

"Dream No Small Dreams"

**Robert M. Franklin, Director, The Department of Religion
Chautauqua Institution, January 20, 2014**

Thank you to all who are responsible for this service. Pastor Paul, Juanita, Tom, John, Maureen, Sandy, Sadie and the Tribute Choir for your gifts and inspiration.

We come to this hour to honor a man who embodied the highest values that we cherish as Chautauquans - community, enlightenment, inquiry, justice, service and friendship. Could it be that Dr. King was an anonymous Chautauquan?

Today, we celebrate and remember an American dreamer. His most famous words included a reference to a large dream of what America could become. But, I think that George Bernard Shaw offered an insight that animated both King, the Kennedy brothers and a lot of the people who are in the church now. He said: "some men (our inclusive instincts would say 'people' today) see things as they are and ask why. Others dream things that never were and ask why not." Dream things that never were and ask, why not?

Today, we remember a dreamer who asked, 'why not?'

This holiday should also be a day for examining our progress in the three areas that were central to King's life: alleviating poverty, eradicating prejudice, and stopping senseless violence. How are we doing in these three areas? What more could you do to move the needle in a positive direction - poverty, prejudice, violence. Our moral exemplars: King, Shaw, Kennedy, Susan B. Anthony, John Heyl Vincent and Lewis Miller believed that each of us could make a difference, for as King said, 'everyone can be great because everyone can serve.'

Chautauqua was part of the dream of creating a better nation back in the 19th century. In contrast to the elite universities that educated the few, Chautauqua was also part of a movement, a popular education movement to empower everyday grassroots people. And, dream we must if we are to thrive amidst the rise of new competitors and the changing nature of traditional forms of vacationing and personal development.

Making the 'why not' a reality involves service and imagination. It includes giving when we do not have to. We can move dreams closer to reality by our daily actions, many of them against the grain of local practice and common custom.

Yes, this is a day for evaluating our progress. But, it should also be a day for evaluating the dimensions of our own dreams. If earlier dreams have been fulfilled or are near the finish line, shouldn't you be working on a new set of bigger dreams?

King would have celebrated his 85th birthday last week. He entered college at the age of 15. He seemed to be living in the fast lane. Ten years later, he began his ministry (1954 - 1960) at the Dexter Avenue Baptist Church at the tender age of 25. He was there for one year as a newlywed, a new father and a newly minted Ph.D. recipient. His plate was full when history tracked him down and challenged him to bring large dreams to an unfolding movement. Having other responsibilities was no excuse for harboring small dreams.

Just a year later, in 1955, King was asked to lead the movement after Rosa Parks refused to comply with a disrespectful Jim Crow policy, King was simply expected to be the custodian of other people's parochial

dreams of enjoying fairness in seating on Montgomery's buses. But, King followed the logic of justice and moral imagination. Einstein said that logic will take you from A to B, imagination will take you everywhere."

God seems to invite busy people to carry the burden of big dreams.

These dreams of unrealized potential expanded King and in turn, King expanded the dreams of his own neighbors. King asked why should we stop with the equal rights to ride the bus or enjoy a meal at Woolworths? What about the full menu of civil rights, privileges and responsibilities of other American citizens. Why not? Why not aim for those?

What about stopping wars that send innocent young people far away to kill other young people over the ideas of old men. Is there really no alternative to this?

What about enabling people living and working in poverty to live with dignity by providing a living wage? Nobel Prize economist Paul Krugman reports that since the 1970s, the real wages for half of the workforce have fallen while the income of the top 1% has quadrupled. (One wonders if philanthropy to Chautauqua has quadrupled accordingly.)

What about eliminating the barriers to creating a diverse and inclusive community in places that have not experienced it in the past?

Dreaming is the art of moral imagination. Practicing that art led King far beyond a local civil rights movement to a global human rights campaign. And today, he asks you and me to keep that momentum alive.

And so, what of our dreams?

Goethe gave us the gift of the phrase, 'dream no small dreams'. His full quote was, "dream no small dreams, for they have no power to stir the hearts of men."

Dreams are projections of imagination. Our nightly dreams are involuntary. But the daily ones that order our footsteps are in our control. We can expand, maybe supersize them, even as we recognize that our most productive dreams are always connected to, and grounded in, reality.

Alas, there is a danger to allowing your dreams to go unpursued.

In one of the great poems of the Harlem Renaissance, Langston Hughes asked and answered a rhetorical question:

"What happens to a dream deferred?

Does it dry up

like a raisin in the sun?

Or fester like a sore--

And then run?

Does it stink like rotten meat?

Or crust and sugar over--

like a syrupy sweet?

Maybe it just sags

like a heavy load.

Or does it explode?"

Today, we are dreamers. Every one of you has a dream. Be sure that is large, large enough to make you a little uncomfortable. Maybe even large enough to make others around you uncomfortable. The call today is to nurture those large dreams. Have a long and audacious bucket list.

Chautauqua is a place for dreamers. That's why King would have loved this place. Dreamers gather here to listen, to learn, to imagine and to commit to action. Little do our summer visitors realize that this staff and its leadership and the permanent community are animated year-round by relentless, hopeful dreamers.

So, let us draw strength from the wisdom of Dr. King's wonderful sermon titled "transformed nonconformists."

He said: "This hour in history needs a dedicated circle of transformed nonconformists. The saving of our world from pending doom will come not from the action of a conforming majority, but from the creative maladjustment of a transformed minority."

Hear the words of another transformed nonconformist, words that were much beloved by Mother Theresa titled, "Do It Anyway."

"People are often unreasonable irrational and self-centered forgive them anyway.
If you are kind people may accuse you of selfish ulterior motives be kind anyway.
If you are successful you will win some unfaithful friends and some genuine enemies. Succeed anyway.
If you were honest and sincere people may deceive you. Be honest and sincere anyway.
What you spend years creating others could destroy overnight. Create anyway.
If you find serenity and happiness some may be jealous. Be happy anyway.
The good you do today will often be forgotten. Do good anyway.
Give the best you have and it will never be enough. Give your best anyway.
In the final analysis, it is between you and God. It was never between you and them anyway."

We are transformed nonconformists. We are dreamers. We are Chautauqua.