

Imagine the Possibilities ©  
A sermon by Rev. Roberta Finkelstein  
Sunday January 20, 2019

What does it mean to be a people of possibility? That is our Soul Matters reflection question for the month of January. Not by accident did they choose the theme of possibility in the month when many congregations begin their stewardship campaigns. Pretty perfect alignment of messages, don't you think? As soon as I saw the theme, this snippet of dialog from *Through the Looking Glass* came to mind. "Alice laughed: "There's no use trying," she said; "one can't believe impossible things." "I daresay you haven't had much practice," said the Queen. "When I was younger, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I've believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast."

Whoa, Queen, be careful there. Bad enough you are suggesting turning our understanding of the world upside down! But before breakfast? Don't you know that breakfast is the most important meal of the day? Doing anything of note before breakfast is just impossible. Or silly. You would be taking a huge risk.

But wait. Where did we get the idea that breakfast is the most important meal of the day? A few years ago the Huffington Post looked into this. They traced it back to an article written in 1917. "[I]n many ways, the breakfast is the most important meal of the day, because it is the meal that gets the day started," Lenna F. Cooper, B.S., writes in a 1917 issue of *Good Health*, the self-proclaimed "oldest health magazine in the world" edited by none other than Dr. John Harvey Kellogg." That's right, the creator of corn flakes created a myth to enhance sales of his product, and generations of Americans believed that myth to be truth.

So if the myth about breakfast can be so easily debunked, what about all the other things we believe to be immutable? How about all those negative messages we carry around in our heads – the ones we got from well-meaning parents and

teachers and other adults trying to inspire us to do better? The ones that instead convinced us that we weren't ever going to be great artists or musicians or rocket scientists? And what about the negative messages we send to each other about our beloved community? We don't believe in organized religion, so we'll never be structured to be efficient in living out our mission? There will never be enough money. We'll never figure out how to be truly and radically welcoming to the diverse group of people we hope to serve.

If we want to explore what it means to be people of possibility, let's start by recognizing and naming those negative assumptions we have made about ourselves and each other and our community of faith. And then let's practice believing at least six of them before breakfast!

"What does it mean to be a people of possibility?" Scott Tayler, Soul Matters Team Leader, writes this month, "We tell ourselves so many small things about who we and others are. And we know that's not really because we're pessimistic." I will insert here that, on the contrary, Unitarian Universalists are known as religious optimists. But constantly asserting the revelation is continuous, we constantly hold out the possibility of a better world. Scott goes on to say, "More often than not, it's about protecting ourselves. There's comfort in convincing yourself that the work is hopeless; that way you don't have to try and risk failure, hurt or disappointment yet again. All of which is to say that maybe being a people of possibility has more to do with being a people of vulnerability and courage than we've thought."

So what does it mean to be a people of vulnerability and courage? First of all it means taking the risk of agreeing to stop using the word impossible. Improbable, maybe? Impractical, for sure! But let's just put aside the idea that some of our ideas, our dreams, our hopes, our visions, are impossible. That is taking a huge risk, of course. A much bigger risk than not starting off the day

with a good breakfast. If we are to be risk takers together, we need to embrace vulnerability together. We need to say to ourselves, and to each other, “I am willing to risk disappointment in order to reach for something splendid. I am willing to risk hurt in order to ask for what I really want. I am willing to speak my mind, knowing that I won’t always get my own way. I am willing to throw my lot in with this group of risk-taking people, knowing that sometimes I will let you down, and sometimes you will let me down. And all of that risking and dreaming is possible because we are a covenanted community, which means that we aspire to be our best selves, and we hold each other accountable when we are not, and we forgive and ask forgiveness, and we begin again in love. Again quoting Scott Tayler, “The work isn’t just about *believing* in possibility. It’s about being willing to endure a few wounds along the way. It can hurt to be hopeful. Especially with all that is going on in our world and society right now, we need to make room for that.”

When we make room for vulnerability, when we covenant intentionally and purposefully, we find the courage to live into our intentions. We become courageous. Yes, the very act of risk-taking, of acknowledging vulnerability, of entering into a covenant that asks us to sacrifice for each other, that very act makes us brave people. The courage comes from the connection. It is just too hard to be brave alone. But together . . . well the possibilities are endless. So let’s talk about some feats of daring-do that we accomplish together. Worship itself is an act of vulnerability and connection. When we join our voices in song, when we share deep silence, when we pray for each other, we are practicing courageous vulnerability. Worship is a communal act of exploring bold possibilities.

When we take on a volunteer job, when we spend time with our children and youth, when we sit at the bedside of a fellow parishioner who is

in pain, when we enter into a decision-making process fraught with possible conflicts and come out the other side with a renewed vision, we are practicing courageous vulnerability. Doing church is a communal act of exploring bold possibilities.

And that brings me to the supposed topic of this sermon. Every year we engage in the communal act of vulnerability and courage known as the stewardship campaign. Please remember that the hallmarks of our free faith are that we are self-governing and self-sustaining. That means that nobody imposes anything on this congregation or individual members. It also means that nobody pays for anything other than you, the individual members. The stewardship campaign makes it possible for us live out our mission. Without your pledges, we cannot formulate a budget, we cannot make decisions about staffing or roof repairs or plowing the snow.

Every year, brave people volunteer to be visiting stewards. They have attended a training session, and they have made their own generous pledges to both the operating budget and the mini-capital campaign. I am pleased to report that the early phase of the combined campaign has gone very, very well. We have no doubt that we will reach our goal for the mini-capital campaign. You will get all the updates and improvements that were originally cut out of the proposal last spring. Your Board and Strategic Planning Committee listened to your pleas and agreed to take the risk of doing a close-the-gap campaign along with the regular operating budget campaign. This is what is happening now.

To be a people of possibility means to participate joyfully and generously in this combined campaign. In order to keep operations going in the next year, we need to increase our pledge income by about 7 – 10%. Costs go up; pledges need to go up to keep pace. As you think about your pledge to

the combined campaign, please think first about a pledge that will sustain the operating budget next year. Then think about what you might give as a one-time gift to the mini-capital campaign.

We're all in this together. Your leadership have all made their generous pledges. Your program staff are all working on the campaign this year. As you know, Barry and I are making a gift of \$10,000 to the mini-capital campaign, even as we have one foot out the door. We want this campaign to succeed. We want to see the Capital Improvement Plan implemented in full.

So when we talk about being courageous together, there is no more obvious spiritual practice that comes to mind than the practice of fair and faithful stewardship. It is not about money. Well, it is about money. But it is also about generosity, and mutual support, and taking a risk on some radical changes to the building and the way we do things. I want to introduce you now to the people who are planning and implementing this campaign. I want you to see that they are your friends and neighbors and pew-mates. If you have been trained to be a visiting steward, either in December or January, would you please stand or wave your hand? If you are on the core planning team would you please stand? If you have in any way contributed your time and talent to this campaign, please stand. Now would you all turn to the insert in your order of service so that we can covenant together. (And please note that I made this an insert instead of putting it up on the screen because I want you to take this piece of paper home with you to remind yourself of what you promised today. When you get a call or text or email from your visiting steward I want you to remember that you promised to respond.) Now would those of you who are standing or waving or otherwise indicating that you are members of the Combined Campaign team please begin.

*Stewardship Volunteers:* We stand before you committed to doing our best to make our shared dreams come true by asking each of you for your help in supporting the mission of The First Unitarian Church of Wilmington.

*Congregation:* Committed to the dreams and hopes of this congregation and understanding that nothing buys nothing, we accept the responsibility for turning those hopes and dreams into reality.

*Stewardship Volunteers:* We commit ourselves to preparing for each Stewardship conversation by having already made our own financial commitment and becoming knowledgeable about the goals of our annual budget drive. We further commit ourselves to contacting each of you to set up a convenient time and place for our conversations or meetings, and we commit to arriving on time.

*Congregation:* We commit ourselves to make time in our busy lives to have a one-on-one Stewardship conversation if asked. We commit to prepare in advance by reading the materials you have sent us, reflecting upon our relationship with the congregation, and including our partners and children, when appropriate, in a decision making process that will allow us to engage in a stewardship visit in an honest and direct way.

*Stewardship Volunteers:* We commit ourselves to listen respectfully to your dreams and concerns. 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 a financial contribution 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 and grandest dreams of our congregation.

Everybody may be seated.

There it is. A covenant that bestows courage on a group of vulnerable, risk-taking people of possibility. Let's live it out in the weeks ahead. I close with final thoughts from Soul Matters. "So maybe the question this month isn't "Are you ready to lean into possibility?" but "Who's beside you and who are you bringing along?" "Who have you gathered to patch and pick you up when the path gets bumpy?" After all, no one makes it down the road of possibility alone. And perhaps that's the real secret: remembering that "Why not?" is something we all have to say together."

Why not?