

3/27/11 Sermon

“The Impossible Dream”

Merri Beth Stephens, Speaker

I am pleased to tell you all that today's talk will be short. I have had a weekend of nothing but talking about Unitarian Universalism – and even I can run out of words. I spent Friday night and all day yesterday talking to the Northwest UU Congregation in Sandy Springs about how to search for a new minister. I spent last night talking to you about why this congregation is worth stepping up for. And this morning I am talking to you about The Dream – our dream. But first I want to share a few stories with you, both with different styles, to put you in the mood to dream:

My first is the story of a young divorced man in Johnstown, Pennsylvania, whose friend introduces him to a young woman visiting from Georgia. The young man looked up from his pinball game and noted that the young woman was basically attractive, and then later reported she had thick ankles. After two years, they married and had my sister Diane and me.

How about instead, the story of the 24 year-old Georgia Mountain woman just out of an abusive marriage and not allowed to return home by her parents who were trying to teach her a hard life lesson about the importance of staying with her husband? This wanderer finally finds a safe place to land with her old high school friend who has married and moved off to Pennsylvania. Soon after that, she meets the suave, blue-eyed, recently divorced man who has just fought and won the first battle for paternal custody in Pennsylvania history. They meet eyes in a smoky game room – okay, let's make it a fancy restaurant – or should it be a bar? Anyway, they met eyes. The blue-eyed Yankee had never met such an intriguing young woman. Her dark brown Cherokee eyes and soft Southern accent captured him. Against all odds (my dad was not supposed to marry somebody who wasn't German), they married and lived happily ever after. They had dreamed of love. After two disappointing early relationships, they finally found it and lived happily ever after.

Yup, I think I'll take story number two. That one makes me feel like I'm part of something big, something romantic and special.

Our stories are tied directly into our dreams. Would you rather imagine that our founding fathers revolted against the Crown because they saw a way to become even more rich in the new world if they didn't have to deal with the laws of the Empire? Or would you rather believe that these men saw in the new land the opportunity for real freedom, a place where all men were

created equal and endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights? Were they a bunch of greedy landowners who wanted the freedom to conquer the new land and create a haven for wealthy white men? Or were they dreaming the impossible dream of true representative democracy, free of corruption, creating a beacon of human rights and freedom for the whole world to emulate?

I think they are both true, and the one you imagined while you were a kid studying U.S. history was probably the second story – unless, of course, you weren't raised in the United States. Then you probably heard the first one!

The truth is, we need big stories to connect us with each other. I became addicted to the HBO drama "Big Love" a few years ago. For those of you who aren't familiar with it, it's the story of a polygamist family living in the suburbs of Salt Lake City. They are what are known as Fundamentalist Latter Day Saints. In one episode, the patriarch decides that the entire family – one husband, three wives and eight children – need to take a religious pilgrimage back to Western New York where Joseph Smith first had his vision and learned that Jesus Christ wanted him to found "the one true church." All along the drive from Utah to New York, the family (while also engaging in their own dramas) stops at various Mormon landmarks and listens to a very romanticized version of their own religious history. These were stories of gun fights, of martyrs and of people barely escaping with their lives. This made me want to read more about Mormonism. I cannot resist a heroic story.

If you haven't read or heard about the history of Mormonism, you should. In 1823, an 18-year-old boy from Palmyra, New York – Joseph Smith – was visited by the angel Moroni, who told him of some magical gold plates. Armed with special glasses, he was able to translate them into a book that told about how the lost tribe of Israel was visited by Jesus in the Americas hundreds of years ago. In 1831, he started a church in Kirtland, Ohio. After Joseph and his followers were persecuted for polygamy, they began their journey across the prairie and finally wound up in Utah, where they lived in polygamy until early in the 20th Century.

Smith later said that church members could act as proxies for deceased persons, baptize them, and "seal" them into family clans that would be reunited in Heaven. His successor wrote about "the perfect mania" that possessed some of his followers as they started "to get up printed records of their ancestors."

Over the next 168 years, 113 million people were introduced, after death, to the church.

There are reports that this is the fastest growing religion in America. Now, some do claim that this is because they have more children than the rest of us. But even if they aren't the FASTEST growing religion in America, we can't dispute the truth of their growth. Why? Well, it's an Exodus story, isn't it? God's chosen people run out of their own land for practicing their religion. Never denying their faith or their God, they faced unspeakable hardships on the trek across the country. They had a dream of building a shining city – a beacon to the world – for their faith. They would live and prosper in this beautiful city. And so they have. Their impossible dream has come true. And they are spreading that dream across the world. The Mormon story may make some of us laugh or even wince, but there are millions more who are invested in it. If they are successful in becoming the fastest growing religion in America, we will all be wishing we had invested in Magic Underwear when we had the chance.

As unlikely a story as theirs is, it resonates with its followers because it reflects their dreams. Who can't picture them all huddled in their stagecoaches, bracing against the weather and other dangers, willing to give up everything for what they believe.

Well, they haven't cornered the market on that! Think of the romantic story of how Unitarian Universalism was formed from the merger in 1961 of two historically Christian denominations – the Universalist church of America and the American Unitarian Association – both based in the United States. Or brace yourself when you hear about how New England Unitarians evolved from the Pilgrim fathers' Congregational Christianity, which was originally based on a literal reading of the Bible. Liberalizing Unitarians rejected the Trinitarian in the tri-partite godhead: Father, Son, and Holy Ghost/Spirit. Instead, they asserted a unitary notion of God!

If you can stand more edge-of-your seat excitement, imagine how the New England Universalists rejected the Puritan forefathers' emphasis on the select few, the Elect, who were reportedly saved from eternal damnation by a just God. Instead, Universalists asserted that "all were universally saved." Universalists rejected the hellfire and damnation of the evangelical preachers who tried to revive the fundamentalist Christianity of the early Pilgrim fathers.

Where's the heartache? Where's the heroism? Where's the scandal? Where's the journey across the country? Bible Geek Robert Price, author of "The Case Against the Case for God," does claim that the Unitarians pilfered from the Universalist pension fund back at the time of the merger. So we do

have that. But where is our dream of a shining city, a place where we can live our values?

Rosie Popp told us last night a story about the young brave people who founded a UU church in North Fulton. How they dreamed of a free faith – a faith they could pass along to their children. She told how they were cruelly persecuted by the Fulton County Board of Education when they were unceremoniously kicked out of Barnwell Elementary School, and how they wandered here in the Piedmont of north Georgia for a few weeks until they found another suitable rental space. She reminded us that the church is in us, not in our buildings. Why? Because she was one of those early North Fulton Liberal Religious nomads. She moved from Barnwell to Primrose Cottage. And after their short departure from UUMAN, when the prodigal Popp returned, they came back to yet another completely different building. But the people she loved were here. And so the church she loved was here. Rosie reminded us last night that her dream seemed impossible for a while, but when she came back to UUMAN in 1997 that dream was being fulfilled. There was a group of religiously liberal seekers thriving in North Fulton. And here we still are today.

I have worked with almost every UU Church in this district and they each have their stories just like we do. In Jackson, Mississippi, the Unitarian Church was damaged by fire when racist hate groups decided to punish them for integrating in the late 1950's. Birmingham, Alabama, has a similar story. I remember feeling so proud to take heat and ribbing from co-workers when we wrapped our property in rainbow tape to protest Amendment One. We were dreaming of freedom, and we were being public about it. And I actually got teased about it. Now, that's not really persecution, but it was derision. Close!

Last night, I sat like many of you and listened to some of our members talk about how being at UUMAN has been life-changing for them – and, you know, it has for me. Kirk Bogue articulated our dream in a way that helped me connect to UUMAN and all of you, and to our work in this community and beyond. But let's not forget that we are actually part of something bigger. Yes, we do have Unitarian ancestors who were persecuted and killed for their heresy. Servetus was burned at the stake for writing books that questioned the Trinity and the orthodoxy. We come from a long line of heretics, and these heretics are why we were able to be here last night dancing to M.C. Hammer and watching Power Points together.

See, Heresy in Greek means “to choose.” The unwillingness to go along with orthodoxy was their story, and please – look around you – it is also our story

today. Over and over, Unitarians and Universalists have chosen their heresy to extend toward a more loving and liberal view of religion.

So let's go back and tell our story again. Unitarians and Universalists share a common history of standing on the side of openness and love that spans over centuries and got several of our forebears persecuted and killed. The concept that all would be saved and that there is no eternal damnation slapped the church fathers of the day in the face, because it took power of determining somebody's eternity away from them. How could church leaders keep control if people weren't afraid of hell? How could the church centralize its power if people were dead set on choosing their own religious destiny? In the face of overwhelming personal peril, these heretics forged a path, and that path leads right down Crabapple Road.

We stand in the footsteps of some crazy folks. I mean, if you knew that publishing a book stating there was no Trinity was going to get you killed, wouldn't you just sit down and pour yourself another glass of tea and read a magazine? Or maybe channel that energy into woodworking or gardening. But no! Servetus couldn't help himself. He had an impossible dream – a dream of a kinder, gentler God. A dream of a world where people forged their own relationship with God – one without fear. And the other martyrs and persecuted who we count amongst our ancestors did the same thing. And I am thankful that they did. And it is that dream I kept thinking about last night when Kirk was talking.

It started with these early heretics. But the dreamers have kept coming through our faith tradition. Charles Darwin faced unbelievable odds for his work in evolutionary biology. Clara Barton felt God directing her life to be an activist – a nurse who founded the Red Cross, she also worked tirelessly with Susan B. Anthony on Women's Suffrage issues, and then became an activist for rights for people of color. I mean, after tending to war wounded through the Civil War and founding the Red Cross, she had earned the right to retire, don't you think? But her liberal religious values pushed her toward justice. That push toward justice lives on in us today – in our mission statement at this church and in our work to end oppression. Clara Barton's dream lives here. Charles Darwin's intellect lives here. We carry them all with us. We hold their dreams, and now they are our dreams.

What will we do with those dreams? Well, I think we will continue being irksome heretics. We will take unpopular stands in our communities, because we won't rest until there is freedom and justice for all. I think we will continue educating our children to be independent free thinkers, so they can be the next generation of heretics. I admit that there have been occasions when I have felt that Unitarian Universalism has lost its way to

some extent. But then I remember that we have never taken the easy way. I mean, anybody can climb up in a stagecoach to take a pilgrimage to the promised land in Utah – especially if you have 7 or 8 wives to do all the heavy lifting. But trying running a UU congregational meeting! Now that's a challenge!

Seriously, I have been here long enough to see many a young person come up through our program and then leave to take on the world. We have sent these little heretics out there with our love and our support. Make your own choices, little Heretics. Even if it's not what we want you to do. But please let it be what we want you to do! Because that's what heresy is – a controversial or novel change to a system of beliefs. And if there's one thing we prepare them for here at UUMAN, it's that! And it makes me proud.

I recently had an opportunity to work with a UU search committee where the chair of the group was telling me over a glass of wine that he didn't connect at all with being Unitarian Universalist. He said, "I love this church and these people, but those people up in Boston mean nothing to me. What do they do for me? This church could have any label on it and I'd be here, because it's these people I love." I argued with him but he was unmovable. I told him that all the Unitarians and Universalists that went before him had made this weekend possible. He just smiled, grabbed a handful of peanuts and poured me some more Chardonnay. I like this guy. I have *been* this guy on occasion. But we can't forget our story.

Just like the large crazy family on "Big Love" needs to be reminded of their higher purpose on occasion, so do we. Then that impossible dream becomes real and people will be writing papers about how Unitarian Universalism is the fastest growing denomination in America. Now that's my dream! Let's make it so together.