

Hope As A Survival Instinct

by Ja'miil Millar

AS MARIAME KABA puts it, *hope is a discipline*. I strive to exist in spaces that honour the depth of hopeful practice. Some may interpret hope as faith, divine guidance, or a quiet teacher. Kaba describes hope as an active practice — something that requires intentional space, effort and attention. To me, hope is a lifeline, an instinct I've come to understand intuitively. It is memory.

Maybe that's why despair makes me feel angry. Not because I don't feel it — I do, and often — but because there's a deep fear of getting stuck in it. Hopelessness is where I feel most frozen. Despair seems at odds with something I know deep inside. A kind of ancestral survival.

As someone of Black-Caribbean and Palestinian descent, my very existence is proof of hope, survival, and resistance. And no attempt by colonial projects across the Western world, including Israel, will ever erase this fact. I believe my purpose can be both simple and profound: to nurture, create and reclaim memory; to stay present and grounded in the histories that shaped me and let that be my guide.

Hope in uncertain times can be commonly dismissed as naive or something frivolous. But I question any tendency to treat hope as passive and equate it with optimism, as if it's merely a way to avoid hard truths. The real naivety, I believe, is in treating hope as something on a binary, rather than allowing it to exist in complexity.

Hope is not avoidance; it is acceptance. It is a reflex, a reminder, and — especially for historically disenfranchised communities — an ancestral inheritance. Hope does not ignore suffering; it insists on possibility despite it.

Consider the world under capitalism: an economic system built on scarcity, where wealth is hoarded, and materialism is prized above all else. In *The Serviceberry*, Potawatomi botanist and writer Robin Wall Kimmerer offers an alternative vision rooted in circularity and reciprocity. She describes a “gift economy” where wealth is not something to be extracted and capitalized on but is framed as a gift that's strengthened in the relationships our survival depends on. “Gratitude and reciprocity are the currency of a gift economy,” she writes, “and they have the remarkable property of multiplying with every exchange.” In contrast, today's fragile economic state, held in the hands of fascist, power-hungry individuals, only underscores how urgently we need to learn this lesson.

Now is the time for our fiercest hoppers. Turning theories of collective struggle into action. I'm reminded of Palestinian journalist Bisan Owda's February 10th update from Gaza, where she points to “stolen land on Turtle Island,” acknowledging this land's colonial history. This is hope in action: resistance and solidarity intertwined.

To meet this moment, we must remember that we have been here before, and those lessons must fuel our hope. I am alive thanks to a lineage that defied odds, remained steadfast, and dreamed futures into existence when none seemed possible. A lineage that commits to resisting, rebuilding and repairing. In Palestine, what I'm painting as hope relates to *sumud*, an Arabic word meaning “steadfastness.” That is where my hope lives: not in denial, but in the undeniable truth that we are still here; not by chance but by resisting, rebuilding and repairing. And we're not going anywhere.

Remembering always brings to mind Octavia Butler's prophetic wisdom. People often feel an eeriness when they realize how accurately her science fiction predicted our present reality.

In *Parable of the Sower*, protagonist Lauren Olamina has a condition called *hyperempathy*, which makes her deeply vulnerable to the emotions of others, so much so that it becomes a risk. The story opens with a diary entry dated February 1, 2025: “We had a fire today.” Lauren lives in California, navigating wildfires, climate change, social inequality, and an authoritarian U.S. president. Butler’s ability to foresee these crises is astonishing. The fiction in her 1993 story is frighteningly our current reality.

Yet, if you read her essay *A Few Rules for Predicting the Future*, it becomes clear that Butler was simply paying attention to very clear patterns. It was a warning. When asked by a student about this she said, “I didn’t make up the problems... All I did was look around at the problems we’re neglecting now and give them about 30 years to grow into full-fledged disasters.”

So, where does hope live in all of this? Butler’s vision has largely become reality. What now?

I’m not writing to offer a definitive answer at all. In fact, quite the opposite. All I know is that there are people paying attention, I am in community with people paying attention. I love people paying attention. And if, like me, you relate to Lauren Olamina — walking through life with your own form of hyperempathy — this cannot be something to succumb to. It’s something to channel and use as a force for resistance against the people and systems that refuse to pay attention. Because what is the alternative? Hope must be a survival instinct.

One of *Parable of the Sower’s* greatest lessons is that “*the only lasting truth is change.*” To me, hope lies in embracing that truth. Resist complacency, step into transformation, and allow ourselves to evolve through change.

“All that you touch
You Change.
All that you Change
Changes you.
The only lasting truth is Change.
God
Is Change.”
— Octavia E. Butler

For hope to be sustainable, it cannot be cultivated in isolation. It thrives in community. It needs collaboration, feedback, relationships, and a commitment to something beyond ourselves. It demands accountability, invites conflict and grief, and requires care. It calls on us to be creative, embrace complexity, and persist anyway.

And if we return to where we began, I recall some more of Mariame Kaba’s most quoted words: “*Let this radicalize you rather than lead you to despair.*” To be radicalized simply means to change. Hope is change. And in the face of overwhelming uncertainty, perhaps we can remember it as the only lasting truth.

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Author’s Note:

I share these reflections as a crystallization of what I’ve learned through Yellowhead’s Radical Policy School (now the [Misko Aki Knowledge Exchange](https://yellowheadinstitute.org/2025/02/18/hope-as-a-survival-instinct/)): hope lives here. It thrives in the unexpected mirrors of community. We began as strangers from diverse backgrounds who came together for a shared month-long commitment that has evolved into meaningful, unexpected connections with lasting impact. Hope is in the voices of those who reflect back to us the most hidden parts of ourselves, the ones we thought existed only in quiet moments. Sometimes, these reflections surprise us.

This program is a powerful example of how hope can be sustained. It is rooted in reciprocity and gratitude.

CITATION

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