

“Come, Dream a Dream with Me”
The Rev. Sue Spencer
UU Congregation of Danbury
January 10, 2010

Readings:

From *To Dream Again* by Robert D. Dale:

What we expect from life is usually what we get. In *Winnie the Pooh*, Pooh and Piglet take an evening walk. For a long time they walk in companionable silence.

Finally, Piglet breaks the silence. He asks, “When you wake up in the morning, Pooh, what’s the first thing you say to yourself?”

Pooh responds: “What’s for breakfast?” And then, “And what do you say, Piglet?”

Piglet replies, “I say, I wonder what’s going to happen exciting *today*?”

Small expectations yield meager results...A [congregation] can choose a ‘breakfast dream’ or an ‘excitement dream.’ Is it time for your [congregation] to examine its vision for either ‘breakfast’ or ‘excitement’? Is your [congregation] ready to dream again?”

From Johann Wolfgang von Goethe:

Until one is committed, there is hesitancy, the chance to draw back, always ineffectiveness. Concerning all acts of initiative (and creation), there is one elementary truth the ignorance of which kills countless ideas and splendid plans: That the moment we definitely commit ourselves, then providence moves, too.

All sorts of things occur to help us that would never otherwise have occurred. A whole stream of events issues from the decision, raising in our favor all manner of unforeseen incidents and meetings and material assistance, which no one could have dreamed would come our way.

Whatever you can do, or dream you can, begin it! Boldness has genius, power and magic in it. Begin it now.”

Sermon:

Even though today is Canvass Sunday, I’m not going to spend a lot of time talking about money. Instead, I want to talk about dreams.

We know something, don’t we, about the power of dreams? Don Quixote, the man of La Mancha, dreamed a crazy, impossible dream – thus transforming himself and those around him.

The poet Langston Hughes urged people to keep dreams alive: “Hold fast to dreams, for if dreams die, life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.”

Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. captured America’s imagination, and the world’s, with his dream of the beloved community - a society built on love, respect, and inclusiveness.

The Universalist side of our faith came into being because of a dream: A farmer named Thomas Potter built a chapel in the woods by the Jersey shore, and dreamed that a preacher would come and preach the humane gospel of universal salvation. John Murray showed up – and the rest is history, a history of which UUCD is part.

There are also dreams not worth having, of course. In *Death of a Salesman*, Arthur Miller warns of the negative power of dreams that aren't right. Willie Loman is a gifted craftsman, but he ignores these gifts and spends his life instead trying to become a super salesman. When his sales drop, he takes his own life. His son, standing by his grave, says, "He had the wrong dreams. All, all wrong."

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In contrast to poor Willie Loman, UUCD is built on the *right* dreams. "Vision Drives Everything!" proclaimed the congregation's Task Force 2001, as it reported to the Board of Trustees in 1997. One Task Force member, Mary Alice Kimball, wrote about the group's experience of dreaming:

"[We] left our past experiences of change at the Barn behind us. We allowed ourselves to imagine anything. At times it felt like Charlie Brown and his friends lying in a circle with their heads in the middle having a group dream." In the end, Mary Alice concluded: "We have dreamt well."

The Task Force's dream was an excitement dream: "a vital, relevant, caring religious community" with lots of space for new people. It called on the congregation to grow, both in numbers and in quality of ministry. The dream included enhanced programs for children and youth, increased building accessibility and membership diversity, and a more significant "presence as a force for good and activism in the wider community."

To accomplish all this, the Task Force concluded that moving was essential. The Barn, beloved and "magical" as it was, was too constraining. For the congregation to achieve its dreams, it needed to pull up stakes, leave the comfort and safety of home, and embark on a pilgrimage to a new, spacious, and unknown place.

Five full years were required, from the Task Force's articulation of the dream to the beginnings of its realization - the sale of the Barn and the purchase of this land. That's five years of conversation, debate, deliberation, and planning.

It took three and a half more years after that – fundraising, renting space, building, and a few setbacks – before the first Sunday services were held here, in the Fellowship Hall. And now, almost 13 years later, here we are - heirs of the dream, in this sun-drenched space, in a complex and fascinating city that cries out for ministry.

I've said it before, but it bears repeating: The dream is bearing fruit. New people, of many ages and backgrounds, are finding their way to the congregation. In the last two years, you've grown from 145 adult members to 160. Accessibility still needs tweaking, but it's vastly improved from what it was.

Visibility in the wider community has expanded, through Sow Green, Empty Bowls, New Sanctuary, and our monthly Share the Plate collections. Ross Fenster, one of the prime movers in making all this happen, said recently, "*We are becoming the congregation we envisioned, when we moved to the Ridge.*"

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Where you go from here? Congregational dreams must continually be renewed. It won't work to call up the dreams of the past in order to rest on them – but only to inspire more dreams! Our dreams must stay fresh and new. Once they've been realized, it's time to dream new ones, and act on them. Fortunately, as Mary Alice pointed out, "If we let ourselves dream often enough, it gets easier, and I think it can be an exhilarating experience."

Of course, some of what happens next depends on your new settled minister. The Search Committee, as you know, has been hard at work, sifting through many ministerial records. Last time I looked, 21 ministers had indicated an interest in this congregation - an impressive number for a small congregation.

My guess is that many of these prospective candidates are drawn by your story - your willingness to dream, and take risks to make those dreams come true. Not every congregation has a vision about moving back into the city. So many went the other way over the last 50 years – fleeing the city, and taking refuge in the suburbs.

Now, any minister worth his or her salt will of course come with some ideas and visions for ministry. But I urge you: Don't leave all the dreaming to the new minister! It will be much more energizing – *synergizing*, if you will – if you're a partner with the new minister, if you've formulated some "excitement" dreams of your own, to share with her or him.

Here at UUCD, what kinds of dreams are before you? So much has been accomplished of late. Even things that seemed unlikely a year and a half ago, have now blossomed into reality. I've already named many of these, and Jean Bowen mentions others in her canvass letter this month. What's most impressive is that you've been able to do all this within the constraints of a balanced budget.

One thing before you, of course, is this building, and this land. Right now, Pamela Mitchell is leading a very focused Task Force, "The Next Level." They are moving forward very methodically, toward a plan to finish the lower level. Once complete, this will give our wonderful Religious Education program much more room. Over in the House, they're bursting at the seams!

When you make the downstairs space usable, it should significantly expand your ministries with children and youth. That in turn should fuel further membership growth, and expand your community presence even more. It should also bring into view the realization of one of your long-term dreams – building the sanctuary envisioned in the original plans.

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Well, I promised that I wouldn't talk a *lot* about money this morning. But at some point, if you talk about dreams, you have to talk about money. Some people in religious institutions find it unseemly to do this. They see money as tainted, and talking about it beneath their dignity.

But money, when you think about it, is really only a form of life energy. It's certainly not the only form, but it's a crucial one. The food and fuel we consume are the sun's energy, stored and released. In the same way, our money represents the work of our hearts and hands, stored and released. In congregations, money is the power to make our dreams come true.

I realize that the Annual Canvass is about the Operating Budget, not about those longer-term dreams. But the short-term and the long-term are related.

A congregation that's timid about raising money will always be stuck in the realm of "breakfast dreams," like those of Winnie the Pooh. Such a congregation's "excitement dreams," if it has any, will always wither on the vine. Now, there's nothing wrong with breakfast – yesterday's vision breakfast, was fabulous! But as a dream, breakfast has limited potential.

A breakfast dream is a survival dream, one of self-preservation – and thus barely a dream at all. A breakfast dream limits itself to questions like these: How are we going to pay the bills? What will we do about the leaky roof? How can we keep burglars from breaking in? It's not that these are trivial questions; it's important to pay attention to them. But if they're the *only* questions a congregation ever asks, congregational vitality is dead in the water.

"Excitement dreams" are about ministry and mission. They extend Piglet's question beyond "What exciting things are going to happen today?" to "What exciting things can we *make* happen?"

Excitement dreams involve answers to questions like these: What unique gifts does Unitarian Universalism bring to this area? What "good news," what saving message, do we offer? How will we reach out to the lonely, the brokenhearted, and those seeking meaning for their lives? How will we share our bread with the hungry? How will we open the doors that imprison - in mind, body or spirit – how will we open the doors, and set people free?

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Each person here is unique, with special circumstances to consider. Each person has his or her own special combination to offer, of time, talent, and treasure.

This month, when you consider your treasure - your *financial* pledge to UUCD - I invite you to think about what this congregation means to you. I also invite you to think about what it *could* mean in the lives of others, and in the wider Danbury community. And then, maybe, to stretch a little further than you'd been thinking you might.

Think about your excitement dreams for this place – and the excitement dreams of the people around you. And then make a pledge that will help them come true.

Benediction:

It must be borne in mind that the tragedy in life doesn't lie in not reaching your goal. The tragedy lies in having no goal to reach for.

It isn't a calamity to die with dreams unfulfilled. It is a calamity not to dream.

It is not a disaster not to be able to capture your ideal. It is a disaster to have no ideal to capture.

It is not a disgrace not to reach the stars. It is a disgrace to have no stars to reach for.

May you reach for the stars – and be bold and joyful in the attempt!

Dr. Benjamin Hooks
Past president, NAACP

