WE² Book Club Discussion Notes – PARABLE OF THE SOWER
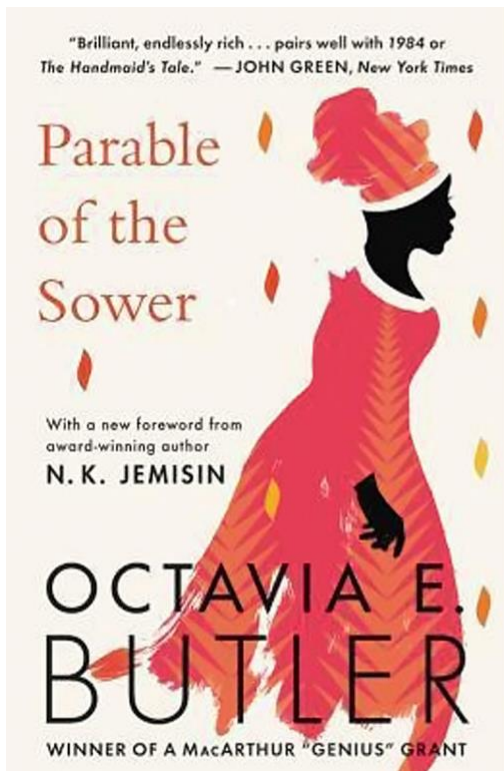
BOOK: "Parable of the Sower" by Octavia Butler
DISCUSSION DATE: Tuesday **January 26, 2021 at 4:00 pm EDT**
https://caes.rutgers.edu/blog-post/parable-of-the-sower-we2-book-club-discussion-january-2021/

Major Themes and Takeaways from the PARABLE OF THE SOWER:

- Change as a force to be embraced and to learn from – fearing change makes it dangerous
- Empathy – both a strength and a weakness
- Climate Change and Sustainable living
- Leadership skills in choosing and developing a team
  - Intentional Community Building
  - Embracing diversity – both identity and skill diversity
  - Knowing who to trust – with certain tasks (delegating) or who to trust with knowing your identity and personal details (which can be difficult in a workplace too)
  - Transparency in leadership and setting clear end goals for the team?
  - Self-actualization (knowing oneself and accepting oneself as a leadership skill)
  - Watching/designing how team members interact and how group dynamics change over time – watching for them potentially breaking off or cause problems within the new dynamics among group members or cause new problems with external forces
- Control over self / Bodily Autonomy

This book was published in 1993 and is supposed to take place in 2024.
What strikes us about the depiction of climate change and the potential impact on American society as depicted in the book?

- Surprised that it was written almost 30 years ago, and it was pretty accurate, but I think (or would like to hope) more people would care or want to change things and help others
- Predicted more severe hurricanes, measles outbreak, droughts and water shortages, rising sea levels
  - Maybe not as severe as yet but there are already displacements of communities in other countries from the effects of climate change (even if it is not quite happening yet in California)
  - Thought it was pretty accurate but that the forest fires in California in the real life are actually already worse than in the book
  - Climate Change's most drastic impacts threaten the most vulnerable in our society. Lower income communities are already seeing greater impact on their lives.
- Even timeline to get to Mars was what it was set to be before the recession (like 10 years ago they were saying we would put people on Mars by 2020 or 2024 or something)
- Kind of upsetting that her end plan was to get humanity to the stars and not fix Earth, especially for us as people coming from the IAC and energy efficiency sector
  - "The Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars."

"It's better to teach people than to scare them, Lauren. If you scare them and nothing happens, they lose their fear, and you lose some of your authority with them. It's harder to scare them a second time, harder to teach them, harder to win back their trust. Best to begin by teaching."

- Fear can be paralyzing rather than motivating for many people
- Scaring a team by starting with big picture without starting with the smaller tangible steps is not the way
- Claiming something as a hard deadline to you team to scare them doesn't work (nor does giving a deadline with no check in after completion date), especially if you do it repeatedly – eventually they will keep pushing off your tasks and possibly ignore the REAL hard deadline
- Some colleges start by telling their freshman to "Look to your left. Look to your right. One of those people will not make it to graduation." Other schools start by telling their freshman to "Look to your left. Look to your right. Make sure they both make it to graduation."
  - The first tactic creates a competitive stressful atmosphere that relies on fear as a motivator
  - The second tactic creates a communal/cooperative atmosphere – one with engineering doors gives you a learning environment where if you can't get a homework problem you let people know and someone comes running down your dorm hallway to help
  - The first worsens imposter syndrome, while the second helps destroy it
  - The second is a community building tactic that helps bring in the already alienated such as women, black, and other minority students (and conversely the first method is an even greater obstacle for them)
- Some colleges have diversity programs that create this community building within these underrepresented communities that can help bring the community gap for isolated students

- o Build off learning and connections to others rather than continue to enforce fear and isolation of a primarily white institution
- o Some of these programs connect across colleges to draw from larger pools of underrepresented minorities so they can have a larger community in their academic experience

"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.
[Change] is your first
and your last teacher.
[Change] is your harshest teacher:
subtle,
demanding.
Learn or die."

Looking back at "Lean In" from last book club:

In "Lean In" it is discussed that current idea of good leadership is "authentic leadership" where the leader is themselves in front of their team and does not shy away from talking about personal aspects of their life. This books is heavy on religious conversation.

How do you feel about conversations about religion in the workplace? Is this something you are uncomfortable with? How should be go about talking about religious aspects of our personal lives in a work environment? Other diverse/minority identities?

- The answer varies based on where you are in your career vs leadership
  - o When new to a team this can be hard to feel out – both leadership and other team members
  - o Easier when you are the leader
- It is important to have a workspace where you feel comfortable being your whole self and being open about who you are, where you are coming from, what motivated you personally, etc.
  - o Your religious and other personal identities are a part of this.
- In the ideal work environment, you should feel comfortable talking about this, with the leaders of the groups leading the way or finding a way to open the floor for this –
  - o Is this answer different when there are no underrepresented minorities in leadership?
  - o How do male, white, Christian, etc. leaders be open with their identity without it being a silencing effect on underrepresented minorities in the workplace? How do they turn it into more of an open door?

In Parable of the Sower, Lauren is a Sharer, empathic to the point where she would become completely incapacitated by someone else's pain or even death. In their increasingly dangerous peri-apocalypse environment, this can be very dangerous for the group if they do not know. However, being a Sharer is also a personal identity, a minority identity that many people fear, don't understand or want to take advantage of. **As Lauren becomes the leader of her group, did she have a responsibility to tell her community members about her identity?**

- It was important that she did this in her own time as it effected the group and ended up making her a better leader
  - Her self-journey to find herself (know herself) made her a better leader
  - Confidence and self-actualization make you a better leader – claiming/owning of one's identities
- She was brought up by a father who taught her to hide it to keep her safe so this was a very hard, personal journey for her – something she had to unlearn or rather decide for herself
- While it did make her a better leader and her identity effects the group, it is still her decision to tell them
- When she told one of the characters, it became clear that he had figured it out a while back (or suspected) but had let her come out to him and the group in her own time
  - I think this was very important to her and did a lot to build trust between them
  - He did not feel entitled to knowledge about her identities
  - I think feeling like someone feels entitled to know about my identities, I am less likely to share about them even – I admire that he was able to give her her own time and space to become comfortable with him to tell him and that made their connection stronger in the end

As Lauren reveals to the group that she is a Sharer, how do you think this effected the other Sharers who were also hiding their abilities?

- It made some of the other Sharers uncomfortable
  - Made some of them feel like they now had to open up about their own abilities (and they maybe weren't ready for that)
- It made others feel a bit more settled in the group, feel a little safer to know that with another Sharer as leader or the group made them less likely to be sold off for their abilities
  - But having a Sharer as the leader also made other feel uncomfortable or worried about safety – though most came around by the end
- I like that when outing herself as a Sharer she never outed the other Sharers to other members of the group (let them decide for themselves) so to me it felt like more of trying to open the door for others to come forward without
- It was interesting how when Lauren met a male Sharer, she noted to herself how she'd never thought how it would be different for a man because of the different expectations we have of men when it comes to emotions
  - Knowing our own identities, skills and strengths is great but sometimes it blinds us to seeing the same in others because we become used to how it manifests in ourselves – for example I might be a very organized person and maybe so is my coworker but thinks about it differently and uses a different organizational system so it may be harder for me to recognize that skill in them
  - Intersectionality: a male Sharer experiences the stigma/discrimination against Sharers differently than a woman Sharer does

"But if everyone could feel everyone else's pain, who would torture?
Who would cause anyone unnecessary pain?"

Intentional Community Building:

Lauren thinks a lot about who she trusts and who she brings into her community/group?

- What do you think about when building a team when you are in a leadership role?
- What skills/personalities/diversity do you think about?
- How do you decide who you can trust to talk about personal/diversity/identity issues with in the workplace?
- What are your red flags for individuals/companies when it comes to your workplace, school, job search, etc.?

With your engineering/energy knowledge, how do you think you would fair in building a new society post/peri apocalypse such as the one in this books?

What role would you see yourself playing in Lauren's group?

"Embrace diversity. Unite— Or be divided, robbed, ruled, killed
By those who see you as prey. Embrace diversity
Or be destroyed."

Our Challenge to You:

Imagine you are put in charge of a project and you get to choose/hire your team.
Identify 3 different professional personality types you would want working under you to compliment your own strengths and skills.

Looking for more notes on the book?
https://www.coursehero.com/lit/Parable-of-the-Sower/quotes/