

Worthy Dreams and How We Got Them
Susan Davison Archer
June 21, 2009
Cedar Lane Unitarian Universalist Church
Bethesda, Maryland

The title of today's sermon was inspired by one of my favorite scholars in faith development, human growth and religion, Sharon Parks. One of her books is entitled "Big Questions, Worthy Dreams." While the book has a special focus on young adults, I want to acknowledge her influence in a broader understanding – for me and many other Unitarian Universalists – of how communities of faith can function to help people grow.

Langston Hughes wrote:

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.

Hold fast to dreams! But where do we get those dreams and how do we keep them?

Our dreams may belong to us, but rarely come to us in isolation!

Today I invite us to think about how we – as children, teens and younger adults -- got the dreams we have, the dreams that have in fact helped determine what our lives are about. It seems especially appropriate on Father's Day to look at how parents and other adults have helped us to develop our own worthy dreams and figure out how to pursue them.

So on this day, we reflect back on our own lives to honor and remember fathers and all those of any gender or age who have been models for our lives, who have given us courage or insight or knowledge, who have mentored us, inspired us or loved us in such an extraordinary way that we remember them still.

Some of these folks are of the variety I would call cheerleaders, whose cheers are sometimes loud. And sometimes these encouragers cheer us on more quietly as they gently share moments of life and are exquisitely present.

The writers of the two passages read earlier are ones I would put into this cheerleading category. In one a person takes time to be totally present to a two-year-old in a particular moment, and in the other a parent unabashedly recognizes that a dream of pig-racing might be just the right one for her kid, a dream quite worthy of our admiration.

And then, added to these noisy and quiet cheerleaders, are those who spark dreams in others by who they are. They serve as models of how to live -- inspiring others to think in new ways about what is of worth, what gives satisfaction, lifting up new arenas in life's menu, showing courage or imagination, stirring up

the sense of possibility, of confidence Or these might be folks who model how to find the will to keep going even when they encounter failure.

Some of you, in response to the invitation in the newsletter, have provided stories of people who have played significant roles in your lives. I thank all of you who shared your personal stories. I learned a lot from them!

Let me start with some of these tales from childhood.

One Cedar Laner thought back to her teacher from 4th grade. She wrote:

One day Mr. Chatterton took the class to the top of the railroad bridge so that we could admire my dad's garden down below. My dad grew show-quality roses, daffodils and hyacinths and developed a garden of native trees and plants which still exists today. I thought that this was normal, but Mr. Chatterton helped me to understand that my dad's garden was special.

He encouraged me as an athlete. He introduced us all to ballet and opera, theater and music. I remember him telling us the story of Madame Butterfly and listening to the music on a wind-up gramophone in our 1948 classroom. He took our class in small groups to matinee performances of the opera that year. He paid. This was a special gift to each of us.

Many years later I wrote to him. He wrote me back in his beautiful flowing penmanship and reminisced about our class, which he said was the best 4th grade class he ever taught!

Mr. Chatterton never married. He had no children of his own. But he nurtured and developed and cared for so many children, praising our talents, encouraging and supporting us, teaching us to work through problems and to be self-disciplined and proud. Above all, he taught us to believe in ourselves -- to listen, collaborate and be part of a community. To be the best that we can. His legacy lives on in each of us.

BE THE BEST THAT WE CAN

Mr. Chatterton, a cheerleader and much more.

Another Cedar Laner remembered her 5th grade teacher:

Mrs. Chesney loved every kid. Each one thrived. I was new to the school and she just "gathered me in." I could go to her to talk about anything. I bloomed. For the first time I made straight As. She believed in me, expected the best. Another teacher in high school also had a big effect. Again it was because she was so accepting of everyone, and she believed in us. And I learned I could love history, even though it had never been my passion.

THESE TEACHERS BELIEVED IN US. WE LEARNED TO BELIEVE IN OURSELVES.

Another story, this time from teenage years:

My mother was a history/English major. My two older brothers were into chemistry and physics. I loved to write and I loved learning languages.

But then, one day, in my 9th grade science class, my teacher, Chuck Philipps, gave a lecture on DNA. I was transfixed. I went home that day and told my mother I wanted to be a biochemist. This teacher loved his subject and loved challenging students. He expected us all to understand what was then cutting-edge information.

I remember hanging around after school all that year, talking about math, science, life and education. I never did go into research, but I got a B.S. in environmental science with a minor in education. I never thought that I couldn't or shouldn't do whatever I wanted for a career.

HE CHANGED MY LIFE.

Worthy dreams, new possibilities, expanding horizons. Teachers and other non-parents are particularly critical in the lives of teenagers. And, in fact, in faith communities, we have a special role to play in interacting with our teens, we as individuals and we who compose the larger environment, a fabric of nurturing and inspiring and of befriending, all that begins with our little ones and continues as they grow. It is, of course, individuals who are important to us then, but not only them. It is also the whole of us, the community itself that mentors, encourages, stirs up dreams.

Here is one story about a teenager that reflects this. It is not about a Cedar Lane youth, but a 14-year-old in another UU congregation, from whom I have permission to share her entry in a collective youth group journal. In it we see that she is changing, adolescence is at full tilt, childhood seems long ago. She is grieving for what she is losing, has lost, and she is fearful and lonely. She writes.

*Before,
Before the change occurred.
When life was sweet and simple
And laughter was the only language,*

*Then
Then the change occurred,
It left me all alone
In a big hole of blackness.
It took control of me,
And left me in a land unknown.*

*Now,
Now the change has occurred.
I've crossed the bridge.
And I shall never return.
It's taken me,
And left me with just memories,
Of before..*

Have you ever known or been a teen in this kind of confusing despair?

This is what she wrote two years later, just before she moved away from the church:

*This is the End.
This is the Beginning.
If Life goes in cycles
I've completed one period.*

I want to thank the people in this church for all your love and support...To help me discover who I am and what I aspire to. Thank you for accepting me and making me feel comfortable with all of me. I love

you guys! High school would never have been the same without your influence! Everything is ephemeral...So live, live and never regret. Carpe diem. The world is waiting for you. Love and Peace,

So what happened? What helped her make such a big shift? I won't presume to know all of it, but I do know that her faith community, composed of individuals but held together by a larger fabric of purpose and meaning, was for her a dependable "holding environment" while she made her way through some difficult times and found some dreams of her own. Human developmentalists use the words "holding environment" to describe a trustworthy place, a place of dependable continuity, love and care. For her this holding place included her ministers, her RE teachers, her youth advisors, older youth, her OWL instructors. It also included those many other adults who had noticed her, interacted with her, demonstrated care for her over a period of many years. Even in her despair, they remained. It was an environment of holding, until she was ready to find her next set of dreams and could pursue them.

Of course this young person makes me think about our own children here at Cedar Lane. It has been pointed out in a recent sermon how many children who have grown up here have become ministers. But that is only part of what can happen here.

In this congregation, there are examples of many young people who have had grown amazing dreams, and dived right into making them realities. Do you remember one of our teens, who a few years ago organized an area-wide campaign to raise money to help premature infants? Have you read in the newsletter of the work of one of our current college students who is trying to establish a volunteer project in which young adults can work in low-income communities, trying to get people to talk to each other and identify needs, and the strategies to meet them, a grassroots community organizing project? Have you talked over the years with CL young adults who have worked with AmeriCorps, or participated in work projects in this country or others? Or older young adults who work on a host of public health and environmental projects or are studying to become teachers or have other amazing aspirations? I do believe they intend to make a better world. They have developed, are developing their own dreams. We don't take credit for them, but neither should we not notice that the culture of dream-making is important here, in this place, among us, as we worship, as we clean creeks, as we support one another in so many ways. And we have responsibility for taking a hand in helping one another, of all ages, find our own worthy dreams.

A couple more stories, this one from the college years:

One Cedar Laner remembers a college professor, who while walking across the campus mall, saw him, stopped his walking, turned and went over to him. He said, "Your paper was good, I've been thinking about it. You have a tendency to give up on yourself. DON'T!"

I doubt if the professor remembers that instance, but the once-young Cedar Laner does. It marked a step towards self-confidence and possibility.

It is important that there are people in our lives who notice us, pay attention, offer words of encouragement.

And this need doesn't stop in those first years out of high school or college. One Cedar Laner identified a person critical in the development of his professional life. He says:

The individual that I wish to honor and remember was my first boss after I made the transition from academe to the federal government. Ray was idealistic, believed strongly in the importance of the work he was doing, and was willing to put a lot of thought and effort in doing it. This is not the image that many beyond the Beltway have of the typical government "bureaucrat." I was Ray's assistant in the early

days of my government work. Through his mentoring my knowledge of the federal structure grew from almost nothing to a decent understanding of what the various departments and agencies did. When he thought I was ready and sufficiently informed, he saw to it that I had the opportunity to travel and talk with representatives of many countries. Through it all he was my coach and supporter. I will be forever grateful to him for introducing me in such a positive way to government service, and for expanding my horizons through his inspiration, work ethic and guidance.

INSPIRATION

WORK ETHIC

GUIDANCE

SOMEONE WHO PAVED THE WAY WHEN HE COULD

Clearly, a mentor who made a difference in this person's development.

The last reflection is actually my own, about my father:

As a child I adored my father – a man of good humor who loved people, was warm, friendly and very kind and generous.

When I was about 15 my dad seemed to come home each night from work looking haggard, so unlike the energetic, glass-half-full person I knew. He was having a very hard time. His job as a community services provider was more challenging than it had ever been. Nationally, it was a new era – Black Power, Youth Power, Power to the People.”Times, they were a’changin,’” and old models of service, no matter how well intentioned, seemed no longer acceptable. People were mad at him – or perhaps just plain mad -- but it was hard for this affable person to tell the difference. He could have quit, but instead, he kept at it, moving aside for more grassroots leadership but offering assistance and knowledge where he could.

What did he teach me at this time in his life? A lot! The way he lived through this time taught me that perfection is not the goal; life is tough AND complicated. Simple values may often suffice, but sometimes you have to sift through layers of complexity to make a good decision.

He had all his life wanted to do the right thing, wanted to be of service, was a giver. That is how he understood himself. And at least at this time, it seemed to him that he had failed. I learned that even in people of the greatest integrity and good spirit, hard times come, when your own sense of yourself is shaken, and all the good will in the world will not help relationships that you want very much to work. I learned that even then, you can go on, as he did, to find new ways of being, of making a difference and of enjoying the gifts of life.

CONCLUSION

We have heard this morning reflections by a number of folks about people who have made a difference in their lives. I suspect there are many other stories among us.

It is important for us sometimes to stop, to remember those who have helped us grow. And it is important for us to pay attention to how we help others. We have heard that for some, even simple encouraging words and the act of paying attention to another can make a difference, a difference we may never even know about.

So, let us on this day remember those who are our personal heroes, mentors, or simply good people at the right time in our lives – and as we think about them, let us also think about how we can do likewise.

And to all you fathers out there, particularly, and to all of us who have taken time, focus, energy to be constructively in the life of one kid, one teenager, one young adult, one aspiring protégé, or of many of them -- we honor you today. We say thank you on behalf of a world which needs you, of young people who need you now or have in the past. And we think with gratitude of those fathers and others from our own pasts, no longer with us, who have helped us form our dreams, our individual goals and our collective vision.

In that spirit, let us be together as one community, in which all of us have a part, in which all of us have something to teach and to learn, to model and to cheer for, in which we have worthy dreams to share and work to do together, moving toward a world of graciousness, generosity and peace.

Let us sing “Come and Go With Me to this Land” as an invitation to one another, to a world that can be better, to a life that is good, knowing we can all get there if we go together.