

The title of the sermon today is taken from the 1998 movie, “What Dreams May Come” starring Robin Williams. I wouldn’t call it the greatest movie I have seen, but I really admired its cinematography. It is a story of man who dies and how he experiences heaven and hell. The artwork on the front of the order of service, is part of a beautiful landscape Robin Williams character creates in his heaven. Now I am not here to discuss the theological construct of Heaven and Hell, that will have to wait until a future time. But what this movie lifted up for me is how through our lives and what we do with our lives, we can create heaven or hell right here right now.

Towards the end of the movie, Robin Williams is trying to extricate his wife from Hell, and a wizened old character in the movie who is Robin William Mentor tells him “The real hell is your life gone wrong, and about how difficult it is to escape he also says, We see what we want to see” How often is that true, that when our best laid plans go off track. And we lose the resiliency to keep moving forward. We see events and the world only from our own narrow frame of reference and we block out other possibilities of how our lives could be different, or how the world could be different. But it can be different. We can transform our selves, our way of thinking and the world itself.

In this movie, Robin Williams tries to save his wife, merely by his willingness to be with her while she suffered. By being in relationship with others, by being willing to see the world through the eyes of another person, by willing to be empathetic with other human beings we can help ourselves and others. We help ourselves, by giving of ourselves, and not just out of a need to ameliorate some feeling of good fortune, but out of an innate love for other human beings and a love for the existence itself. And one last quote from the movie when everyone doubted his ability to save his wife, Robin Williams character states “The stuff they call impossible is just the stuff they haven’t seen before How true. So often when I would go into a new organization, any organization, whether it be religious or business, I would always ask people why they are doing things the way they are doing things, and I preface their answer by saying that they cannot say that is the way its always been done. There may be a good reason we always done something the same way, but let us make sure that with each action we take, we should think about how it serves our mission and vision today. How is it serving our congregation today and our congregation in the future. Just because something hasn’t been done before, doesn’t make it impossible.

We should look at everything we do with fresh eyes, with open eyes, with everyone’s eye’s and not just our own, to help widen our vision. We choose what we choose to see. Let us choose to see a broader vision, a bolder vision for what we can be as humans and as a congregation. Let us use our imagination and imagine what it would be like to live in beloved community, and then let us go forth together and not just imagine but to build that beloved community, one thought at a time, one relationship at a time, one action at a time.

So what are you dreaming about for our congregation? What can you imagine? A world class music program where visiting musicians from all over the world will want to come here and play for us. I can tell you I have already experienced here in my 6 months some world class music. Maybe a UU theatre group that is putting on original performances about socially conscious topics. We have just started our social justice ministry within the congregation. Maybe this ministry will continue to grow and become so active that one day, when there is a justice issue in the Quad Cities, the community leaders will call us and ask what do the Unitarian Universalists think about this? And when I attend social justice events in our community, they are heavily populated with members of our congregation. In this coming year you will be hearing more about our Green Sanctuary program, and maybe we can become the community leader in environmental issues which I think in the coming years will be one of the most important issues for global sustainability. We can be a gathering place for young adults to explore new and different theological ideas. We can be a religious learning center for all ages, for not only our congregation but the larger neighborhood community, nurturing and mentoring all people allowing them to reach their fullest potential.

Do we look at ourselves as just a small outpost, an oasis in the desert, or are we that shining light on the hill, a light that can draw others to us, so that all can journey together in the light of truth, the

warmth of love and the fire of commitment, can we lead the way to creating an integrated Quad Cities community so that the values we stand for are integrated into the larger community life. Let us be a voice of reason, a voice of love, a voice of religious freedom that can be heard from all the corners of the Quad Cities. But these can't be my dreams for you, they have to be your dreams. It can't be done without you.

And this is the key reason we are doing a one on one stewardship campaign this year. We want to hear from you. We want to hear about your hopes and dreams for the congregation. We want to make it as easy as possible for you to share those. Last weekend we had over 40 people go through a visiting steward training. Now there are some people who are just naturally outgoing and this is easy. But for many it is a risk. It is not always so easy to call someone you may not know and ask them to get together to discuss stewardship with you.

So I ask you to be welcoming to your visiting steward, and secondly I ask you to look at this stewardship visit as an opportunity to make connections with a fellow member. I want to share with you a story about the first time I was visited by a visiting steward. It was only a few years after I joined my Orlando Florida Congregation. I had at that time, some personal issues that had caused me to drift from Congregational activity. But this steward who I knew only tangentially at the time called me for a stewardship visit. They listened to my congregational story and journey, made me aware of a new program called connection circles, and invited me back into active relationship with my congregation. Well connection circles changed my life, this steward became a good family friend, and well what can I say, the rest is history as I am now here as your minister. Now I am not saying accepting a stewardship visit will have that same profound effect on your life as it did on mine, but I am just saying and asking you to, take the risk of accepting the call and the visit if for no other reason than to make a connection with another member of the congregation.

I know there are many people for whom money is an uncomfortable topic. That is yet another reason that we have decided to have one on one stewardship visits. We want to be able to give you the opportunity in a safe environment to ask stewards questions about the stewardship materials you received, and the suggested fair share giving guide. So at this point I would like to recognize all of those individuals who have agreed to be visiting stewards, if you are a visiting steward could you please stand up and stay standing for a moment. At this point I would like everybody to look into your order of services and open up the insert that says covenant between visiting stewards and the congregations.

Covenant Between the Congregation and Visiting Stewards

Stewards We stand before you committed to doing our best to make our congregational dreams come true by asking each of you for your help in supporting the mission and vision of our congregation

Congregation Committed to the dreams and hopes of this congregation we accept the responsibility for turning those hopes and dreams into reality.

Stewards We commit ourselves to preparing for each stewardship conversation by having already made our own financial commitment and becoming knowledgeable about the stewardship process. We further commit ourselves to contacting each of you to set up a convenient time for our stewardship conversation, and we commit to arriving on time.

Congregation We commit ourselves to make time in our busy lives to have a stewardship conversation. We commit to prepare for the conversation by reflecting upon our relationship with the congregation and to engage the visiting steward in honest and direct conversation

Stewards We commit ourselves to listen respectfully to your hopes and dreams for our congregation. We promise to keep private what should be private and pass along only that information that you have asked us to share

Congregation We commit ourselves to generosity of spirit and promise to make as generous a financial commitment to the best of our ability

Everyone And together, we commit ourselves to enjoy each other's company, to respect each other's ideas, perceptions, and beliefs, and to have a good time while raising money to ensure the future health of our congregation.

Lets all give each other a round of applause for our willingness to do this sacred task. Yes the last covenant we read did talk about raising money. Yes I understand when we speak of a financial commitment there is risk. Risk of alienating someone who doesn't want to hear about money in a religious service. Risk of turning off people who have come from other traditions where there is a constant bombardment for requests for money for things that have nothing to do with the vision and mission of the congregation.

And let us realize that every person is in a different circumstance. We do not stand in judgment of anyone based on how much you pledge. We do not have minimum pledges. Some people give out of their savings. Some give out of current income. Some have children and are saving for college, some have parents they are caring for. We do not always know each others circumstances. So we ask you to be generous, be as generous as you can. Think of generosity as a spiritual practice. Think of generosity as something righteous.

Now I stand here before you today. I have been your minister since August. And ours is a shared ministry, where we work together as a community to determine our vision and missions. We do not get directives from a bishop, an ancient book or even from the Unitarian Universalist Association. We all of us together work to make real the visions and missions of this congregation. We work together, supporting and being supported by each other. We as a congregation and as a religion can do great things together, but we must come together if we are ever going to be a strong congregation. We can do more together than we can ever do alone. So now is the time, the time to stand together. We have a strong foundation to build from. The foundation of a long history in this community, a history of raising families together, a history of offering liberal religious education, a history of working on important social justice issues. Let us build from this foundation.

Let us build that beloved community where all people are welcome, where all people will have the opportunity to connect with each other, where all people have the opportunity to participate, where all people have the opportunity to learn to love. But to do this, we need you. We need your participation, we need your leadership, we need your love, and we need your generosity.

And so I stand before you today, not just as your minister, but today as a member of your congregation. Well almost a member. I have signed the membership book and all that needs to be completed is for me to make a pledge and make a payment on that pledge. I have spoken often to you on many issues about the need to model behavior. Modeling behavior in how we act with each other, modeling behavior in how we live in the world. And now I will speak to you about modeling behavior as to giving and generosity for me using the fair share model. There is no secret as to what my compensation is, it is part of your budget. Now I have committed to and I have filled out a pledge card here that pledges 5% of my compensation or \$2,900 to the congregation. I have also attached my automatic deduction form so that it can come out each month from my bank account. This is not an easy thing for me to do. There will have to be some sacrifices made, but I value this religion, and I value this congregation, its members, what its vision and mission is and could be if made real. I value it as a

significant part of my life and I want how I spend my money to be accordance with my values and in accordance with the most meaningful parts of my life. I ask of you to do the same. May it be so.