

Making Dreams Come True

by Rev. Don Garrett

Delivered March 3, 2017 at The Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley

When imagination and desire get together, they have a baby called, “Dream.” As the Disney song goes, “A dream is a wish your heart makes when you’re fast asleep.” Sometimes we have dreams while we’re wide awake and call them daydreams. Some dreams are idle fantasies, while others capture and command our imagination with a compelling mixture of longing and desire, so much so that we actually do something about them: we do the hard work of making them come true.

Can you recall those dreams that have given your life purpose and direction? I know I’ve had a few. The first one I can remember is wanting to learn to read. I was in Kindergarten when Hurricane Hazel struck the Eastern seaboard in 1954. It was a powerful, dangerous storm that brought widespread damage and death. My parents were relatively new transplants from the Pacific Northwest who had never experienced a dangerous storm before, and I can remember the intensity of my mother’s anxiety as the hurricane approached.

I can remember standing in front of our house with the freshly delivered newspaper on the doorstep. It had big bold headlines I could not read. I remember staring at that paper, knowing it had important information about what was coming, frustrated that those big black marks had no meaning for me. I decided, then and there, that I wanted to be able to read, and set out to accomplish just that.

I can’t remember the details of what I did that year, but I can remember working very, very hard on learning to read. I especially applied myself the summer before first grade. I set myself a goal. Having mastered all the children’s books in our home library, I decided to take on the Bible. I recall the intensity of my desire, and can even recall the setting, temperature, and sunlight in various settings as I applied my young self to making this dream come true.

And it worked! I brought my Bible to class on the first day of first grade and read the first chapter of Genesis aloud in front of the class. (I remember wondering just what “firmament” was.) I was proud of my accomplishment, but was even

happier to be able to read everything I wanted. And I did, becoming a voracious reader all through my childhood – and adulthood as well, for that matter.

There's the formula for making a dream come true: imagination plus desire plus hard work. All three have to come together for the dream to come true.

I can recall other dreams where the elements didn't quite come together. For example, my sixth-grade class put on a musical with show tunes and original material. My classmates auditioned and rehearsed while I did nothing but imagine that I'd be the star of the show anyway. I was so sure it would happen that I didn't even try. Needless to say, the show came and went and I just sat in the audience, watching. A clear case of imagination only – no desire, really, and certainly no hard work. No dream come true.

This reminds me of something that the Rev. Charlie Kast, minister of my home congregation in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, liked to say: "One can stand on a hillside with one's mouth open for a very long time before a roast duck flies in."

It wasn't long before I was in the grips of another dream, though. In 8th grade I was listening to the Kingston Trio and Peter, Paul & Mary and decided I wanted to learn to play the guitar. Now this dream was more like my dream of learning to read. It combined imagination with desire and really hard work. I had a 30-year-old guitar from Sears and Roebuck – needless to say, it was a dreadful instrument. But I persisted, practicing, practicing. I devised ways to make up for the guitar's shortcomings until I saved enough to buy a better one, and by 10th grade I was advanced enough to sight read professional jazz band guitar parts.

I wanted to be part of a larger jazz ensemble but the stage band in my high school didn't need a guitar; it needed someone to play the upright bass – so I learned to play the double bass, becoming a key member of the rhythm section. And I learned things about music, jazz and ensemble playing that took me over the moon – and that was another dream come true. But not in the way I'd intended

With all that, I decided on a career as a professional musician. I sleepwalked my way through the rest of my high school classes because all my attention and efforts were going into music. I didn't even take the SAT test because I wanted to go to a music conservatory where the audition was the most important thing. I took a

gap year after high school graduation to work on my playing, practicing, learning more, and performing in bars, clubs and those ubiquitous coffee houses back then.

Then I enrolled in the Berkelee School of Music in Boston, a conservatory for jazz musicians. I was swimming with the sharks there, some of the best performers in the world. But their approach was too practical and down-to-earth for me. They were all concerned with getting work in the music business. I didn't know how hard that was going to be. My dream was still far enough up in the clouds that I wanted to create great art more than I wanted a job, so I transferred to Bard College where I studied music composition.

My dreams of a life in music were alive and kicking, I could envision great things for my future. I didn't really know how to make it happen, but was sure that I was on my way. Then, when I was just 21, I was diagnosed with terminal metastatic cancer and everything changed. I lost my strength and vitality, but even more telling, I lost my dreams and ambition. There wasn't room for them in the face of my impending death. Now I don't know anyone at that age for whom the idea of dying would a dream come true. Even youthful suicides are more the result of dreams lost than fulfilled.

I began what turned out to be nearly 20 years of living without a dream. I moved through life just one day at a time, just dealing with challenges as they came up. I worked, ate, slept, and paid my bills. I had relationships. I even had a marriage and a child. But it was all in the context of living in death's waiting room.

It wasn't that I was completely disengaged with things. I cared for my daughter. I found a new career in graphic arts and built a business. But there was no magic in it all. I can tell you that this is not a great way to live. Downs were more powerful than ups, depression more much frequent than happiness.

When my business partner betrayed me after a decade of hard work, I lost hundreds of thousands of dollars. But it freed me to look at my life, question what I was doing and explore whether there could be yet another new dream for me. I won't go into all the details, but the Unitarian Universalist ministry became that new dream for me.

I was so dedicated to that dream that I basically spent my 40's in college and graduate school, followed by an internship and four years of search. I was called to a

congregation in Indianapolis. I was sad and disappointed when that didn't work out but my dream was stronger than ever. I continued to study and devote myself to spiritual wisdom and practice, certain of my calling to teach those longing for the kind of depth that daily life in our culture does not have to offer.

Imagination – desire – and hard, hard work. That's the formula.

When it comes to stewardship time here at the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Lehigh Valley, we don't tend to dream very big. In fact, we tend to dream very, very small. We even structure our budget and stewardship program around our efforts to cover our overhead; to meet our expenses. Where's the dream in that? I worked and worried and paid the bills when I was living without dreams, but there wasn't any magic in my life. And by magic I don't mean sleight of hand or trickery. I mean the way our hopes and dreams can capture our imagination, set fire to our spirits, and create powerful communities of love and transformation.

There's a great quotation from Marianne Williamson that I like. She uses the word "God." I invite you to think about my new definition of God in this context. In her book, *Return to Love*, Williamson wrote, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light not our darkness that most frightens us. We ask ourselves, who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world. There's nothing enlightened about shrinking so that other people won't feel insecure around you. We were born to make manifest the glory of God that is within us. It's not just in some of us; it's in everyone. And as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same. As we are liberated from our own fear, our presence automatically liberates others."

We sell ourselves so short when we fail to dream big. Paying the bills! How boring! The only way to make that exciting is to focus our anxiety on the risks of failing to meet our expenses. But this is not the kind of excitement that can make a church vital and alive. It's like Bob Dylan said, "All those not busy being born are busy dying." Paying the bills and covering expenses are not being busy being born. That's what I did when I had no dreams. It's what you do when you're hanging out in death's waiting room. Taking care of expenses is necessary, but so is brushing our

teeth and going to the bathroom and we're not going to be able to build a compelling dream out of that. Can you?

So how can we be bold in our dreams? How can our dreams liberate us from fear and anxiety, and lead us into such an exciting vision of the future that we tend to lose interest in our own petty annoyances and complaints?

For this I'd like to go to the character Bloody Mary from the musical *South Pacific*. A young American falls in love with her daughter and she tells the couple that they need to talk and think about their future if they are going to build that future together. She does this in the song, "Happy Talk."

Happy talk, keep talkin' happy talk,
Talk about things you'd like to do.
You got to have a dream,
If you don't have a dream,
How you gonna have a dream come true?
Talk about the moon floatin' in the sky
Lookin' like a lily on the lake;
Talk about a bird learnin' how to fly.
Makin' all the music he can make.
Happy talk, keep talkin' happy talk,
Talk about things you'd like to do.
You got to have a dream,
If you don't have a dream,
How you gonna have a dream come true?"

We need a dream if we're going to have a dream come true. Let's think big and dream bigger. What could we do – within our walls and in our larger community – if we had more money than we knew what to do with? Now, that's a problem we'd like to have.

But if we're going to have that dream, we need happy talk, too! We need to talk with one another about our hopes and dreams for our congregation – talk about what we like, what we hope for. Our playing small doesn't serve the world. I know there are hopes and dreams among us, individuals willing to do the hard work of making those dreams come true, but they are individuals. It's not enough for one or

two or four of us to have a dream. We need to be bold enough to find a dream we all can share. And the only way to find that dream is to dream together.

The first step is to pay attention to what we're paying attention to. When dreams are missing, there's a tendency to focus on what we don't like and complain about that. This is one of the major symptoms of a dream deficiency. It blocks our ability to dream. I want you all to bear in mind that when you're complaining about something – anything, no matter how compelling it seems to you in the moment – you are exhibiting the primary symptom of a dream deficiency. We end up hurting our community instead of helping.

We need happy talk instead. Talk about what you like to do! Let's stretch our imagination and open our hearts to possibility. Let's share our visions of a Beloved Community with each other. We can change the world by changing ourselves, but only if we dream big. Making the budget is not transformational. It's what you do when you're hanging out in death's waiting room – and I don't think any of us want our community to die.

But the admonition that, "without a vision, the people perish" is more relevant than ever. We need a shared vision, a shared dream, that can lift us up from the ashes of managing the budget's bottom line into the clouds of happiness, hope, and fulfillment. I'm not kidding. This is what church is really all about.

So when you pledge your support for our stewardship campaign this year, I encourage you to forget about the bottom line. It's not about covering expenses. That's the kind of playing small that doesn't serve the world. It's about making our dreams come true. Can you imagine our congregation in the grip of a dream so powerful that it unites us all in a shared vision of a future that transforms hearts, relationships, communities, and the world?

As Marianne Williamson said, "... as we let our own light shine, we unconsciously give other people permission to do the same."

Let it shine, let it shine, let it shine.

May it be so.