

## FULFILLING THE DREAM

A sermon by Galen Guengerich  
All Souls Unitarian Church, New York City  
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The comedian Hasan Minhaj began his monologue at the White House Correspondents' Dinner last Saturday night by observing that with everything that's going on in the country, no one would've thought a Muslim would be on stage for a ninth year in the row — eight years of Barack Obama and now Minhaj. To be sure, he said, no one else wanted the job, which is why it landed in the hands of an immigrant.

In the opinion of most pundits, Minhaj's speech turned out to be an adroit exercise in politically-opportunist comedy. He lampooned, sometimes hilariously, the usual suspects for the usual reasons. Along the way, he tried to figure out why the fact-based news media has been so ineffective in the era of Trump. Even though the media has begun confronting White House press secretary Sean Spicer for his lies, and even though late-night comedians continually make jokes about the administration's falsehoods and Trump's flip-flops, Minhaj said, "It doesn't matter. His supporters still trust him. It has not stopped his momentum at all."

Minhaj added, "And I realized something — maybe it's because we're living in this strange time where trust is more important than truth. And supporters of President Trump trust him. And I know, journalists, you guys are definitely trying to do good work. I just think that a lot of people don't trust you right now."

As I watched the speech earlier this week, I stopped short at his observation that we live in a time when trust is more important than truth. While I agree with this observation, I found myself wondering whether the opposite had ever been the case — whether truth had ever been more important than trust. On my reading, human beings have always been willing to believe whatever comes from sources we trust, even if the information turns out not to be true.

This is the stuff of which traditional religion has been made. For hundreds and even thousands of years, people have affirmed as true the content of the Jewish, Christian, and Muslim scriptures, because they trusted the supposedly-divine source. Many people today still maintain that trust.

In more recent centuries, many people have begun to shift their confidence from scripture to science, despite the fact that what we think we know from science doesn't always turn out to be true. Even so, enlightened observers have learned that the scientific method is generally more trustworthy than other sources of knowledge, and therefore people like you and me have come to accept what it says as true.

Here's the question that inevitably follows this historic turn from scripture to science. Do people who believe in science have any need for religion? This is a question

you have heard before, both from me and from others. It was posed with new urgency by Audette Fulbright in her sermon here at All Souls last Sunday. She quoted from a recent essay titled “The Unfulfilled Dream” by the Unitarian Universalist minister and seminary professor David Bumbaugh, who writes:

If we are to be the religious movement some of us dream [of], if we are to respond to the needs of the world from a liberal religious basis, it is critical that we be able to address and answer three central questions: What do we believe? Whom do we serve? To whom or what are we responsible? Those are the questions with which every viable religious movement must wrestle. So long as those essential questions remain unaddressed, the dream will remain unfulfilled.

The truth about religion in America today is not in dispute. It’s in decline — slow decline in some traditions, and rapid decline in others. Fewer and fewer people participate. More and more people identify as spiritual but not religious. Overall, Unitarian Universalism has not been exempt from this trend.

Hence the urgency of the questions: What do we believe? Whom do we serve? To whom or what are we responsible? To put the question more simply, in what dream do we trust, despite the truth about the world as we know it?

Several months ago, I spoke to you about University of Chicago philosopher Jonathan Lear’s book titled *Radical Hope: Ethics in the Face of Cultural Devastation*. In the book, Lear describes what happened when the Crow people were forced to give up their hunting way of life and enter a reservation near the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. To a people who understood themselves as wanderers and hunters, this move completely destroyed their culture. Whatever happened after the Crow people were pushed onto the reservation had no meaning to them. As one Crow woman said, “I am trying to live a life I do not understand.”

Given the political, economic, and especially environmental terrain we have entered as a nation and as a global community, we’re facing some of the same challenges as the Crow did. They didn’t know how to imagine their future, and we often don’t know how to imagine ours. What will happen if things turn out badly for our nation and our world — politically, economically, and environmentally? What will happen if some of the dystopian scenarios turn out to be true? What then?

As I explained previously, situations like these require what Lear calls radical hope. “What makes this hope radical,” he says, “is that it is directed toward a future goodness that transcends the current ability to understand what it is. Radical hope anticipates a good for which those who have the hope as yet lack the appropriate concepts with which to understand it.” In other words, radical hope privileges our trust in the dream of what might yet be possible over the truth about our circumstances as we now understand them. This is the stuff of which religious faith has been made.

In his book, Lear goes on to make a further point that I didn't share with you last time. It has to do with what he calls imaginative excellence, which is an expression of courage in moving beyond what's present toward what's possible. Courage is required, Lear says, because the truth about the human condition is that we are finite erotic creatures.

By finite, he means that we are partly defined by our limitations. We are not all-powerful or all-knowing. We can't always accomplish what we undertake or get what we want. Some of what we believe to be true may well be false. By erotic, he means that our experiences of limitation drive us to reach out to the world in longing and desire for whatever we take to be valuable, good and true. Lear writes:

As finite creatures we are vulnerable: we may suffer physical and emotional injury, we may make significant mistakes, even the concepts with which we understand ourselves and the world may collapse — and yet as erotic creatures we reach out to the world and try to embrace it. For all the risks involved, we make an effort to live with others; on occasion we aspire to intimacy; we try to understand the world; on occasion we try to express ourselves and create something; we aim toward living (what we take to be) a happy life.

According to Lear, imaginative excellence is the virtue that toggles back and forth between our limitations and our longings, or between the truth about what's present and our trust in what's possible. He says, "It may be our desires that help us focus our beliefs or shift them in imaginative ways, and thereby help us better to face the situation."

In my view, what has been unfolding here at All Souls in recent weeks and months has been a courageous expression of imaginative excellence. We've taken a hard look at our limitations, even when that's been difficult. We've acknowledged our shortcomings — neglect of our building, insufficient focus on our fiscal well-being, and inadequate support of our larger mission and ministries. We've acknowledged the daunting challenges of being a religious community at a time when such communities seem to be falling out of fashion.

But we haven't stopped there. We've had the courage not to be defined only by our limitations. We've also given full voice to our longings as a congregation — to be more spiritually grounded, more diverse and inclusive, and more cohesively engaged. We dream of being more disciplined about our spiritual formation as individuals and more effective in our efforts to transform the world around us. We've had the courage to trust these longings without denying the truth about our limitations. As a result, we've begun fulfilling the dream.

One indication of our imaginative excellence as a congregation has been the emerging success of our capital campaign. To date, 124 individuals or couples have committed more than \$6.6 million to the campaign. In addition, 350 more visits are in

process, and there will be many more to come. Together, we are developing the means to fulfill our dream.

Another indication of our imaginative excellence was the overwhelming vote last Sunday — the vote was 97.5% positive — to call the Rev. Audette Fulbright as our associate minister. This is an extraordinary moment in our congregation's 198-year history. During our entire previous history, the congregation had only voted upon 11 ministers before Audette. She is the 12<sup>th</sup> and the first woman.

For my part, I couldn't be more pleased at this outcome or more energized by the prospect of working with Audette in the months and years ahead to develop our shared ministry as a congregation. We will become a better congregation because of her influence and ministry. I will become a better minister because of the imaginative excellence my partnership with her will enable. Together with Audette and with all of you, we are developing the shared ministry to fulfill our dream.

Let me mention one final indication of our imaginative excellence. It has to do with your presence here today as part of this congregation. Many of you have come to All Souls because of limitations you have confronted, sometimes painfully, and often abruptly. You feel bereft because a loved one has died, or distressed because a relationship has turned toxic, or discouraged because a child has turned away. Your health may be in doubt, your job may be at risk, or your future may be in question. You may be distraught at the retrograde motion that's developed in Washington, the inequality and injustice that's increasing all around us, the environmental devastation of the natural world and its creatures, or the declining practice of compassion and the decreasing commitment to human dignity and human rights.

Whatever the reason, you've had the courage to move beyond these limitations. Here at All Souls, we acknowledge the truth about what's present, and then we trust in our dream of what's possible. Though the evidence may sometimes suggest otherwise, our faith in the ultimate goodness that lies ahead remains unshaken. Together, we are committed to imaginative excellence — to fulfilling the dream.

Despite the risk of disappointment, we face the future undaunted. We open our hearts to embrace the people around us. We open our hands to transform the world around us. We're people of the dream, relentlessly pursuing what's possible.