

“We Are Our Grandmothers’ Dreams”
A sermon by the Rev. Meg A. Riley
Preached at First Universalist Church, Minneapolis
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Thank you so much for the honor of speaking on this amazing day in this Unitarian Universalist congregation. One hundred years of organized Universalist women! Imagine that! One hundred years ago, women who had no right to own property if they were married, or to stop a husband from abusing them, or even to vote for politicians who might change those facts of their lives...those women dared to imagine that they had dignity, that they were indeed, fully equal to men in the eyes of God, and that women would eventually be fully equal to men in the eyes of the law.

You can't know how much it means to me to speak on a weekend when we are honoring women who have been my mentors, my teachers, my friends here at First Universalist—Betty Benjamin, Sharon Bishop, Dru Cummins—and so many more of you that don't have your names on plaques but really should. If I started naming you I wouldn't be able to stop. Please know how much your lives inspire me on a daily basis. And please also know that there are still plenty of empty puzzle pieces on our office wall where for a nominal gift you can honor someone else or even yourself!

This morning I want to talk about what it means to inherit a tradition of fierce passion for justice, to carry our *grandmothers'* dreams towards our *granddaughters'* lives. To be human vessels of time. Because we know that we sit here today with rights and privileges unimaginable 100 years ago, rights and privileges labored for by particular women and men in particular moments of time...we sit here in our male, female, or transgendered bodies as the answer to their dreams.

Obviously, none of us was there 100 years ago when those Universalist women began their group—a group of teas and handiwork and other traditional women's activities, yes, but also a group of fighters on behalf of poor women, of workers for long hours in daycare centers and of activists for the right to vote. Universalist women listening to provocative speakers on issues of birth control and sexuality and peace and justice much as we do today—listening, and then acting, as Bob Benjamin reminded us yesterday about his late wife Betty. She came to a women's event at the church in the early 60's about the lack of legal abortion—and the rest, as they say, is herstory.

I wasn't there 100 years ago, contrary to my daughter's belief, but I have seen in my own nearly **half**-century the power that happens when women come together in a spirit of love and commitment to vision, and so I can imagine how they, in the words of the late feminist theologian Nelle Morton, “heard each other into speech,” that is, how they literally remade one another to more resemble a Universalist God's viewpoint than a Calvinistic society's viewpoint.

After all, the primary voices used to stop women's advancement 100 years ago were religious ones. A typical argument is this one, voiced by the Reverend Professor H.M. Goodwin, in the *New Englander* and *Yale Review*, March 1884:

Under the accepted legal and Christian idea of marriage, all talk about the disenfranchisement of women, and their degradation to the ranks of children...is sheer nonsense, or the most transparent fallacy...Woman is made to be the complement and help-mate, not the rival of man. To deny or ignore this law is to deny the plainest facts, and to fly in the face of Nature itself. Nature and reason, no less than Scripture, declares man to be 'the head of the woman' and of the family, and for the same reasons that he is the proper head and ruler of the state...The equality of the sexes, in the only sense in which the term can be properly used, is perfectly consistence with the subordination of rank and place, as even theology teaches in the doctrine of the Trinity, where the son is subordinate and obedient to the Father, yet one with Him in all divine attributes.

Oh well, the TRINITY ordained subordination! THAT would have stopped our Universalist grandmothers in their tracks!

This morning's sermon title was inspired by the African American poet Nikki Giovanni's words:

God can get busy elsewhere, I was told, which is why God invented mothers.
Grandmothers are even better.

How do you go out into the world without a firm sense of those women watching you?
Why would you want to be out there if not to continue their story?

We have obligations! We are somebody's dream.

Somebody, some woman, hundreds of years ago dreamed that one day somebody who looked like her would be able to do...what? Eat in a restaurant, go to a school, vote, not be cold, own herself, be paid for her labor.

Who knows **what** she dreamed, but we do know **that** she dreamed. Had she not dreamed we would not be here.

We have no right to stop now. We have, in fact, an obligation to continue the dreams, to stand before history's docket and testify: I am here. And here I will stand. Let the church say, Amen.

My own maternal grandmother, Granny Macel, just died last year at 106. She wanted her tombstone to read, "The good die young," but propriety intervened, I'm sorry to say. Anyway, back at the turn of this century, when she was a youthful 102, I interviewed her about changes she'd seen in her lifetime.

As I remember that conversation, it is not the particular changes she highlighted which stick with me—cars, medicines, telephones, radios, televisions, women's right to vote, the civil rights movement—none of that. What I am left with is the image of a young woman in rural West Virginia, who grew up in a large family where even going to the nearest small town was a half-day enterprise via horse and wagon. As Macel and her siblings neared high school age, her family moved into the buzzing metropolis of Spencer, West

Virginia. Macel most remembers afternoons in the library, where she read National Geographic magazines and fueled a deep passionate longing to see a world which was not so homogenous, self-contained, static. Decades later, after her husband died and she needed to support three children, Macel joined the WACS during World War II and began a life of overseas travel and adventure—when I was a kid, she was constantly going on around the world jaunts, taking up yoga in India in the 1950's, for instance, which certainly contributed to her long life!

Contrast Macel's family life with her grandchildren and great-grandchildren. In my section of the family alone-- My oldest brother moved to Canada during the Vietnam war, married and has two grown children—four Canadians. My sister married a Japanese American man and there's a Japanese-American child. My brother and his wife adopted a son from Russia. My partner and I adopted a daughter from China. We are, indeed, living our grandmother's dreams. What a difference a hundred years makes in a family's identity! We can only imagine what our children's children might do.

Some sixty years after Macel pored over her library's National Geographics, her granddaughter sat in a library at the University of Akron, Ohio and read verbatim transcripts of the early women's rights conventions and dreamed of women preacher activists. This excellent women's history library was there because Akron U was founded by Universalists in 1870 as Buchtel College, and welcomed women from its beginnings. It was in reading these ancient manuscripts that I learned that Sojourner Truth had given her famous "Ain't I a Woman?" speech at the 1851 Women's Rights Convention in Akron in the Universalist Church—my own church. Those ancient manuscripts first stirred in me the deep longing for radical feminist politics which were deeply grounded in faith, which has borne out over the subsequent three decades as my life's work.

And in another four decades, I imagine my own granddaughter on some planet, in some library, perusing some text or hologram or something, which sets afire her own life passion. She will be living her grandmothers' dreams, as I am living mine. Moving towards 2105, another hundred years from now, when the world will hold...what dreams of ours? Do we dare to dream of 2105? Do we dare?

I once participated in a workshop of structured imagination led by the ecofeminist Joanna Macey. We were told, initially, to imagine that the time is 100 years from now. Nuclear weapons have been dismantled. Care for the earth flourishes. War has ceased. Equality reigns. While one of us stayed in this reality, another person acted as an activist from the future who has learned to time travel and has come back to understand some things from us. How did we let it get so bad before we changed things? What did we do? How did we do it? What didn't we do?

As I was interviewed by this time traveler, I became aware of a sense of deep relief, coupled with grief, coursing through my body. I had never before sat and **imagined** a positive future. Things were OK! We made it!!! We didn't destroy the planet!!! Just to **IMAGINE** this was a hugely transformative experience. There was relief, but there was

also grief—because some part of me could not even allow myself to imagine this to be true. Could not even DARE to IMAGINE.

Susan Griffin tells this story, which I read in Paul Loeb’s anthology, *The Impossible Will Take A Little While—A Citizen’s Guide to Hope in a Time of Fear*:

I am thinking, she writes, of a story I heard a few years back from my friend Odette, a writer and a survivor of the holocaust. Along with many others who crowd the bed of a large truck, the surrealist poet Robert Desnos is being taken away from the barracks of a concentration camp where he has been held prisoner. As the truck leaves the barracks, the mood is somber; everyone knows the truck is headed for the gas chambers. And when the truck arrives no one can speak at all; even the guards fall silent. But this silence is soon interrupted by an energetic man who jumps into the line and grabs one of the condemned. Improbable as it is, Odette tells me, Desnos reads the man’s palm.

Oh, he says, I see you have a very long lifeline. And you are going to have three children. He is exuberant. And his excitement is contagious. First one man, then another, offers up his hand, and the prediction is for longevity, more children, abundant joy.

As Desnos reads more palms, not only does the mood of the prisoners change but that of the guards does too. How can one explain it? Perhaps the element of surprise has planted a shadow of doubt in their minds. If they told themselves these deaths were inevitable, this no longer seems inarguable. They are in any case so disoriented by this sudden change of mood among those they are about to kill that they are unable to go through with the executions. So all the men, along with Desnos, are taken back to the barracks. Desnos has saved his life and the lives of others by using his imagination.

While awed by the courage Desnos embodies, Griffin cautions us not to slide into denial with a story like this. Desnos, she reminds us, did die of typhus just a few days after the liberation of the concentration camps—one of millions of men, women and children who have have been killed all over the world despite countless creative acts of survival and the deepest longings to live.

And yet, and still. Desnos dared to interject life into a moment when all that was offered was death. As the African American community says, he made “a way out of no way,” as so many who are oppressed do each and every day. And this, I believe, is how we carry on our grandmothers’ commitments to life. Through our bold, fierce, acts of imagination when so-called ‘reality’ offers us little or no hope.

It takes no imagination to know that we will all die one day...though few of us use our imagination to think creatively about how we **want** to die. (My favorite joke, which anyone who knows me has long since heard, is: When I die, I want to go peacefully in my sleep, like my grandfather...Not crying and screaming like the people in the car he was driving at the time!)

But **our** faith does not center itself in wondering where will we go after we die. What the very first Universalists knew, and what we can claim from them if we would dare, is not certainty about our whereabouts in the afterlife. What they knew is that our salvation, our spiritual well-being, is wrapped up **not** in trying to placate an angry God and then be rewarded in heaven, but in living a life which magnifies the love God has blessed us with right here, and right now. Universal love, knowing no boundaries.

A loving God, they knew, would not give women, or anyone, gifts, in order that they NOT receive those gifts. This is why the Universalists opposed slavery at their very first gathering in 1793—God would not create people in order to enslave them. Nor would God create people in order to subordinate them. It is no wonder that, as Minister Emeritus John Cummins reminds us, by 1920, the Universalists had ordained some 83 women ministers, the Unitarians 32, all other denominations combined, fewer than half a dozen. There was something in the holy water!

It is this theology of the living, this radically incarnational faith, that made women's emancipation so logical an outgrowth of Universalism from our very origins. God is offering love to us, gifts with which we came into the world, which we can use to share with one another, or we can deny by withholding this love from others in the very name of God.

If language about God's love doesn't spark your imagination, then please use different language. I have gotten increasingly comfortable with God language partly because of my involvement with the public conversations going on about the nature of reality in our common lives. The Reverend Professor Goodwin's words about women's suffrage which I shared earlier are eerily similar to the current talking points about marriage equality on the website of the religious right giant, Focus on the Family. GENDER, and the nature of women's subservience to men, is the center of their opposition to marriage equality, just as it is central to the Massachusetts decision to enact marriage equality—which is written in the language of GENDER equality.

I believe, with feminist theologian Rosemary Radford Ruether, that in all work for justice where religion is used to justify oppression, we MUST name "THE BIG LIE"—that is, that God ordains the oppression—if we are to stand with clarity and conviction on the side of justice.

And this is why ultimately why I have thrown my lot in life with this quirky, stunning little jewel of a faith of ours—because in so doing I become a living vessel of history. I can claim its history as living in me—I get to claim Universalist women from 100 years ago whose names and lives I don't even know, and Sharon Bishop and Dru Cummins and Betty Benjamin and so many more amazing souls as **akin** to me--and I can also relax knowing that Kierstin Homblette and Kristana Larsen-Wille and people a living history of future people I will never know will go on after me and correct what I have botched up, manifesting faith and justice in ways which I literally cannot yet imagine.

I don't believe in a vengeful God...although sometimes I really want to...but I do love it when history confirms that 'what goes around comes around.' One such historic reckoning which I've been enjoying of late:

From 1900 to 1927, Samuel Atkins Elliot II was president of the American Unitarian Association. While I am sure the Reverend Elliot II had many redeeming qualities about him, he thought that women were unsuited for professional life. Thus, the many excellent Unitarian women ministers who sought help from him in their careers were snubbed; he would cite "management issues" as a reason not to even meet with them if they traveled to Boston.

The UUA headquarters in Boston are full of full length portraits of many historic figures; the Reverend Elliot II's portrait hangs in—for obvious reasons--Elliot Hall, AKA the UUA chapel. This is where staff gather for weekly worship and people like Dru Cummins have sat through hundreds of hours of UUA board meetings and many other events, both wonderful and mundane, have occurred.

One of the wonderful moments which has recently been marked in Elliot Hall is that it was the site of the marriage of Julie and Hillary Goodridge, as in *Goodridge vs. the State of Massachusetts*. As in, the case where confronting gender justice led to legalizing marriage equality in Massachusetts. Because Elliot Hall isn't super big, it was crammed with press—hundreds of press—from all over the world. After the wedding, literally thousands of photos were taken of UUA President Bill Sinkford, who officiated at the wedding, and the beaming lesbian brides, standing—you guessed it—in front of the portrait of Samuel Atkins Elliot II. My colleague John Hurley, who is both the UUA's historian and our media director, chortled gleefully: "I just imagine Elliot turning over—no, really, spinning, rotissereeing—in his grave!"

So my friends, we won't do it perfectly, but we simply **must** dare to envision the bold future of equality and abundant love to which this glorious Universalism has always called us, lest we become a puny faith, a huddle of scaredy-cats and cynics. We **are** our grandmothers' dreams, and those are mighty powerful dreams to live up to, to carry with us as we go about our lives today, building for a future we shall not live to see.

But we can imagine!

