

The Dreamers and the Dream

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March 24, 1996

We were standing together in the Trapp Gallery in Community House. The meeting to plan the founding of a new Unitarian Universalist congregation in the Somerset Hills area of New Jersey had just concluded. My friend turned to me and said, "This sounds like an interesting project; it might even be fun. But what I want to know is why do you feel so passionate about the need to establish a new congregation. Why does it matter so much to you?"

I explained to her that I have had occasion to drive out into that area of our state. I have walked through the regional shopping mall. It is clear to me that not only is Somerset County the fastest growing region of New Jersey, it is also full of young families with young children. Someone is going to respond to those young people and attempt to fill the spiritual needs in their lives. I recognize that not all of them, perhaps not even most of them will be attracted to our kind of religion, but many of them will be, if we let them know we exist. And frankly, I am not willing to abandon them to the religious right, the fundamentalists and other forms of religious expression which I believe to be destructive of the human spirit and which I believe represent a clear danger to our way of life. In the debate over the future of this nation and the world, we cannot refuse to enter the discussion. We need a congregation in places like Somerset County and places like Somerset County need a strong Unitarian Universalist presence.

By the time I had finished, my friend had that glazed look about the eyes which suggested that she had suddenly remembered how dangerous it can be to ask a preacher a simple question. Almost inevitably, the answer turns into a sermon only you get to stand while it is delivered.

As I have thought about that conversation in the weeks which have passed, I find that while I would affirm everything I said that evening, there is a deeper matter which I did not address. It has to do with the peculiar role that religion plays in our culture. Throughout our history, the religious community has been the keeper and the generator of the dreams which have shaped our destiny as a people. Indeed, there is a school of thought which insists that our first sense of being a peculiar people, our first national awareness was the shared experience of the great religious awakening of the mid-eighteenth century. There is a strong tradition which insists that the American Revolution was rooted in the vision of the Puritan churches of New England. It is clear from the historical record that many people saw the founding of the nation and the establishment of constitutional government as a consequence of the new religious understandings which swept the continent after the Revolution. Clearly, the demand for an end to slavery was framed in terms of a religious as well as a political vision, as were the struggle for

women's rights, and the movement for the extension of civil rights and the anti-war movement in the middle part of this century. Indeed, the so-called "the culture wars" which have flared as the century draws to a close is one more manifestation of the power of religious vision to shape and structure public policy in the Great Republic.

The religious community is the generator and the keeper of the dreams which shape our destiny. Over the course of my career, I have had occasion to see the power which adheres to a religious community determined to fulfill its dreams. When I left seminary, I was called to a church in suburban Chicago. It was a smallish congregation serving a town which had been one of the first planned communities to be built after the Second World War. Sometime in the late fifties, the men and women who comprised that congregation looked around and discovered that they were living in a segregated community. There were no African American residents in their town. The members of the church dreamed of an inclusive community in which the barriers dividing the races would be broken and swept away.

In this regard they were not unlike many other congregations around the country or even in their own town which deplored the racial segregation of our society. What made them different was that they decided that dreaming a great dream was meaningless unless they acted upon that dream. They might have looked around and concluded that their numbers were so small, their resources so slight that there was nothing they could do. Instead, rather than focus on their inadequacies, they decided to act out of an assumption of abundance. They set about to find black pioneers who were prepared to accept the substantial risks of breaking the racial barriers. Then they sought out an appropriate house, arranged a purchase using white surrogate buyers. When the new black families moved into their new homes, members of the congregation provided friendship and support and protection.

Beyond this, members of the congregation solicited statements from residents who affirmed that they would welcome African American neighbors and began to pressure realtors to open the market in those neighborhoods. As a result, by the time I arrived in Park Forest, the town was known as the best integrated of all Chicago's southern suburbs. A small congregation with a few hundred members had been captured by a dream, had focused on its power rather than its weakness and then had accomplished the impossible. In the process, they infused their own congregation with a sense of mission, with a deep pride, with a profound sense of the important role their faith played in their own lives and in the larger community.

I witnessed a similar kind of phenomenon in a church I once served in Northern Virginia at the height of the drug culture. At the time, the young people of the surrounding communities had made the church grounds a center of the drug traffic. The Christmas before I arrived, the church youth group had been busted by the police for using drugs. The church was at its wits end, attempting to respond to this challenge. The older members were afraid to visit the church except on Sunday mornings. Younger members were fearful of the impact of the drug culture on their own children. The congregation felt an obligation to minister to the young people they found on their own doorstep, but

understood that such a response could alienate the community and drain the church's resources. In the end, they chose not to respond to their fears and perceived inadequacies but to focus instead upon their dreams and an abundance of talent and commitment.

That congregation decided upon a bold program of intergenerational programming. Creating a thing they called the Free Microcosmic University, members of the church offered intergenerational courses in everything from photography, plumbing, auto mechanics, and bread baking to mythology, world religion and film critique. They created a summer program of drama and art and music. They celebrated the presence of the young people among them. In the end, they revitalized their own religious community, they established an imaginative ministry to the most disillusioned and alienated and discouraged of young people and they created a new role for themselves in the world--a role which offered the opportunity to make a difference in the world.

I tell you these stories because in each instance, a congregation, facing a moral challenge, chose to embrace its dreams, to focus not upon its fears or its inadequacies but rather upon its dreams and strengths and to act out of a culture of abundance rather than a culture of scarcity. And in each case, a religious community transformed itself and a small part of the world. I tell you these stories to demonstrate the power of a religious community when it is captured by a dream and when it acts upon that dream.

Dreams, you see, are to the human community what genes are to the individual body. Dreams define the limits of the possible. Dreams describe the inherent potential within any community. Without dreams there can be no cultural evolution, no better society. Without dreams we are limited to what has been. "Without a vision," in the words of the Hebrew scriptures, "the people perish." Religious communities, by their nature, are communities of dreamers, of people who see the world as it is, who understand the great distance between what is and what might be, who refuse to be satisfied with that discrepancy, of people who sing, with Jacob Trapp, "Wonders still the world shall witness, never known in days of old...." Religious communities, by their nature, speak for unrealized possibilities and challenge the complacency of the status quo.

But dreams are not enough. A religious community must also be a community of courage, willing to risk in behalf of those dreams. I have known congregations which have failed in this final test. I have served congregations unable to see beyond the challenge of mere survival, congregations so wedded to a culture of scarcity that they respond to every dream with the plaintive wail that we are too few, too poor, too over-committed. And you know what. In every case they were right. Living in a culture of scarcity, they regularly sacrificed their dreams to a harsh and narrow reality. Living in a culture of scarcity, they took no risks, dared nothing and lost everything--their reason for being and eventually their existence as well. Dreamers have to believe that the dream is worth taking risks, worth supporting. Dreamers have to believe that they exist in a culture of abundance in which their efforts together do not diminish their resources but multiply them, making possible results which could not have been predicted at the outset. And religious communities are nothing if they are not communities centered around dreams.

In this church, we have been about the process of dreaming larger dreams and then working to make those dreams come true. Six years ago, for example, the Board of Trustees dreamed of a powerful and creative religious education program for our children and for all our people. We as a congregation set about to make that dream happen. We said that if it were to happen we would need to make the position of Religious Educator a full-time, professional position. We didn't know where the money would come from; we weren't sure where the people would come from. Nonetheless we committed ourselves to that dream. You know the result. Our church school has tripled, our adult education program has exploded. Last month we created the position of Minister of Religious Education and called Carol Haag to fill that post, joining a Parish ministry which had been expanded to serve a larger and more vital congregation.

But beyond that, the congregation, dared to dream larger dreams. We determined that this institution, while it was making a difference in our own lives, had a responsibility to make a difference in the world around us. We committed ourselves to a number of projects. We would extend our religious vision to embrace a congregation in Transylvania, struggling, in a difficult economic and political climate, to complete the first new Unitarian church building to be constructed in that country in this century. We would embrace our responsibility to Unitarian Universalism on this continent by committing ourselves to full funding of our share of the cost of the Unitarian Universalist Association and the Metro New York District. We would embrace our responsibility to those in need around us by expanding our work with the homeless to include funding of a transitional apartment for families attempting to move out of homelessness and into a more settled life, by providing funds for feeding the homeless in Summit, by supporting outreach work in East Orange and in Newark. In all, we pledged more than ten percent of our budget to programs and projects outside our own church walls at the same time we committed ourselves to an enlarged and expanded ministry within our walls. We were a little nervous about where the money would come from and how we would put it all together. We chose to dream and to act out of a culture of abundance rather than scarcity. And to a surprising degree, we have realized the promise. We have met our obligations, we have met our commitments, and we are stronger and blessed with more resources as a result.

But there is this about dreams: Dreams beget dreams. Even as they are translated into reality, they are replaced by new dreams. We dream of an enhanced music program. As we celebrate the twentieth year of our Flentrop organ, we dream of giving that marvelous instrument a cleaning and a total restoration. This enables us to reach out to the larger community with a special ministry of music. We dream of an expanded program over the summer, rather than our tradition of virtually closing our doors for two and a half months. We dream of an expanded voice in the community as we seek to offer a series of Sunday afternoon lectures on important issues confronting our world--lectures which will bring to the area people who can enter with power into the debates which have been described as "the culture wars." We dream of continuing and enlarging our ministry to the homeless. We dream of continuing our partnership with the Unitarian Church in Barot, Transylvania, and look forward to a visit to Summit by the minister of that church and his wife in late summer. We dream of becoming a more effective witness to the importance

of the environmental challenges which confront our world. We dream of presenting a powerful advocacy for children. And, in covenant with our neighboring Unitarian Universalist congregations, we dream of establishing a new congregation.

But even this is not the end of our dreaming. For we are convinced that hidden within each of you is a dream which is waiting to be voiced. Somewhere, deep inside you probably have an outrageous dream of what we might be and what we might become, a dream which has the potential to open up a future of more radical dimensions and deeper meaning for us. Part of the duty of religious community is to honor the dreams and provide the means by which those visions become reality. Dreams are the cultural genes which shape the future--your future, our future, the world's future. And religious communities are the generators of the dreams, the keepers of the dreams, the servers of the dreams.

Nearly eighty-eight years ago, a handful of women and men in this town dreamed this church into existence. Five years later, they dreamed this building which is our home into existence. And less than five years after that, as the nation prepared to enter the First World War, this congregation gave substance to their dream of a religious community committed to freedom when they supported their minister's right to preach truth as he saw it, even though many of them and most of the town disagreed with his pacifism. Over the years, with ministers like A. Powell Davies and Jacob Trapp and Deane Starr and Jan Knost we have dreamed bold dreams. And when we have allowed ourselves to function out of a culture of abundance, we have achieved a great deal. Now, as the century draws to a close and we prepare to enter upon a new millennium, we are called to dream again as others have dreamed before us, to shape a religious community which nurtures the human spirit, which speaks out to the world about the challenges which confront our common society, which seeks to make a profound difference in the world we share in common.

Over the course of the next few weeks, you are going to hear a great deal about the dreams which will shape our congregation in the next year. Soon of you will receive the brochure entitled, "We Shall Dream Again." When it comes in the mail, read it and accept the invitation it includes to you to dream boldly about our congregation. On the second and third weekends of April, you will be invited to join a "vision group," a neighborhood gathering where we can share our dreams for this congregation and for its role in the community and the world. And then, you will have an opportunity to help fund those dreams we hold in common. We have learned that we have the power to be what our dream call us to become. But dreams do not become realities unless we provide the resources to enable them.

The great African American poet, Langston Hughes, challenged us with these words:
Hold fast to dreams
for if dreams die
life is a broken-winged bird
that cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams
for when dreams go
life is a barren field
frozen with snow

Hughes is right, as far as he goes. We need to dream bold dreams; we need to hold them close to our hearts as a promise that we and the world hold secret and unrealized potential. But we must do more than hold fast to dreams. We must serve them; we must provide the commitment and the energy and the resources needed to transform the dream into reality. In the image of A. Powell Davies, "We will dream again as others have dreamed before us." And then, we shall build a road that others shall travel into the world we have dreamed.