

The Moral Imagination

preached by the Rev. Colin Bossen at the Unitarian Universalist Society of Cleveland,
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Albert Einstein once said, "Imagination... is more important than knowledge." I have been thinking about Einstein's words a bit this month. As many of you know the theme for worship in November is vision; vision and imagination are inexorably linked.

Imagination allows us to call into our minds things that we are not immediately experiencing with our senses. We can imagine both what is and is not. We can imagine a rose with its sweet scent and velvet textured red petals. We can also imagine fantastical or fictional creations like the world of Tolkien with its hobbits, elves, dragons and orcs. Vision is using the imagination to create an image of hope for the future.

One of the inspiring things about being a Unitarian Universalist is that our religious heritage is filled with people who had visions for a better world and tried to make those visions a reality. Ohio is rich with such visions. More than 150 years ago the Unitarians and Universalists of our state were filled with bold visions. Many of them were actively engaged in trying to make those visions part of reality.

In 1851 the Universalist church of Akron was the site of the women's rights convention where Sojourner Truth gave her famous "Ain't I a Woman Speech." One of the organizers of the convention was the Universalist Frances Dana Barker Gage. Gage is credited with having transcribed Sojourner Truth's speech but she was also a powerful speaker and writer in her own right. She actively tried to create an image of the world she sought to build.

In a speech at the same convention where Sojourner Truth spoke Gage said, "The old land of moral, social, and political privilege seems too narrow for our wants... and we feel that we see clearly a better country that we might inhabit." A description of that better country can be found in her hymn "A Hundred Years Hence" that had some popularity with Universalists about a hundred and twenty five years ago. Here are two of the verses:

Then woman, man's partner, man's equal shall stand,
While beauty and harmony govern the land,
To think for oneself will be no offense,
The world will be thinking, a hundred years hence.

Oppression and war will be heard no more
Nor blood of a slave leave his print on our shore,
Conventions will then be a useless expense,
For we'll go free-suffrage a hundreds years hence.

The wonderful thing about texts like Gage's is that they remind us that visions can become reality. While not everything that she dreamed of us has come to pass we certainly have made progress since she wrote her works in the 1850s. Women today have the vote and slavery is illegal. Beauty

and harmony may not govern the land but strides have been made since the days when only white men were full citizens of this country.

The visions, the dreams, we have today can become reality if we work toward them. The whole idea of what Martin Luther King, Jr. and others called the moral imagination is that we can imagine a more moral world. And then we can set about building it.

The moral imagination, the vision for a better society, is dangerous to the status quo. Often the powerful try to tell the rest of society what is and what is not possible. To offer a current example, we are in the grips of a world economic crisis brought about by the structure of our financial system. Yet it is hard to find many mainstream economists who argue that an economic system other than capitalism is possible. Most academic and institutional economists actively discourage us from imagining a different economic system. Many make claims that all other systems beyond the one we currently have are destined for failure.

Likewise, it is difficult to find politicians who seriously consider using something other than war and violence to maintain order in society. In our country few political leaders would actually suggest that we dramatically reduce or eliminate the military to fund strong international peace programs and domestic development programs to rebuild our decimated urban areas like the ones we have in Cleveland. Yet such efforts would probably do more to create a just and peaceful world than all of the drones and tanks in the United State's army.

I believe that peaceful diplomacy is the only true way to peace. I think that Einstein was right when he said, "You cannot simultaneously prevent and prepare for war." This Sunday after Veterans Day, I have to ask how many of the world's wars have brought more peace into the world? What is each war but the result of a failure in the imagination? A failure to imagine that problems between people and between nations can be solved through means other than violence.

There is ample proof that they can be. Recently the radio program "Fresh Air" featured an interview with David Kennedy, a professor at John Jay College in New York who has been at the forefront of efforts to curb violence and drug dealing in inner city communities. The traditional approaches to dealing with these problems have been to throw more policing at them. And the police usually address the problems violently, by hauling perpetrators off to prison--prison is a form of violence. In many communities a siege mentality has developed with the police on one side, the drug dealers and the gangs that protect them on the other and the vast majority of the community caught in between.

Kennedy has advocated for strategies that do not involve simply locking drug dealers up. His strategy instead uses the police to promote a dialog between the larger community and the drug dealers. In Boston he has worked with the police to develop a strategy where representatives from each of the city's drug gangs are called-in and given a message.

At the meeting the person is told, "You are here as a representative of your group. Please take what you're about to hear back to your group." And then the representative hears three things. First, they hear from people in the larger community that they respect--parents, ministers, survivors of gang violence--that the violence and drugs they are part of is tearing the community apart. Second, they hear that there is help available for them if they wish to quit the gang lifestyle, and

social service providers commit to helping them find job training and placement. And third they are told by the police that the next time there's a killing in the neighborhood the police are going to target the gang that was involved and put the whole gang in jail.

While this strategy ultimately rests on the threat of police violence it is the other things about it that are remarkable. And I think that is the other parts of it that are responsible for its success. In city-after-city where it has been implemented it has been credited with successfully driving down the crime rate. And honestly, I think that the part that has made the difference is the community communicating to the gang members that they are hurting the community and that the community cares about them.

Communicating this message to gang members took an act of imagination, a vision for how things could be different. It required Kennedy and those he worked with to think beyond the traditional approaches and try something different and new. In the times we live we all need to think beyond the traditional approaches and try something different and new. Otherwise I fear that the better world we hope for will never come into being.

The moral imagination is the key building the new world we seek. As Diane di Prima writes eloquently in her poem "Rant" that "the only war is against the imagination." We either accept the world as it is and accept the current limitations to our communities and lives or imagine something different. We either accept that war and greed are normative or we embrace the moral imagination and refuse to limit ourselves.

These past weeks as the Occupy Wall St. movement has unfolded I have been struggling with the question of how to take the inspiration I feel from it into my daily life. This a big question. And it is an important one. If the world is to be different then our lives need to be different too.

The movement began as a protest against the way our financial system is operated. But through its participatory nature it has begun to morph into something larger, an effort to change the way people interact with each other and with society's large institutions. The last few weeks have seen people from the Occupy movement take their vision out their encampments into the larger community and their daily lives. Bank Transfer Day last week inspired people to transfer as much as \$4.5 billion from large national banks like Chase and Bank of America to small local banks and credit unions. And on Minneapolis, Los Angeles and other places throughout the country people are occupying foreclosed homes and forcing banks to re-negotiate the terms of loans with home owners. All of this is beginning to transform the way that large banks interact with the masses of people. Scheduled debit card fees, for instance, have been cancelled. And people who would have been evicted from their homes are still living in them.

Such examples are inspiring. But the question remains: How would the better world I wish change my life if it was brought into being? And this leads to other questions: How would I relate to people differently? What sort of work would I do? How would my relationships with my family and friends be different? How I move through the world? The difficulty of answering such questions is one reason why I find exercises like the ones we shared earlier today to be so useful. We have to engage the moral imagination if we wish to see a better world.

In other words, we have to dream. We have to create visions and then strive to make those visions part of reality. As the poet Arthur O'Shaughnessy famously put it, "we are the dreamers of dreams." Or as one piece of graffiti from the sixties would have it, "Forget everything you've been taught. Start by dreaming."

My wish for each of you this morning is that you give yourself permission to dream. And that, in turn, you may take those dreams, those imaginings, and turn them into visions. May we dream good dreams, conjure powerful visions, and in doing so learn to build of them a new reality.

Blessed Be and Amen.