Impossible Dreams©
preached* for the Unitarian Universalist Church of Vancouver (WA)
by the Rev. Kathryn A. Bert
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I studied this great work of fiction, Don Quixote de la Mancha, when I studied Spanish, but I have to admit that I remember the stories better from the musical version in English, Man of La Mancha, from which Patrick just sang. There’s a stage version and the film version, too, which are different.

All of these versions play with the question of reality – a reality of much brokenness, and a dream of wholeness and chivalry and goodness. When we envision a future different than the present, we are messing with reality – we are imagining a different world than the one we have right now. Our world in many ways seems quite broken, and so we might imagine a different ending.

Brokenness seems like an odd topic to highlight on the morning we welcome new members into the congregation, and launch our Annual Pledge Campaign – I don’t want to scare you away. On the other hand, I imagine those of you who were gathered into the church this morning joined because you are seeking a faith with a message deep enough to provide some comfort in what is indisputably a broken world. You’ve figured out by now that our comfort is not very simple or easy. I’m not going to tell you, for example, that I believe everything happens for a reason or that God has a plan. You may believe that, but I can’t tell you in good conscience that I believe that. I am much more attracted to the Jewish concept of tikkun olam – repair of the world: the kabbalah story we told earlier in the month that explains the imperfections of the world – the shatteredness – and it is our responsibility to help put back the pieces, to repair and heal the world, to finish its completion.

Don Quixote’s quest to heal the world provides us much comic relief - we can see the optimism in Don Quixote’s insistence that the world be like the novels of chivalry he reads: with people who are good and noble and seek no harm, wishing well for others.

But as a tragedy, his idealism and nobility in the midst of an evil world are taken by others as proof of his insanity.

I am intrigued by how the story is different depending on your perspective or script. A character in the musical version cries: “Poets, spinning nonsense out of nothing, blurring man’s eyes to reality.” to which Cervantes replies, “Poetry demands imagination, and with imagination, you may discover a dream.”

What is your dream? Or what is the quest that leads you on?

In the tikkun olam story to which I referred earlier: light is everywhere and everything, and God put all this light into a vessel in order to make room for the world. But being so bright, this light shatters the vessel and sparks of it stick to the pieces which fall away.

The story rather sounds like the big bang to me – or the great radiance, I’ve heard it called – a working theory of our origins. And these shards of vessel, these pieces, though broken, have light in them and have the possibility – together – of creating more and more light together than they could alone. I imagine piecing back the vessel and connecting its parts – the only clue that there is light inside would be through the broken places –and isn’t that true sometimes, that we learn to be grateful for what is, only once it’s been broken or lost? We see how bright the light was when we first encounter the darkness.
Sometimes I’ve experienced the work of tikkun olam to be painful, like the scene from Man of La Mancha where the Knights of the Mirrors force Quixote to look in the mirror of reality and see things as they really are. You’ll remember that Alonso Quijano only believes that he is Don Quixote, and his family wants to bring him back to “their” reality – and so on a hillside they approach, dressed as knights in shining armor, carrying shields which when turned on our hero, are mirrors. He looks into those mirrors and finally, instead of seeing himself as The Ingenious Gentleman Don Quixote of La Mancha, he sees a retired country gentleman – nearly 50 years old – ancient in those days, Alonso Quijano. It can be heartbreaking to look at our illusions and the ways in which we’ve both been deceived and have deceived ourselves.

That place of disillusionment – that place of brokenness – however, can be a healthy starting point for our dreams. We know how we don’t want it to be, now, how shall we imagine it differently? What do we need to do? What’s next?

Church, I think, is all about that imagining a different future. And working to create it. Starting where there is the greatest need for healing, and beginning where we are, to seek our quest.

When I arrived here to serve as your minister, I was struck by how very tired the leadership was. The two years of interim ministry were hard – there was burnout among leadership. I had heard how very hard you were on each other. That people weren’t always nice to each other, that the behavioral covenant was even hard to adopt.

But your Board has been scripting another story. My experience with your Board has been very different from those old tales, I want to be clear. Our Board meetings have ended early and there is plenty of laughter and cooperation.

But there have been times when its been hard to find people to step up into leadership, and I still hear those old scripts – people not wanting to risk burnout. Or, even, new people not feeling like room was made for them in leadership – something about the way we have volunteered, keeping newer folks at bay. And I know I’ve contributed to miscommunication along the way, not knowing what I didn’t know.

Many of you tell me you loved having a Director of Shared Ministries those couple years you had one, and that the position, taken from hours of the minister, was instituted with some pain and dispute. But when I arrived, people expressed missing having a coordinator of volunteers – that she helped to identify peoples’ gifts and talents and helped them find a good place to serve.

What I noticed, when I arrived, was how excellent your office administrator, Donna, is and how much she does efficiently and quickly and with good humor. But how little of her there was. This system has been dependent on volunteers for personnel matters, website management, contracts, power point creation, and so much more that in a church this size, is generally handled by staff. The staff have helped with some of these matters, as time has gone on, and you hired an office assistant, Danielle, to take over some of the secretarial tasks leaving Donna to work on a more administrative level, but I suspect this lack of infrastructure accounts for some of the volunteer burnout experienced.
At the Board retreat in October, the weekend following the installation – in which you gave me this
beautiful stole – the Board leadership began to imagine a staff infrastructure that would support volunteers
more fully and help people find their passion and skill building those leadership qualities that help us make a
better world. We knew it would be a hard sell – infrastructure is never sexy. In fact, people donating to
charities often cite wanting their money to go to the cause and not infrastructure – but the truth is, without
infrastructure, our efforts are less effective, more wasteful, and often duplicative. I think of infrastructure as
the roots of a tree, deeper and stronger, supporting healthier branches and leaves and life.

We have known for a while that Donna Aase was in her role temporarily, that her job at Clark College is
her career, and that she would like to return to membership in this church, rather than a staff role – that she
had been talking about leaving but wanted to stay long enough to settle your new minister, for which I am
incredibly grateful. We had rather hoped that we were training Danielle to step into her shoes, but she also
has other plans for her trajectory, which includes moving to more sunny climes. Her last day with us is May 12.
Donna is less definite – she will be around and has offered to stay around to help as long or as little as we
need.

But these two impending departures have presented us with an opportunity – a challenge, for sure, but
an opportunity as well – a chance to take two part time positions and create a full-time position, with benefits,
to attract highly qualified candidates. And this is quite a leap for our budget and a big ask of the congregation,
after a few years of a big ask in order to call an experienced minister. But one thing I have learned over the
years, is that you don’t get what you don’t ask for. This is a generous congregation that understands that as
we give, we gain.

This turnover of staff – four ministers in the last five years – addition of Danielle and Amy Brock – a
new full-time director of lifelong learning, all these changes has served us like the Knights of the Mirrors –
causing us to reflect on our current circumstance and system and infrastructure, as we quest for an impact
outside these walls. I preached about productive disequilibrium last week, because there has been so much
change around here.

A different kind of opportunity has presented itself to us recently, which we are exploring. Family
Promise is the leading, national nonprofit addressing family homelessness – and they have come to us with a
request for us to join their growing interfaith partnership in Clark County. They have presented the project to
members of the Board and Council for Collaboration and Coordination, and those leaders were interested
enough to ask them to present again in an open meeting for all in the congregation, whether you’re a member
or not. That meeting will take place on April 7 after each worship service, here in the sanctuary. I hope you will
all attend.

It’s a pretty big stretch, for a church this size, without the infrastructure we’re seeking to build, to take
on such a large volunteer project – providing shelter for homeless families – that is, adults with children – 4
weeks out of the year, one week at a time. And so, this rather impossible dream will only go forward if the
congregation makes a commitment to it, a commitment that involves your time.

This is the vision from the pulpit. From the pew, you might only be aware of a part of the system, the
Sunday service or the chalice circle or class, It may be harder to get onto the balcony (or into the pulpit as it
were) and into position to see the entire pattern. If we don’t, however, we run the risk of increasing burnout
and inefficiency, spinning the blades of a windmill unconnected to the generator, the generative power
potential of our actions. Because we have a mission and the quest leads us on.
The quest is never easy or straightforward. In fact, it can get a little scary, as we debate the details of a budget or volunteer project, but all along the journey, of course, we are trying to impact the world. We are trying to be those positive scripters, who affirm other people, and inspire a higher path – helping this country and our world move in a generous, positive, loving, faithful way.

The literary version of Don Quixote ends with Alonso Quixano retiring to his bed, deathly ill, and renouncing his previous Quixotic adventures, and dictating a will which includes a provision that his niece will be disinherited if she marries any man who reads books of chivalry.

Broadway gave it a Hollywood ending, however. The prostitute, Aldonza, whom Quixote had dubbed his lady Dulcinea – in the book she’s a farm girl – but Aldonza rushes into the death chamber and insists that Quixano remember her – she can no longer stand to be Aldonza but wants to be the Lady Dulcinea that Quixote had known.

When he doesn’t recognize her, she sings to him and tries to help him remember the words of "The Impossible Dream". Suddenly, he remembers everything and rises from his bed, calling for his armor and sword so that he may set out again. He dies, of course, in this version as Don Quixote de La Mancha, a man with an impossible dream. But she lives on scripted again as a Lady and all sweetness, Dulcinea, with new and impossible dreams.

We, too, have impossible dreams. We have impossible dreams for our children, for our country, for our world. We have impossible dreams for our lives and for our common life here as a church. Visions of service and justice and greatness, on a journey as a solid, rooted congregation, with infrastructure to support our volunteers whose dreams include helping homeless children in Clark County and deep study in order to combat racism, and re-using and recycling more than curbside, and all the projects to promote the worth and dignity of all persons, with the ultimate goal of healing the world – picking up the broken pieces.

As we dream the impossible, may we build possibility, launching quixotic adventures, to repair the brokenness of the world, inside and out.

Benediction

May we all have impossible dreams, quixotic adventures, and visions of peace and justice. And so, may we also have the presence and resolve to create the world of our dreams.

*Sermons are meant to be spoken and not written. I have not edited this sermon to written form.