When Everyone Around You Is Talking About the End, Talk About Black History

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It was a regular January evening in a household like many others, in which three kids would be going to school (or not) the next day, depending on the latest vicissitudes of the Omicron variant of Covid-19. Around the dinner table, my husband, kids and I were assessing the school situation and calibrating our response. New cases in the high school that our twins attend had hit alarming double digits. At the middle school that our youngest attends cases were not very far behind.

Covid is not a vague threat to us. Beloved family members have been taken by this dreadful disease — into the next world, into reduced states of capacity and into a long tomorrow of fatigue and neurological unpredictability. But when one of our kids put her fork down and announced, "We're all gonna die," in a way that was falsely humorous and at the same time heartbreaking, I found myself sputtering in response, desperately wanting to soothe her worry.

"Listen to me," I told her. "This is not the end. This is just a change."

Everyone around me seems to be talking about the end. The

end of nearly a million American lives in the Covid pandemic; the end of American democracy; the end of a public bulwark against racism and blatant antisemitism; the end of the post-Cold War peace in Europe; the end of the stable climate; and the end of our children's best futures, to name a few undeniable possibilities. A condition of apocalyptic anxiety has overtaken us, raising our collective blood pressure, and sending us deeper into a maelstrom of suspicion, conspiracy thinking and pessimism. I confess that I have also been down in this foxhole of doomsday thinking, but hearing it voiced by one of my children, a girl who should have a whole, vibrant life ahead of her, snapped me out of my anxious crouch.

This is just a change. I have given these impromptu words of maternal reassurance some thought since then, and I am not prepared to retract them yet. This is not the end. It is a change, albeit the largest and most dramatic transformation that many of us have seen in our lifetimes. Change is often frightening. We strive for stability. Because of the stress change causes, we often shrink or freeze in the face of it.

But there is a hack to prevent that panic, and it is called history. "The single greatest constant of history," the historian and futurist Yuval Noah Harari writes in "Homo Deus: A History of Tomorrow," "is that everything changes." History is indeed our best accumulated record of change, and of how our species has borne up to the shocks. It is a

record replete with flood, famine, disease, exile, resource depletion, abuse and war. But it is also a golden repository of thought and action, a specieswide playbook for resiliency, recuperation, and even reinvention in response to societal disruption, moral failure and collapse.

Take, for example, the last time in United States history when raw and unabashed tyranny reigned: the nearly 250 years when the enslavement of human beings for profit and pleasure dominated the economy, politics and culture of the nation. For the four million people of African descent who lived enchained before the Civil War, tyranny, and a particular form of racial authoritarianism, were the frame, structure and substance of daily life. Most Black people in the mid-19th century lived in the agricultural Southeast, Deep South, and Southwest (and some in the West of present-day Oklahoma, California and Oregon) under the heels and whips of a legally enabled population of abusers seeking ever more profits at the expense of their fellow humans — including, too often, blood kin born as a result of sexual exploitation.

I hope we can agree by now what manner of beast chattel slavery was — how vile, how evil, and how intimately interwoven it was into early American society. Back in the 19th century, most African Americans lived and toiled under the sway of slaveholder-tyrants. For these millions of enslaved African Americans, the turning of each new day

must have felt like the end, as it presaged the near and palpable threat of hunger, torture, murder, rape and the loss of loved ones to sale and redistribution. But while some did lose their lives or their minds under these unbearable circumstances, for many Black people slavery was not the end, but rather, a series of changes in states of being, because of a lack of control over their futures.

The capacity to recognize those moments of emergency, catastrophe and impending loss as moments of change and then to anticipate what might come next are part of the psychological and emotional tool kit that saved Black America. It was illustrated powerfully by a single mother named Rose, enslaved in Charleston, S.C., in the early 1850s, who found herself contending with what must have felt like the end when her daughter, a girl of only 9, was about to be taken from her. That daughter, named Ashley — perhaps for the river that flowed near their homeplace — was slated for sale following the death of the man who had “owned” them both. Rose could have shrunk into herself from the horror of it; she could have frozen in the face of existential threat. Instead, Rose willed herself to take an action that might not stop the coming change, but would better equip her child to bear it. In so doing, Rose would gouge one more discernible crack in the wall of American slavery and the ideology of Black inhumanity.

The historical record tells us that Rose did not look down in shame or away in a refusal to accept her reality. She instead looked up into the change of her terrifying circumstances and met the eyes of her daughter with an insistence on hope. Although Rose knew she was losing Ashley, perhaps forever, she hoped her child would survive this change and packed a sack of essential things to make it so. According to the story passed down by a line of women in their family, that sack held food, clothing, a braid and a mother's eternal love.

Rose would never see her daughter again, but Ashley and her descendants would carry the sack through a series of tumultuous transformations, including lifelong separation in the slave trade, civil war, emancipation, racial violence and migration to the urban North (as I detail in my book "All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake"). These many daughters of enslaved ancestors and their figurative sisters in bondage would persist through unfathomable change.

In Rose's action and Ashley's perseverance, we find a codex for survival buried in this country's dark history of racial slavery. Ashley's sack survives to this day (it is on display this February at Middleton Place Plantation in Charleston), a testament to the courage that is possible amid change, and a soft blueprint of hope in this month when we commemorate the miracle that is Black history.

This spirit of perseverance, of course, flows through nearly every cultural endeavor of Black America — our politics, our social and scientific achievements and our arts. The visionary African American science fiction and fantasy writer, Octavia E. Butler, embraced that mind-set in her best-selling novel "Parable of the Sower." First published in 1993, this prescient, dystopian story is set in Los Angeles and greater California just around the corner from our today, in 2024-2027, amid a chaotic backdrop of fires, crime, neoslavery and societal collapse. Butler's protagonist, the 15-year-old Lauren Olamina, is the child of an African American father and birth mother, and a Latina stepmother. Lauren struggles with a disability resulting from her deceased birth mother's drug use.

"The only lasting truth is change," Lauren writes in her journal before her community is attacked and her life is utterly transformed. After her escape from the charred remains of her destroyed neighborhood, Lauren takes to the road, forming relationships with others who have also been cast into exile by exigent circumstances. With this new tribe of survivors from every race, sex and previous condition, she begins to form an alternative faith and politics of perseverance. Lauren sees no option but forward movement into the boundless breach. Neither did Rose. Nor should we.

Despite our anxieties, we are not standing on the precipice

at the end of America or the end of the world. Instead, we face change of a nature and magnitude that we may not fully perceive, but which history gives us a way to confront. It is not a viable strategy to close our minds against the threat by believing all is already lost.

So let us meet the change ahead by joining together in small acts of mutual humanity, embracing the strategy of gritty hope that Black culture and history make manifest.

Tiya Miles is a professor of history at Harvard and the author of "All That She Carried: The Journey of Ashley's Sack, a Black Family Keepsake."