



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

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“Let’s Dream a Dream”

© by the Reverend Alison W. Eskildsen

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Centering Thoughts

The vision that he sees is far ahead, and he prophesies for the distant future. Ezekiel 12:27

If you can dream it, you can do it. Walt Disney

I don't know what the future may hold, but I know who holds the future. Ralph Abernathy

Sermon

If you are a healthy person, you dream every night whether you remember your dreams or not. And every person has dreams that can break the rules of everyday waking reality. Anything can happen in a dream – and it frequently does. I’m sure you can remember some pretty bizarre dreams where time or place shifts inexplicably, or you can do things you normally can’t do, like fly or speak to animals. Our dreaming lives are pretty amazing.

Once I started working on this dream-focused service, I began remembering my dreams more than I normally do. Though the content of my recent dreams have been decidedly unreal, they seemed very real during my dreaming.

This past week I dreamed I was standing about knee-deep in a murky stream when a fish, about a foot long or so, opened its mouth as it swam towards me. I wasn’t surprised by this, it looked like a super-large goldfish opening and closing its mouth (*demonstrate?*).

While I watched the fish approach it suddenly leaped up, and using its mouth like a suction cup, attached itself to my knee! In my dream this didn’t hurt, but I wanted the fish off of me. I tried dislodging it by pushing at it with a magically-appearing balled-up shirt in my hand, but the fish wouldn’t budge! Happily, though frustratingly, I woke up. No fish anywhere in sight.

I have no idea why I dreamt that particular dream nor can I suggest if it means anything. Feel free to offer your interpretation with me after the service. What I can say is this: I doubt I encountered God in the form of a sucking fish and my dream did not change my life.

But Jacob's dream did change his life. In his dream he saw what couldn't be seen in waking life – the link between earth and heaven. He hadn't realized this connection existed until that moment, and that changed him. Additionally, since God promised to be with him and bless him despite all he had done to his family, he felt worthy, and that changed him, too. Upon waking Jacob promised, "If God will be with me and will keep me in this way that I go, ... then the Lord shall be my God, and this stone, which I have set up for a pillar, shall be God's house. And of all that you give me I will give a full tenth to you." [Genesis 28:20-22] Jacob's dream awakened him to a new life of obedience to God and he vowed to give back to God a portion of his blessings.

Jews and Christians have interpreted Jacob's dream in several different ways. But they agree on this: the stairs, or ladder, symbolized the idea that humans can communicate with the spiritual realm of angels and God. The ladder's base firmly rested on earth in the human condition, but its top rose high up to God's heavenly realm. Angels, God's messengers, were shown coming and going from Heaven, carrying prayers up to God and God's responses back. Angels have wings; they don't need stairs. But stairs made concrete this lesson for Jacob.

The Hebrew word in this passage often translated as stair or ladder more closely means something which 'lifts up'. The stairway is a symbol for something that lifts up or leads one to a new perspective. Jacob received a new perspective.

We too like to rise above something for a better look. We might say we're taking a balcony view to get some distance and see the bigger picture. Then we come down to act in accord with what we've seen. Jacob's vision lifted him up and gave him a chance to start anew.

Dreams, with or without actual stairways to heaven, have been thought by ancient peoples across the globe to be a method by which gods or spirits speak to humans. Long before there were psychologists or New Age mystics, priests and shamans were interpreting dreams from a religious perspective. They sought to learn through the language of symbols what the spirits were saying. Were they warning of impending disaster? Were they urging kings or pharaohs to fight a war? Were they indicating a god's pleasure or disapproval?

For ancient people, the distinction between dreaming and waking, or the sacred and profane, was less hard-lined than they appear to many of us modern folk. The rationalists among us would say dreams are nothing more than meaningless brain activity during sleep.

Not so for Australia's aboriginal people who tell of the 'dream time' when the world was created. Not so for many Hindus who say the god Indra's dreaming created the world and that we exist because we are part of his dream.

Paradoxically, the Ancient Egyptian root for the word *dream* is the same as *to wake up* [*resut*, in *Dreaming in the World's Religions*, by Kelly Bulkeley, p124]. The hieroglyph for dream includes an open eye image. Egyptians believed that dreams help us wake up.

In our own lives, when you or I can't solve a problem or feel creatively stuck, we might say, "I'll sleep on it" because we know sleep, perchance to dream, may clear our mind and/or give us a new perspective. History is full of people who wake up in the morning with new revelations—such as inventors, scientists, authors, artists, musicians, and other dreamers.

Mahatma Gandhi dreamed about a peaceful sit-in which led him to hold non-violent protests against India's colonial government. It led directly to his country's independence from Great Britain. Gandhi's dream changed the world.

Science-fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke envisioned satellites in an early book. Scientists made real that idea and changed our world.

Martin Luther King, Jr., spoke about his dream to see all people treated equally and fairly. His speech about a dream may have been metaphoric, but it represented a reality he wanted to come true. King was lifted up by a vision of what could be, and he lifted the rest of us up with him. He sacrificed his life while making that dream come true, as visionaries often do. But King's dream and what he did to realize it helped change the world. Sadly, we still have work to do in making that dream fully real, as recent events in the courts and in the streets demonstrate.

To be fully awake, we must first dream. Jacob exclaimed in the morning that he wasn't looking for God, but God showed up anyway. In that moment, Jacob awoke. He became inspired. Inspiration can strike us, too, anytime, if we but pay attention. But waking up isn't all there is. Jacob made a vow to commit his life to God and to prove his commitment by tithing.

We can be like Jacob. First we need to dream, and then wake up with a new commitment. So, tell me, what do your dreams show you? What do the dream spirits tell you? What do you and we need to wake up to?

This Fellowship has a dream or vision. You, the members and friends of UUFA who participated in a vision quest process, created this vision. We print it on the back of the order of service most weeks. It begins, "The vision of the UU Fellowship of Athens is to be a beacon of liberal religion in Northeast Georgia."

Like Jacob's stairway or ladder, a 'beacon of liberal religion' offers us a symbol. A beacon is often a light that indicates the location of something. A beacon exists to be noticed. Our vision, therefore, is for the Fellowship to be noticed as a location where liberal religion, meaning free of dogma and open to change, is practiced. This Fellowship is the place where we come together to learn, to find purpose, to be inspired, to form meaningful relationships, and to act upon our shared values amidst the welcome confusion of our diverse beliefs.

We want to be noticed so that others can find their way here who also want a religious community that welcomes all that you are without telling you what to believe. That encourages you to discover what you must believe. But if our beacon is shining only on those already here, then those who are out there navigating the rough waters of life without a light remain lost.

It is your and my vision that our beacon will shine bright. And the power that fuels that light must come from each one of us. Every person needs to wake up and say some version of Jacob's exclamation, "God was here and I didn't know it! How awesome! I vow to commit my life in your service." Whatever your theology, it is my dream that each day you and I will wake up and recommit ourselves to furthering our values in the world. Freedom, equality, respect, justice, interdependence—in a word, Love. Love given equally for all is the fuel that makes our beacon bright.

But let me get a little less symbolic. I dream that we'll be a leader in forging relationships across cultural, language, class, and other boundaries. Because the world is focused on race relations now is the time for our Fellowship to bring together the different groups of our community and ask how we can stand beside one another and improve our community relations. I do not want Athens to be a divided community like Ferguson, Missouri. I do not want Athens to be a place where excess military vehicles and weapons are trained on our citizens. I do not want Athens to be home to those who don't believe black lives matter.

I also dream we'll be a leader in forging interfaith relationships that will further our environmental justice dreams. Whether you call life God's creation, Gaia's creation, or a happy confluence of cosmic events, we all care for this planet. We all want life to thrive. We can make a difference. Together, we can improve this tiny portion of the planet we call home.

I dream we'll continue taking care of one another and being present to one another to celebrate life, mourn death, and notice everything in between.

I dream we'll willingly suffer through the awkwardness of our two-service transition – where we may feel too big for one service and not big enough for two.

I have many dreams. But what do you dream? What do you imagine will brighten our beacon? Share your ideas today after the service. Offer your suggestions online by taking the survey. A link appeared in this past Thursday's e-news and will continue to be on the website all month. Share your dreams.

This is the last month of our 60th anniversary observance. For eleven months we've looked back. Now we look forward. Let's dream together, then let us recommit ourselves to making our dreams come true so that when UUFA celebrates its 75th anniversary in fifteen years, there will be much to celebrate.

May your personal dreams and the dreams we have for this Fellowship and our larger community come true. May we join together to make it so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion

1. What do you dream for yourself in the coming year/s? For UUFA? For Athens and beyond?
2. What do you most fear about the future? How might those fears be put to rest?
3. What obstacles to realizing your/our vision do you expect and how can these be removed?