CREATING COMPELLING FUTURES WITH AUTUMN BROWN AND ADRIENNE MAREE BROWN

In Conversation with Gabrielle Donnelly

Autumn Brown is a mother, organizer, theologian, artist, and facilitator. A worker-owner at the Anti-Oppression Resource and Training Alliance (AORTA), Autumn’s work connects movements for social justice, the solidarity economy, and imaginative practices for survival. Her writing has been featured in Parenting for Social Justice, Forget Prayers, Bring Cake, Lightspeed Magazine, The Procyon Science Fiction Anthology, Revolutionary Mothering: Love on the Frontlines, and Octavia’s Brood: Science Fiction Stories from Social Justice Movements.


Together, adrienne and Autumn co-host the podcast How to Survive the End of the World and live in the United States.

Gabrielle: So how did you develop your interest in the future?
adrienne: Star Trek. We come from a Star Trek family—our dad was a Trekkie. We both grew up watching the original Star Trek, The Next Generation, and all the movies. We didn’t stand a chance. From an early age we were immersed in thinking about going to space and the future, and it was all tied to Gene Roddenberry’s vision which was so multi-racial, multi-species, multi-everything. As an interracial family there weren’t a lot of resources on how to do it, and it was something our parents could draw upon and share with us. They wanted us to see it, the love in it (the first inter-racial kiss on television—between Lt. Uhura and Capt. Kirk!) and immerse ourselves in it.

Autumn: Yeah, the kiss! And the storytelling around the Star Trek universe deals with issues of colonization and rules about first contact with other communities. One of the things so interesting about the Star Trek universe is that it takes many of the things that plague
society now and just resolves them as the starting point. They’ve figured out sustainable food sources, for example, and there is something really compelling about a future in which the current problems just don’t exist—making room for new problems instead.

Also, we both fell in love with science fiction as teenagers and adrienne discovered Octavia Butler’s work, passing it on to me. We are always passing ideas back and forth with each other. We both have a real insatiable curiosity. Both of us are not interested in obsessing over the problems. We are more interested in solving the problems and having that as an invitation to solve new problems.

adrienne: It was also a part of the politicization process. I started to understand that we are living in a world that’s a mess. The present is already a mess. We must focus on the future, and that informed both of us around our organizing and politicization. If we want things to be different, we must be thinking about the future and how do you do that.

Gabrielle: How do you both orient towards the future? Think about the future?

adrienne: It’s always been interesting to me to not get caught up in dystopic thinking because I’m so obsessed with the dystopian. To this day, I still can ask, “what’s the worst thing that could happen?” And then I ask myself, “what could be good? What could that look like?”

Autumn: I remember seeing Ta-Nehisi Coates in an interview disagreeing with Martin Luther King’s idea that the arc of the moral universe bends towards justice. He expressed that he thinks the arc of the moral universe bends towards chaos and that we constantly exist inside of that. I remember being blown away by the presentation of the juxtaposition. Justice versus chaos is an interesting way of thinking about what we are constantly moving towards. And is organizing taking us closer to a justice-oriented future? Or are we basically stemming the tide of chaos that is constantly before us? I don’t take easily to binaries, so I don’t necessarily accept this framing, but I do think it’s a nice encapsulation of what it feels like for most of us right now—that we’re either moving toward justice or moving towards chaos, and we’re trying to avoid a catastrophe future.

Gabrielle: What are some assumptions about the future that you encounter in yourself and others that you’re curious about?

adrienne: I experience people as very binary about the future. Some people think there is nothing we can do—it’s going to be a shitshow, there is no hope, humans don’t get better. Or that it will be better if the Earth just doesn’t have us around. And then there are naively hopeful people, saying, “it’s just going to get better!” I hear this binary quite often. And I also think there are a lot of assumptions that technology is going to take off, that outer space is an escape plan or interaction that will save us in some way. There is a lot of hopelessness that shows up in the idea that the future is just for the extremely wealthy—those who are able to create little safety pods for themselves get to survive the conditions they’ve created. And the big assumption around climate fear—which I think is intelligent—is that it’s just starting to land for people and it’s so overwhelming that we just can’t comprehend the scale of the crisis. There is a looming terror.

Autumn: I co-sign all of those and I’m making notes to myself, as I’m sure I do and say all these things! In a US context, our society tends to be very ahistorical—we have a tendency towards ahistoricism. It’s both true inside movements and in society at large. People tend to be disconnected from history and therefore disconnected from patterns and stories and lineages. And it’s not just that the past informs the future, but the way the past informs the future. There’s a “what’s happening right now is what’s happening, it’s the only thing that’s happening!” I think that we have a similar relationship in the US context with the future. I don’t know what the word is, but if we’re ahistorical, we’re also afutural. We behave as though there is no future and as though our current actions aren’t shaping a
future. But if you study history, you see how history shapes the present. If you study the present, you can predict how the present will shape the future. If Octavia Butler were alive now and she heard people saying she was a prophet (which I think she was) she’d say, “No, I’m not! All you need to do is pay attention to the present and see how it shapes the future.” So, let’s address this afuturality (my new word!). Because of it, people lose sight of the fact that our present shapes the future, which means that multiple futures are possible at any given moment. I think a lot about preparedness and because our present is shaping multiple possible futures, I want people to be preparing for multiple possible futures. But I think that afuturality is a difficult thing that people just carry around with them, which is related to what adrienne just said about binaries. I also think—and this is an unpopular opinion—that people get way too caught up in the idea that humans not surviving would be a tragedy. Lately, I’ve been thinking and writing about the idea of de-centering our survival in the way we think about the future. We are so obsessed with the exceptionalism idea of the survival of our species, and therefore whatever we do has to be in service of our own survival. I think this is an assumption that we have to trouble up, if, for instance, we take seriously Indigenous worldviews. If we take seriously the invitation to see the world as alive, then I can’t keep acting like the version of life that is expressed through me and other humans is the most important version.

adrienne: I feel like the more we learn about octopuses, the more it’s clear that they are probably superior to us, in a multitude of ways! I think another assumption is that the current dynamics of oppression and identity will not change, even though they have changed every 10 to 20 years. We’ve changed what we call ourselves; we’ve changed how we understand race and gender. But somehow people are talking about it like it will always be exactly this way. It’s almost offensive to people to suggest that this will also shift, and not to get too attached to it.

Gabrielle: So how are you orienting towards futures in your own life and work?

Autumn: What’s coming up for me right now is my kids, because they are the primary way I orient towards the future—through raising them and being humble about the life they’re experiencing and the ways they see and understand the world. Children today are navigating something no child in a hundred years has had to navigate, the last global pandemic being 100 years ago. But also, they are navigating it alongside climate catastrophe, alongside the way digital networks are destroying civil society. They are aware of it in a different way—they’ve grown up within the internet age and social media era. It’s humbling for me to realize that I don’t know more about how things like social media work simply because I lived before it existed. My kids understand these platforms and know this world in a really different way because it’s the only world that they know.

In the past couple of years, I’ve had a lot of big questions come up around hope and how do I instill hope or invest hope in my children. If hope is an act or a way of being, how do I instill that in them? It’s interesting because it’s not a question they are asking—it’s something I’m projecting onto them. It’s not that I don’t feel hopeless or concerned about the uncertainty of the future world that they will live in, but I see so many other adults of my generation concerned about whether kids are hopeful about the future. So, what I’m trying to do right now is have an orientation towards the future, in the same spirit of decentering human survival. I’m decentering my own perspective about all of this in relationship. While I can still teach my children, they are growing up so much faster than I did and have heightened levels of emotional intelligence. I don’t think they are unique among children. I believe that for my generation and older, we need to have humility here around what we think we know.
In Conversation with Gabrielle Donnelly

adrienne: I appreciate the question and what you’ve shared, Autumn. For as long as I can remember, I’ve been thinking, talking, and writing about the future. Thinking about how do we become accountable and responsible and make it different than the present? Over the course of the pandemic, a new humility has happened within me too. I feel like I’m shifting from being a futurist to a now-ist. We can’t control the choices that past generations have made and that future generations are going to make. The only thing we can do is embody different ways of being in the present, in our relationships, and embody the future we want to see now. Speaking personally, I have lived many years flying from place to place, two to three times a week, creating a massive carbon footprint, to tell everybody about the future and how we need to care about it. But I wasn’t very present in any community, not connecting with my capacity to be in deep authentic relationship. At the time it felt fine, something that many organizers were doing in their work. Learning about how the planet adjusted to our absence in the early lockdown was emotionally impactful for me. I have been in a quest to change my behaviors, not just my ideas or the ideas of others. I’ve made big changes about where I live and how I work—to be in a different relationship with the natural flow of life, the weather systems, my turtle. And I know it’s not just about individual actions alone. It’s a dance where a lot of individuals must be willing to change their behaviors and to listen to what the Earth is telling us to do. With social movement spaces, at least, how do we take leadership in that? The words we spill are not a carbon offset. We must change our practices. That’s humbling. I want to be an old auntie and an old grand auntie to an old person. I want the younger generations to come and sit down with me and I want to be able to look them in the eye and know that I realized what I needed to do, and then did it. That I told as many people as possible without causing additional harm. That feels like my orientation right now.

Gabrielle: We’ve been talking about your orientations toward the future, and we’ve moved into discussing practicing into the future. What does it mean, for you, to practice into the future?

Autumn: I’m part of a worker-owned co-operative and we democratically manage our business and use consensus to make decisions. While consensus is an old practice, I think it’s a way that we can practice into the future—if more people committed to it and learned how to do it. The beauty of consensus is more than the decisions we make together. It’s a cyclical process of practicing being together in this way. It’s a future-oriented practice because at its best, it is a practice of consent (unlike hierarchical forms of decision making). And I think consent is the future, as an alternative to enslavement and subjugation. It’s about saying, “I won’t do this without you.” When I teach people about consensus, one of the first things we talk about is where it can go wrong—when we try to make a decision in a space where not everyone who needs to inform the decision is present. A critique of consensus is that it takes too long and it’s too messy. But the problem is not that it’s long or messy. The problem, often, is that we don’t slow down enough to make sure everyone who needs to be present is present. It’s about moving together. Not envisioning a future without each other. Even with what seems like a hopelessly divided nation, when we zoom out and really see it and feel it, if we really hope to survive, we can’t orient from a sense that anyone can be discarded along the path (as much as we may want to).

adrienne: For me, facilitation, consensus, mediation, and things like that are intentional practices that connect us to our mycelial nature. We’re all connected but capitalism has fooled us into thinking that we can operate as individuals and that delusion is killing us. It’s important to link it back to slavery, in the sense of what it did to our bodies and to the land. By engaging in these collaborative practices, we’re inviting everyone in as equal
partners. And we can broaden this future that these consensus practices need to consider all the species impacted by our choices, the lands that are impacted by our choices. On a simple level, I’ve been learning this around eating what’s in season and adjusting my life and energy and contribution to seasonal changes. There is an earthing practice that’s needed on a collective level—whether it’s putting our feet on the ground literally or whether it’s in terms of how we have conversations. The premise of our podcast is an understanding that we’ve been through many apocalypses and we’re in one now, an ongoing condition shaped by class experience, where you fit in the global hierarchy of who has resources and who is deemed valuable. But it can be the work of what’s right in front of you. I think we sometimes look at the future as a distractive tool. The future is right now, and I love thinking about the multi-verse, that every small choice I make is opening up new possibilities. There are a lot of readers of mine who are perfectly fine with ideating and not acting. Right now, I don’t care if you agree with me or not, but what are you doing right now?

*Gabrielle:* How do you see the relationship between personal and collective practices? Are they both necessary, nested, or distinct? Where do you fall in this conversation?

*adrienne:* For me the trick is thinking collectively and then taking whatever individual action aligns with collective well-being and collective needs. On one level, it doesn’t matter if we recycle, but over a lifetime it can have a major impact. But it doesn’t make a difference until you’re also organizing and tied to other people and influencing each other. Greta Thunberg sitting by herself angry over climate change isn’t the same level of impact as Greta Thunberg in a global network of people speaking directly with politicians and leaders, collectively bringing the fight directly to them.

*Autumn:* In practicing consensus it’s not about being anti-hierarchy. I love the idea of fluid hierarchies and of people inhabiting power. In most stateless societies where consensus has arisen as a practice for how people work together, it often meshes with an existing hierarchy. There’s usually a cultural hierarchy related to generational differences, and yet people still practice consensus. To be in this well, my individual practices are what makes it possible for me to relate to that collective negotiation of power in a healthy way. If I’m not taking care of my personal sphere, then I’m going to show up to collective process and collective practices with a lot of unprocessed stuff, acting out things within my collective. My internal work is never done, but I can get to places of clearance. I can get to places of awareness with my internal work so that I can show up to collective process and know who and how I am. It’s the clarity that no one else is responsible for taking care of my feelings, and then the harder part is that I’m not responsible for taking care of anyone else’s feelings either. This is a place where we can get so stuck. People are carrying around hurt and our natural inclination is to want connection and a desire to help people heal. So, I think we must be clear about when we’re in healing work we’re in organizing work. Individual practices can help us in this discernment, knowing the boundaries we need to hold when and for what purpose. One of the core ideas inside of my collective is that we are accountable to something larger than ourselves, and we are responsible for our own feelings, actions, and communication. We are responsible for asking questions and not making assumptions and figuring out which containers are actually for us. I think that’s going to be one of the most important skills for the future. In the US context, we’re born into this nation, and we’re supposed to feel patriotic and protective, regardless of the decisions it makes. But I don’t think that experiment is working—I see myself as a post-nationalist. I am asking myself, if this container can’t hold justice for me, what containers can?
Gabrielle: Given we’ve explored so far in this conversation, how willing are you to articulate a future that you want to see?

adrienne: I co-edited a collection called *Octavia’s Brood* with Walidah Imarisha, where she introduced the idea of visionary fiction. Visionary fiction, in the lineage of Octavia Butler, is fiction that can articulate a future that aligns a radical value system, where change happens from the bottom up. This includes de-centering whiteness and telling a more honest story about the diversity of this time, of disability justice, and all these things being able to exist in the future. More people are co-dreaming the future. If the majority of the future wasn’t just dreamed up by white men, I think we would have a future that is automatically more just, considerate, compassion, accepting, and excited about difference. I think of it like biodiversity and being responsible for biodiversity. I sometimes feel like humans are on the edge of understanding our purpose, and that purpose is love. So how do we cultivate a love that is liberating for people? It’s theoretical and hypothetical, but I’m trying to figure it out and testing it in my own life. How do we remove the limitations that humans put on ourselves that cause us to be miserly and cruel? How can we instead, love into the spaciousness that it’s all connected? I don’t think of the future in terms of the kind of cars we’ll be driving. While I’m mad as hell at the hyper-accumulation of the Elon Musks and Jeff Bezos’ of the world and have serious critiques of their approaches to the future, they are shaping it. They are shaping how transportation and commerce are going to happen, shaping it from a capitalist perspective. If we want something else to be possible, we must shape something else that is more compelling. This is daunting work and requires bravery—you’re going to get your ass kicked!

Autumn: Like adrienne named, I have a lot of thoughts, imaginings, and predictions about where the future could go, but I don’t feel a commitment to a particular future. I feel a strong sense that much of our work in this time is grief work. We have a capacity to grieve in a way that is not shared by all species, and I think of it as a superpower, something that is required of us right now. Maybe that grief is witnessing the end of ourselves, the need to archive ourselves, and figure out what artifacts we want to leave behind.

adrienne: I read the *Tao Te Ching* once a year, and one of the ideas in it is that you must let the mud settle until the water is clear before taking action. That idea is evergreen and I’m curious about what are the evergreen ideas we can observe and learn right now and pass on? I think these ancient ideas are necessary and I want to be a part of the portal that helps move them forward.

*This conversation has been edited for length and clarity. For more information about the work of adrienne and Autumn, visit: adriennemareebrown.net, iambrown.org, and endoftheworldshow.org.*