present to myself and to others, readied for a multiplicity of possibilities that exist.

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***Your teachers***

***Are all around you.***

***All that you perceive,***

***All that you experience,***

***All that is given to you***

***or taken from you,***

***All that you love or hate,***

***need or fear***

***Will teach you -***

***If you will learn.***

***God is your first***

***and your last teacher.***

***God is your harshest teacher:***

***subtle,***

***demanding.***

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In *Notes on Hearing & Being Heard*, a conversation between psychoanalyst Anouchka Grose and luthier Robert Brewer Young, Grose discusses how listening promises to open up the possibility of both speaker and hearer being transformed. We are constantly changing, and the more awareness we bring to change, the more intention we can bring to it; change as teacher. Part of what distinguishes Lauren Olamina as a character is her willingness to listen and learn; acknowledge, anticipate and adapt for problems she recognises – and counter the perspective of the adults in her early life who embrace the ideas and promises of a politician who promises to return things to normal. Lauren strives to adjust to uncertainty, as she resists the lie of a return to normalcy, and instead seeks to adapt to the world as she sees it. By listening without bias to what's around her, she creates more potential for possibility.

Grose later writes “Why would anyone attempt to make a meaningful sound if they didn't have the idea that there was a pre-existing, complimentary space in which it might be worthwhile to lodge it? What if we were listeners who incited people to speak - or musicians to play, writers to write, composers to compose - rather than vice versa?” What if I characterised my practice as listening, as opposed to 'producing', which my role is most often characterised as.

There are many ways to be and many ways to grow, many paths to the future. adreinne maree brown's *Emergent Strategy* is fundamentally about how we get into a positive relationship with change. Nick Obolensky defines emergence as “the way complex systems and patterns arise

from a multiplicity of relatively simple interactions”. Applying emergent strategy to your practice is to explore the relational ways in which your ideas and intentions brush up against the real world.

When photographer Dawoud Bey describes his early career making photographs of people on the streets of Harlem, he described how his initial intentions transformed once in contact with the reality of them meeting the people themselves. “I’ve come to believe, from making photographs in Harlem all those years ago, that the best work tends to result not from the imposition of an idea on a situation, but from being responsive to what is going on when you get there.” The idea is still meaningful because it is what gets you out into a relationship with the world, but when you get there, your work has to be driven by the experiences you’re having, the people you’re meeting, and your best attempt at honestly and relating to your encounters.

I will make my work listening;  
for my needs, and the needs of others.  
I will attune to change;  
never a failure, always a lesson

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***Any Change may bear seeds of benefit.***

***Seek them out.***

***Any Change may bear seeds of harm.***

***Beware.***

***God is infinitely malleable.***

***God is Change.***

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Change comes from cumulative shifts. We are constantly changing - the more ease we bring to how we change, the more intention we bring to our daily lives, the more that change can serve our vision. Help people change with intention. Not just react, not move into scarcity thinking where we have to handle every crisis, but adapt in ways that move us towards where we want to go.

I will change with intention.  
I will grow with abundance.  
I will change again.  
And again.

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***Belief***

***Initiates and guides action -***

***Or it does nothing.***

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“All organising is science fiction” says Walidah Imarisha. To claim the vast space of possibility, and in building vision and ideas of change and life beyond the ‘normal’, we engage in a faithful craft of speculative fiction. Faith infuses the pages of *Parable of the Sower*, where Lauren Olamina founds her religion, which believed a destiny of humanity’s purpose to ‘live among the stars’; a space colony. You don’t have to believe in space colonisation, I don’t think, to believe in the idea of Earthseed. Any “sweet and powerful positive obsession” will do. But belief is the key. Because belief is a source of energy. And perhaps, to quote Coetzee’s fictional author, belief is a battery which one clips into an idea to make it run.

I will change what is possible,  
by changing what I believe is possible.

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***Kindness eases Change***  
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I like to think of the verses of Lauren Olamina in relation to Baldwin in *The Fire Next Time*: “If the concept of God has any validity or any use, it can only be to make us larger, freer, and more loving.” Kindness soothes spirits on the verge of breaking. It is not about being ‘a good person’; rather it is about expanding our capabilities for care. This doesn’t displace struggle, critique, or conflict, but rather deepens and softens these necessary human experiences, making them part of belonging instead of a precursor to exile.

Nora Samaran believes that to transform a culture of misogyny, people (masculine people in particular) must build nurturing skills: nurturance and recuperation of their true selves and nurturance of people around them. To become nurturing of the self and others. “Radical kindness first comes to us as the opposite of violence,” says Vandita Morarka of One Future Collective, an organisation whose organising principle is radical kindness. At its core, radical kindness seems to mean something very amorphous, yet specific at the same time. It is to hold a picture in mind of a better future and see people within the contexts they come from. It is easy to flatten one another. Care is a resistance to this flattening; a commitment to withhold our humanity and the humanity of others.

bell hooks wrote that “forgiveness and compassion are always linked: how do we hold people accountable for wrongdoing and yet at the same time remain in touch with their humanity enough to believe in their capacity to be transformed?”. This is a commitment I want to bring to my practice.

I will face change with kindness.  
I believe in the capacity for change in myself and in others.  
Care is fundamental to my relationship with change.  
I will use my humanity to maintain the humanity of others.

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***A Gathering of Earthseed  
is a good and necessary thing.  
It vents emotion, then  
quiets the mind.  
It focuses attention,  
strengthens purpose, and  
unifies people.***

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If we believe in community, then we must get curious about the ways we need to grow and communicate to truly be a part of a community. Not just one community, but the multitude of communities we intersect with. We are capricious and interconnected, and find meaning in our relation to one another. People engage and trust in people, and thrive in environments where they find joy.

This is exemplified in the art of poet, musician and performer Alabaster DePlume, where his music is enhanced by what he learned in a decade as a care support worker. DePlume was working for Ordinary Lifestyles, a charity in North Manchester which supports people with disabilities to live in their own homes and to live fulfilling lives. Specifically, he was working with two individuals (Cy and Lee, of whom he titled his 2020 album).

I learned all of the best things I know about performance and about leadership while doing that work. And I know I wouldn't be making this music the way I'm making it if I hadn't worked with those guys (...) they showed me a way of expression and my team leader in that job, Maureen, showed me a method of leadership that requires the person involved too, like, she was aware that I wanted to make music so she put music making into the method of support and she encouraged me to engage with the two men that we were working to support with their desire to express themselves with music and their desire to connect with their social group using music, by making music events happen, and to lead using joy, and playfulness, and openness to people's human expression. (Warren 2022, 14)

As part of his support work DePlume would run music sessions for Cy, Lee and their friends. "People would focus on a central point, tuning in to one another. There are things we can't put into words, which can be expressed with sound and music. These guys have fewer words than us, some of them have none. When we put some feelings into a music expression – that's liberation." It's a method he uses in his live shows wherever possible, placing himself and the musicians in the round. The aim is to maximise the creative benefits that a community of players and listeners can bring to the music. It's a collectivist and humanist approach to making music that sits underneath everything he does. This is music made for a reason, and those reasons include – to paraphrase some of the catchphrases he uses both on stage and in conversation – mixing people up, asking everyone to be as much themselves as they possibly can and the hardcore encouragement expressed in his most popular line, shouted back at him by audiences wherever he goes: "You're doing very well!" Practically, he purposefully brings together players of different skill levels and different backgrounds so they have to interact differently, placing



them in unusual situations in which to record. “I wanted to destroy the idea of correct so we were playing it different ways for fun. We had a very magical time playing the tunes”. This is activism expressed through gorgeous music that breaks down barriers by encouraging that most powerful emotion: connectedness.

I will convene and connect;  
with myself  
with my community.

I will enact and enable joy;  
small and personal celebrations.

I will focus on connections

I will build resilience through relationships.

I wish to acknowledge, give recognition to, and celebrate the authors and thinkers whose ideas and work are applied and contextualised within this paper. Most notable are adrienne maree brown, bell hooks, Nora Samaran, and of course Octavia E. Butler, without whom this document would be but an empty page.

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