

August 27, 1963. Seven individuals are gathered at the Willard Hotel to go over final remarks on the March on Washington. Martin Luther King Jr. is passing out papers to the other 6 individuals. He had been working on this speech diligently, making sure to include the perspective of many of his constituents - young, older, black, white. Everyone is going over this speech line by line. They know it will be not just be a pivotal moment in the Civil Rights movement, but hopefully a pivotal moment for America. After a couple hours of editing and fine tuning King's speech, it's sent to the Washington Post to be published before King has even given it. The day arrives for the March on Washington, and King is up to speak. Millions of people watching on television, and 250,000 people in person right in front of him are electrified to see what he is about to say. For the first 7 paragraphs of the speech, King reads every single word on the page diligently. It's good stuff. It's well written, cohesive, and has a nice flow though King seems a bit stilted. I can relate to that feeling that sometimes. It comes with nerves, and the desire to really get something right. Mahalia Jackson, the gospel artist, knows that King is being diligent but is not showing the public the raw power of this movement. Mahalia Jackson says just loud enough so Ted Kennedy who is standing right next to her, and King can hear her. She tells King simply: "Tell them about the dream."

King takes a pause. Something I've learned is very important. He takes a pause and gives his body a chance to catch up to his mind. He looks at the crowd before him and really sees them. And he tells them: "I have a dream..." the beginning of the most famous American speech ever given in the 20th century. It was not written, though King had given versions of this dream at churches across America when he was invited to preach. And all of those speeches in all those churches came together in this powerful package that now everyone thinks of as the speech for the March on Washington, a speech that was never formally written.

The reason I mention this story this morning, is because sometimes I think it is not so much the content of our dreams that matter most, but the way we choose to embody it. King wrote a good speech, a really good speech. He had 6 people edit for him, something they would all be proud to have printed as the speech that represented the possibility of freedom and equality for African Americans in this country. It was a good speech, but it was not the speech that needed to be given. The speech that needed to be given was not the speech that was smart and cohesive. It was a time for passion, for risk, for vitality, and due to King's great talent this was delivered in a way that was also smart and cohesive. The people needed to feel the energy of this movement, not it's editorial.

King believed in a version of the American dream. I have always appreciated Malcolm X's criticism that what King calls a dream is at present a nightmare. These two poles of reality have informed my thinking and my feeling for dreams. I feel a stubborn commitment to trying to live in the tension of the aspiration of who we might become with the very real struggle of the present and it's excruciating limitations.

I have often thought of a human life as an impossible dream. We are the spoken and unspoken dreams of all that has come before us.. Even the soil we stand on has memory and some kind of thrust for growth and new life. We cannot get away from this. We are embedded in dreams. We are given a new day, and we don't know really where it came from, or why it is here. But it is here.

Sometimes possibility is just too small a concept. It's too utilitarian, too rational. Possibility is good enough. It's smart. It's cohesive. It reads on the page well. It's something we'd be proud to put our name to. But it's not the real dream.

The real dream is impossible. The real dream takes our possibility and pushes it aside, off the lectern and it forces us to confront the enormity of this moment. It beckons us into the vastness. It invites us on a tightrope walk where we know there is no net.

Spiritual teachers including Malcolm X have showed us how to maintain your dignity in a world that is hellbent on stripping you of it. This is to know that many dreams do not come true, at least not fully, and sometimes not at all. This acceptance saves us from a kind of naivete that can rob us from having compassion for a significant portion of the population, including ourselves. Yes, true compassion, is predicated on knowing limitations and respecting them enough to name them as impossible situations. It's a perspective that looks at a life and marvels at the strength and resilience it takes to maintain an upright posture in the face of injustice and tragedy. This is what it means to have compassion.

But I think it's a mistake to stop there. There is something greater than our limitations. There is something greater than our understanding of possibility. It is the fire in the belly. It is the breath of life itself that though embodied in each of us, is so easily missed. It's the embodied sense of something impossible and yet here - real as reality itself, even more real. It's the thrust of life itself, moving us to share with the entire world our greatest hope and our greatest faith. To the pragmatist, to those familiar with the realms of possibility, it looks like childlike dreaming. It looks like a kid looking out the window in geometry class, not paying attention to the hard lessons in front of her, but looking at the sky. A sky full of castles, and circuses with big tops and elephants, and other worlds never experienced but imagined.

Possibility is too small a word for any human life. We must know the frozen snow, and hold fast to something that warms our bones in the middle of winter. We need a fire to melt the frost of accumulated disappointment and loss. This fire is the dream. It is not just any dream. It is not the well thought out and polished dream. It is not concerned with public perception and public criticism. It is not even concerned with self perception and self criticism. It doesn't care about what has been done, and what is likely to happen. It truly doesn't care about what is possible. It's aim is far greater than that. It's aim is the impossible.

I've had enough conversations with various people about the future of Youngstown to learn one thing - far too many people are more familiar with the nightmare than the dream. They know what's it's like to feel ignored, devalued based on their zip code, and value of their tax dollars. They are familiar with limitations and the great resilience it requires to maintain a persevering attitude in the face of seemingly unwinnable odds. It can seem like an unwinnable odd just to get your road plowed after a heavy snow. And this is lived day after day, mostly in quiet resignation.

An impossible dream provokes us from the complacency of perceived possibility. It demands more for us, whether we think it will happen or not. An impossible dream uses our circumstances as the tools for creativity rather than seeing our circumstances as a sentence, as a prison cell, a place we will never succeed in breaking free from. Only an impossible dream makes a way for the possible. We can't prepare and strategize for the impossible. We can only open ourselves to it. And with a little encouragement, we can share it with people just like us

thirsting for something that has never been seen before. A people just like us waiting, and hoping and dreaming the impossible.

I think the power of certain dreams is that though their full fulfillment seems impossible, they feel right. The enormity of a dream that captivates and enthralls our entire imagination transforms us, and compels us. It gives our life purpose and our struggles meaning. It gives our pain a greater context and trajectory for which our life may serve. Our life becomes less a possession, a trinket or shiny object, and it actually becomes alive, something wily and ungraspable. We let our life recognize its wildness, the untamed, the unadorned. We let our life speak.

I think it's time for Youngstown to speak. I know it has a lot to say, and it's already being said in quiet murmurs day after day. I hear the nightmare and I hear at the heart of this nightmare the impossible dream. To repeat - the two always go together. Compassion and resilience. Love and perseverance. Parents and children. They are inseparably bound together. King's first line spoke straight from the heart "I have a dream that one day my four little children will one day live in a nation..." In speaking about his children, King knew he was speaking of a time that would surpass him, that would be impossible for him to see. He knew that the possibility of his vision would only be the starting place for his four little children. He knew that the dreams of his four little children would be his own dormant impossible dream.

Each of us contain dreams that are dormant and remain unfulfilled. And most of those will remain unfulfilled in our lifetime. We will not see them. We may not even feel them or sense they are there, but they are. They are as real as reality itself, more real. Because they are the birthplace of a reality to come. The container and shape of this birth is what we see around us. It is the buildings, the structures, and most importantly the stories and mindsets that we give energy too. These will shape how these impossible dreams will become known or unknown, real or unreal. We have a part in creating an environment for dreaming to flourish or die. Notice I said dreaming, not dreams. The act of dreaming is more important than the content of the dream. The willingness to look beyond what we see as possible is more important than the fulfillment of its possibility. Yes, we must make space for the impossible. We must encourage it, nurture it, and when the time comes, say the right words - Go ahead, "tell them about the dream." Tell them your impossible dream. They're ready to hear it.