

IF YOU CAN IMAGINE

A Sermon Preached by Richard Corson
(Campbell UMC Pastor Emeritus)

Campbell UMC
June 26, 2016
Text: [Joel 2: 18-19, 21-29](#)

When I accepted Kathi's invitation to preach this morning I didn't realize at the time that this particular Sunday would coincide with the 10th anniversary of our last Sunday as your pastors. It's been ten years since we, or at least I, retired.

Ten years since I removed my robe, folded my stoles, packed my books, emptied my desk and embarked on a new career as an apron-wearing, recipe-clipping, window-washing, floor-scrubbing, food-gathering, herb-snipping, weed-pulling, travel-planning, bill-paying home maker! Which is my primary work these days. And, except for folding fitted sheets, I love it.

Although I will admit that *sometimes* when I get up in the morning I'm torn between the need to tend my home *and* the desire to improve the world in some small way *or* simply to enjoy it – hands open, eyes open, listening with all my senses to hummingbirds and azaleas, fluffy clouds, ripening tomatoes, kids in the park, people in the coffee shop, new ideas rustling around like wind in a cornfield. Sometimes – *sometimes* – all of these possibilities make it hard to plan the day! Nevertheless, it's a great season of life! We are blessed and I am grateful to be living in a place beyond ambition.

* * *

With that said, let me turn to the text we heard a few minutes ago, the hope-filled passage from the prophet Joel who promises a beleaguered people in a parched and desolate land that things are going to be different now. That God is going to send grain, wine and oil; that the soil will rejoice, the trees will bear fruit, the fig tree and vine will give their full yield, the threshing floors shall be full of grain, and the people shall eat in plenty and be satisfied.

“And after all this,” says the Lord God, “I will pour out my spirit so that your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men and women shall dream dreams again, and your young shall see visions.”

Which is what I want to talk about this morning. I want to talk about dreams, visions and their companions - curiosity, creativity, inspiration and imagination. Especially imagination.

A number of years ago Barbara Wade introduced me to a book titled Gaviotas: A Village to Reinvent the World. Written by award winning journalist Alan Weisman, the book tells the story of a young Colombian visionary named Paolo Lugari who wondered whether the brutal, barren, rain-leached eastern savannas of war-ravaged Colombia could be made livable for his country's growing population. Fifty years later Gaviotas has become one of the world's most celebrated examples of sustainable living: a permanent village where renewable energy, a reborn rain forest, and cooperative imagination are a proven reality. It's a great story!

Recently, I learned that ten years after the first edition of his book, Weisman returned to Gaviotas and updated his observations in an anniversary edition. What he discovered is that the Gaviotas economy now sustains more than 2,000 people, in a carefully designed eco-system that relies on solar energy, cheap pumps to tap shallow groundwater, a network of bike lanes and roads reaching out into the thousands of acres of forest growing in what was once an uninhabited, infertile wasteland. From resins for paint to bio-fuel, recyclable plastics, gourmet water and most anything one can imagine, the Gaviotas community remains on the cutting edge of innovation.

Living among Mango trees, bougainvillea, and hydroponic farms with the scent of gardenia in the air, Paolo Lugari is now a man in his early 70's yet he continues to dream about how to restore the planet's living skin and to keep atmospheric chemistry in balance and global warming in check. He reminds me of John F. Kennedy who famously said, "*Other people see things and say why? But I dream things that never were and say 'Why not?'*"

"Why not?"

You see, the real crisis we face in the world – in our forests, our prisons, our schools, communities and even in our churches – isn't a lack of resources it's a lack of imagination. "What would happen," asks Lugari with a familiar twinkle in his eye, "what would happen, if every human being were required to plant three trees . . .?" It's what Colombia needs. It's what Latin America needs. It's what the world needs!

And still he dreams – this man who has
outlasted a war.
What about you? Do you dream?

A recent review in the Mercury News of another remarkable book titled Genesis introduced me to Sebastiao Salgado, a native of Brazil, who at the beginning of a career in economics, was inspired by his young wife Leila to take up a camera and see the world through a lens. That seemingly innocent suggestion led Salgado into a career as a photojournalist who has criss-crossed the world recording its beauties as well as its terrors. His story is told in a brilliant documentary titled "The Salt of the Earth," in which we learn that by the time Salgado had clicked thousands of images of sprawling camps of refugees, the exploitation of women and children, mass graves, drought, starvation, and unmitigated human suffering in Rwanda, the Congo, and the Sahel, not to mention the

burning oil fields of Iraq or the pit mines of Brazil, he had lost all faith in the future of humanity. “The history of the world is a history of warfare and cruelty,” he concluded as he wept over the specter of evil.

Emotionally devastated and unable to continue his work, Salgado retreated to his native Brazil, to the now barren, treeless expanse of his father’s once verdant and productive farm. Not knowing how best to help her husband regain his vision, confidence and hope, Leila, who in many ways is the hero of the story, suggested that they try to recreate the forest that had once prospered there.

Without any experience but with considerable imagination they acquired and planted seedlings of native species. The first year they lost about 60% of their harvest. The second year about 40%. But still they kept at it, learning, planting, watering and watching in wonder as trees grew and grasses and flowers, which in turn attracted birds, butterflies, beetles, and bees. As the forest grew, heavy seasonal rains were absorbed by the soil rather than turning into flash floods and in time rivers and creeks began to flow year round. Fish returned. And alligators. Jaguars and other beasts of prey. More than 2 million trees cover the land as far as the eye can see, while 700,000 seedlings grow in the nursery. An impressive expanse of Eden restored. Along with hope to a wounded soul.

Can we make a difference? Can we choose to be instruments for what is possible? Can we be springs of mercy and tenderheartedness? Where there is death, can we restore life? Where there is darkness, can we sow light? Where there is injury, pardon; where there is despair, hope; where there is sadness, joy? The answer is, of course, yes! Yes! – if you can imagine!

In his book Finding God in Unexpected Places, Philip Yancey talks about a South African named Joanna, who began a ministry that radically transformed one of her country’s most violent prisons. When Yancey asked how she did it she said, “Well, of course, Philip, God was already present in the prison. I just had to make Him visible.”

Can we make a difference? In a prison, in a place like Elmwood; in helping older folks stay in their homes through Heart of the Valley; in building homes with Habitat; in sending shoes to Sierra Leon; in reading stories at Rosemary school; in rehabbing homes on a reservation near Smith River; in sorting food at Second Harvest; in walking against hunger; in dedicating years and resources to discovering and developing dancers, singers, and actors among our youngest; in welcoming the still-targeted GLBTQ community into this community; in sending a flock of chickens to Kenya or a heifer to Bolivia; in deconstructing racism or Islamaphobia through conversation and collaborative ministry?

*The answer, of course, is yes.
We can! We do!*

If you can only imagine!

At the base of a volcano in the middle of Lake Nicaragua, there is an orphanage. Although third-world orphanages are not normally festive places, on this day, at this time, there is reason to celebrate the arrival of a young man named Ben Schumaker. Schumaker comes from a faraway place called Wisconsin, and he comes bearing gifts. A suitcase with 62 pounds of portraits of the kids, a painting for every one of them, never meant for anyone's eyes, except the children in them. Having virtually nothing they can call their own, no parents snapping baby pictures, no family bearing gifts or sharing stories, these portraits are something the kids might hold on to for the rest of their lives.

Schumaker calls this *The Memory Project*. The idea is to establish a sense of personal heritage. He started it in college out of a bedroom in his parents' house in Madison. So far he has distributed more than 80,000 portraits to orphans around the world. Of course, he can no longer paint them all. Instead he gets someone to take photos of the kids, and then he sends those photos to high school art teachers across the United States; the teachers assign the portraits to their students.

This is where the idea goes from good to genius. The American kids who paint these portraits spend hours staring into the faces of their orphan subjects. Schumaker says that after working with them for so long – after painting their eyes especially – there's a genuine connection. Every day they come into the art classroom and, bam, there it is, looking right into the eyes. "To be honest," says Schumaker, "that's the main reason why I do this work. Because for every portrait I give out, there's a student back home who is now more aware of a world that needs light, of people who need hope, of hurts that need healing. That's why he says I'd like to make my *Memory Project* part of every high school art class in the country. If it can raise the *net level of compassion* in the world by just a little, I'll be happy."

Can we make a difference?

Emma Gatewood told her family she was going on a walk and left her small Ohio hometown with a home-made bag, a change of clothes and less than two hundred dollars. The next anyone heard from her, this 67-year-old grandmother had walked 800 miles along the 2,050-mile Appalachian Trail. The first woman to hike the entire trail alone, as well as the first person to walk it twice and three times, Gatewood became a national celebrity. The resulting publicity led to renewed interest in maintaining and improving the trail. Hence the title of the book that tells her story: Grandma Gatewood's Walk: The Amazing Story of the Woman Who Saved the Appalachian Trail.

Can we make a difference, honoring a dream, shepherding a vision, freeing and following the imagination?

The answer, of course, is yes.

For under the power and persuasion of the Holy Spirit we are always and forever free to dream, imagine possibilities and find ways to raise the *net level of compassion* in the part

of the world that is within our reach, remaining open to surprise, wonder and hope rather than shutting down under the constraints of *can't*, *won't*, or *it wouldn't be proper*.

If you can imagine it, it is possible.

Yet – and this is so important. We need to remember that dreams, visions, prophecies and the actions or solutions they inspire, usually arrive when we're still. Asleep, perhaps, or sitting on a park bench, strolling a beach, meditating - going *nowhere* in particular, experiencing the simple cathartic thrill of stillness.

That's where the imagination quickens and solutions emerge. In the stillness. The quiet. The calm.

Which, as you well know, is in such short supply that many of us complain of being so busy that we never seem to be able to catch up with our lives and have little time to tend even the smallest of vision and dream.

Barraged by information streaming in on us 24/7, it's easy to feel as if we're standing two inches away from a huge canvas that's noisy and crowded and changing with every microsecond. It's only by stepping back and standing still that we can begin to see what that canvas (which is our life) really means and what we can do to alter the landscape.

We need perspective, if we are to see the possibilities.

Einstein said, "No problem can be solved by the same consciousness that caused it."

Thomas Merton, one of the great contemplatives of the 20th century, pointed out that "one of the strange laws of the contemplative life is that in it you do not sit down and solve problems; you bear with them until they somehow solve themselves. Or until life solves them for you." Or shows you the way.

It is only by getting away from clutter and distraction that you can begin to hear something out of earshot, and it is only by going nowhere – by sitting still or letting the mind relax – that thoughts can come unbidden and visions that are often far fresher and more imaginative than the ones you consciously seek out.

Can we make a difference in this world? The answer is an emphatic YES!

But if we are to change the world, bend it just a little, I believe we must be changed as well.

Poet David Whyte writes

*When your eyes are tired
the world is tired also.*

*When your vision is gone,
no part of the world can find you.*

That's when you know beyond doubt that it's time to stop or at least slow down, take a break, disconnect from your devices, and enjoy a Sabbath day or hour, some kind of intentional pause that can help restore your vision, renew your energy, heal and make you whole – again.

“Then . . . THEN . . .” says the Lord God, “I will pour out my spirit so that your sons and your daughters shall prophesy, your old men and women shall dream dreams, and your young shall see visions.”

I close with this. On this day in 1997, an unemployed, single mother sat waiting for a delayed train when an idea came to her. She didn't have a functioning pen with her so she simply sat and thought for four hours while all the details bubbled up in her brain and a scrawny, black-haired bespectacled boy who didn't know he was a wizard became more and more real to her.

She began to write that evening. What flowed from Joanne Rowling's imagination were seven Harry Potter books that have sold over 450 million copies and spawned an empire through movies, destination spots, costumes, lunch buckets and more. It's said that the franchise earns her \$10,000 an hour.

With success like that you get invited to places like Harvard where, in a commencement address, J.K. Rowling said this: “We do not need magic to transform our world. We carry all the power we need inside ourselves already. We have the power to imagine better.”

So let's do it!

Amen