



SERVICE TRANSCRIPT:

Riding on a Light Beam: Dare to Imagine

By Janet Luongo

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(Opening words for Chalice Lighting, by worship associate, David Smith)

The Vision Must Grow: We light this flame to remember that every vision wants to grow. It has its own heat; its own hunger. It arrives wanting more and wanting us to become more. It has us; we don't have it. We are continually drawn forward by its pull. May today help lure us toward its larger call. -Soul Matters

(Prelude: "If I were Brave" by Jana Stanfield, sung by Jenna Jacobs and Steve Axthelm)

OPENING REMARKS - Janet Luongo

When I was a little girl, a friend of my father said to me, "I've known you since you were merely a 'gleam in your daddy's eye.' (Huh). My Unitarian parents had already explained the mechanics of how babies happened. But the "gleam in the eye," that was new to me. It made me think – how a gleam, a desire, a thought, had set in motion events that led to my being born. That stuck with me.

The moon landing 50 years ago: that too began as a thought, a vision. I was twelve when President Kennedy announced a goal many thought preposterous: "landing a man on the Moon, and returning him safely to the Earth." JFK set the time – "before the decade is out." He made all of us feel part of something grand when he said, "It will not be one man going to the moon...it will be an entire nation." He was clear about costs, dangers, and obstacles. He said we choose goals like going to the moon "not because they are easy, but because they are hard."

My point is that a thought precedes a result. Even something quotidian like your dinner didn't just appear. Someone had to think about it and do something to get it on the table.

(In our household, that's usually my husband, Jim.) A vision has a good chance of becoming reality if it is bold, specific, and for a higher good. In addition, you need the will power to plan it, the determination to overcome obstacles, and – most essential - the belief that you can do it! Today, during this service, you'll have the opportunity to imagine a bold vision for yourself, and to sample a process that can remove inner obstacles so you can make your vision a reality.

The famous Swami Yogananda, who I'm studying now, never let his disciples utter the words, "I can't." He said we must tell ourselves, "I can do it."

Paramahansa Yogananda traveled from India to Boston in 1920 to give an address* on an invitation from Unitarians, whose interest in Eastern spirituality had grown over previous decades. In the mid 19th century, Ralph Waldo Emerson, a Unitarian minister, had written an essay "The Over-Soul," exploring concepts of an immortal soul that he'd studied in the Vedas, ancient Indian scriptures. Yogananda's mission was to bring yoga to America, to make connections between the materialism and science in the West and the deep spiritual traditions of the East. Today I too will draw some connections between science and spirituality. I worked at the Museum in Bridgeport then called the Museum of Science and Art, and, as director of education, my job was to connect concepts of science and art.

One connection I'd like to draw today is between our Unitarian Universalist principle that we are part of an "interdependent web of existence" and the Vedic concept that "We are all One." Unity is an idea found in many traditions from Earth-based spirituality to Buddhism, as well as in modern physics. Nobel-Prize-winning physicists of the early 20th century, such as Erwin Schrodinger, were deeply interested in the Indian Vedas. Schrodinger, who discovered wave mechanics, was "devoted to vedantic" concepts, according to his biographer, Walter Moore. He wrote in *A Life of Erwin Schrodinger*, that Schrodinger's theory of wave mechanics revolutionized science in part because it "showed that everything in the world is part of everything else" – a concept strikingly similar to those expressed in the Vedas.

Unitarian Universalists affirm: “Respect for an interdependent web of existence of which we are a part.” An astronaut, Ed Mitchell, one of twelve who walked on the moon, wrote about hurtling back home and looking out of the capsule into space. He saw the Earth, moon and sun orbiting among the stars. He said, “I realized the molecules of my body and the molecules of the spacecraft had been manufactured in an ancient generation of stars...it was a subjective, visceral experience accompanied by ecstasy.”

We can't all rocket to the moon, but we can imagine moving beyond intellectual concepts to direct experience. The “direct experience of transcendent mystery and wonder” is the first Source of wisdom for UUs. Perhaps Unitarians invited Yogananda to America a century ago so he could guide us in how to FEEL the unity of existence. He taught that yoga means, “yoke,” the uniting of our individual soul with the vast universal energy. He called that unity “Self-Realization,” the goal of meditation. He founded a center near Los Angeles, and for thirty years he gave speeches all over America and wrote hundreds of books, including one of the top spiritual books of the 20th century – *Autobiography of a Yogi*. George Harrison, after he traveled with the Beatles to India, freely handed copies out to friends. I was given the book last March and immediately signed up for Yogananda's Self-Realization Lessons, a home-study course he wrote before he died in 1952. He teaches us to free ourselves and live “victoriously,” and that our life purpose is to realize the true Self, the inner light. As we sing “This Little Light” a favorite song of UUs, let's visualize the light within us, a brilliance that can guide us through dark times.

(HYMN: “This Little Light of Mine.”)

SERMON – PART A: VISION

Albert Einstein said, “Imagination is more important than knowledge.” His “thought experiments” involved visualization. It's said that while of high school age, Einstein realized the distortion of time/space by imagining himself riding on a light wave traveling at the speed of light. That vision may well have inspired him, a decade later, to conceive the Theory of Relativity. Thoughts, dreams, and beliefs can lead us to greatly impact the world around us.

Beliefs work on the collective level too. For instance, groups of people who believe brown and black people are threats, see a crisis at the border – even manufacture one, and acting meanly, create a meaner culture. In contrast, those who believe all people have integral worth, tend to see the humanity in others, and acting kindly, create a kinder culture. I'd like to relate a few personal examples of how realizing dreams worked for me as an individual. In my childhood, my Dad turned me on to literature and my Mom to art, particularly the French Impressionists. I formed two passionate personal visions for my future – I'd be a writer, and I'd be an artist – I dreamed I'd exhibit in Paris, just like the Impressionists.

Fast forward, I married a man who wanted to live in Europe. He got a job teaching in Geneva, Switzerland, and I had the good luck to have time to write and paint. I set a goal that I'd fulfill my childhood dream: before we left Switzerland, I'd exhibit in Paris - only 3 hours away by train. I built up a body of work, got into local shows, and finally I was accepted for an exhibit in Paris! But, at the train station in Geneva, an official blocked me from transporting my paintings. I refused to allow a bureaucrat to kill my dream. Though unprepared, I drove across the border to France to catch the train. During this trip I lost my way, ran out of gas, and lost my wallet, leaving me in a foreign country with no money, no ID. But I would NOT turn back. I made it to the gallery, and fulfilled my goal of exhibiting in Paris.

What about my dream of being a writer? For most of my life, I kept journals and wrote in bits and pieces. In Geneva I drafted a story of a disastrous year in my teens, but the book sat unfinished. Seven years ago I got serious and joined a writers group and worked with editors and finally completed the memoir. Recently I discovered a press run by women, one that I totally relate to. It was the one and only publisher I submitted to, and it felt like such a good fit that I had high hopes. But I didn't hear back...I waited...and waited. Nothing. Just Last March I was flying home from a trip and was reading *Autobiography of a Yogi*. I hit a part about how the universe wants us to realize our yearnings. We need only ask for what we want. I burst into tears sitting on that plane. I said to myself, "Really, I've been writing for *seven* years. I've asked spiritual teachers if it was a good project, they

said yes, keep going. ...I don't want to sit on this book. So now I'm *asking*: I want my book published so people can read it and hopefully find ideas on how to recover from hard times like I did." That was Saturday. On Monday I received an answer. My book was accepted.

A very similar thing had happened to me in 2002, just after Bush invaded Iraq. I was in bed listening to the news, the "shock and awe" of bombs exploding, the terrified cries of women and children. I turned the radio off, and sank into a deep meditation. I stood up and said out loud, "I must work for peace." Just at that moment, the phone rang. A woman said she worked for Amistad America and that she'd had my card on her desk for a year, and just this minute *happened* to think of me – would I consider working with them on a project for peace? I felt stunned. How quickly my heart-felt thought became reality, literally within minutes.

Now you'll have time to imagine what you want for yourself. Maybe to fulfill a childhood dream, or form a new vision of happiness. You'll picture yourself doing something that makes you feel well and happy, and is for the highest good of you and others. The possibilities are limitless. At this point totally drop any concerns of practicality, or restraints of time or money - that's for another time. Dream big and bold. We're going to fly high, shoot for the moon, to aim for the feeling that astronaut Ed Mitchell described – ecstasy. Dare to imagine your own personal paradise, where you feel bliss.

MEDITATION – FLYING (Summary): We imagine growing wings and flying to beyond our moon, where we land on a small planet or moon. There we encounter spirit guides who lead us to a place that is our own personal paradise, where we are perfectly relaxed, comfortable, feeling joy at being in our chosen place, alone or with loving people, and engaging in an activity that makes us feel well and happy, doing what feels like something we're meant to do.

PAIR UP on VISION AND SHARE with a neighbor, the images, visions and desires experienced in the meditation.

STORY: “Alexander the Great Meets the Yogi.” Told by Jim Luongo **

Over 23 hundred years ago, in the 4th century BC, King Philipp ruled Macedonia. Wanting the best education for his young son, he had him tutored by the great Greek philosopher, Aristotle. The boy grew up to be a warrior-king named Alexander the Great, who set out to spread Greek culture throughout the known world and did become ruler of the largest empire in the ancient world. After his victory taking over the Persian Empire, Alexander, ever restless, then dared to march on Northern India, the mysterious land they believed to be the end of the earth. Alexander had developed curiosity about the strange powers of the yogis and Hindu holy men of ancient India, and once in India he determined to meet a great yogi named Dandamis.

He dispatched an envoy, to fetch the wise man, Dandamis. Alexander’s envoy had to travel deep into the forest and finally found the yogi alone on a retreat, in only a loin cloth, peacefully meditating under a tree. The envoy said to the yogi, “O great Teacher, Hail to Thee! My Lord, Alexander the Great, Son of the mighty God Zeus, Sovereign of all men, orders you to go to him. If you comply, he will reward you with great gifts of gold; if you refuse, he will cut off your head!”

The yogi Dandamis did not move, or blink, as he calmly received this so-called “invitation.” He did not so much as lift up his head, and remained seated on his couch of leaves. The yogi finally spoke, “I want nothing that is Alexander’s, for I am content with what I have, while I see that he wanders with his men over sea and land for no advantage, and is never coming to an end of his wanderings...

“Go tell Alexander that the one Supreme god I give homage to is the Creator of Peace, a god who denounces slaughter and war. Alexander’s bribes and threats mean nothing to me for yogis do not love gold nor fear death. Alexander may cut off my head, but he has no power to destroy my soul.”

The envoy's report about the yogi's courage stupefied Alexander. In the old and half-naked Dandamis – the great warrior Alexander had met his match. When Alexander invited other yogis, he treated them with great respect. One yogi named Kayana left India with Alexander, and agreed to converse with him about how the wise men developed the power to shed themselves of greed and cravings. Alexander mostly burned with desire to discover the yogi's secret of conquering fear, even the fear of death!

SERMON PART B - OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

So what was the yogi's secret of conquering fear, even fear of death? Yogis believe, as we heard in the story, that the soul cannot be destroyed. Our individual soul is One with an energy that is eternal and infinite, powerful, conscious, pervasive, peaceful and blissful. This energy is nameless but is called by many names, so pick your preference. The name I prefer is "Spirit." Just as the Sun is reflected in still waters, the Spirit is a reflected in the still soul. This powerful energy exists in every one of us and is indestructible.

Yogananda teaches us in his booklet, "Living Fearlessly," that we are "given one tremendous instrument of protection – more powerful than machine guns, electricity, poison gas, or any medicine – the mind." He says the "secret of a happy, successful existence... comes by exercising mind power and by attuning the mind to God during meditation...The easiest way to overcome disease, disappointment and disasters is to be in constant attunement" with Spirit. It's been consoling for me to believe, and sense, that Spirit is always here to love and guide me. I only have to **pay attention to it and tune into it**, and feel that I am united with universal energy. It helps me to connect if I think of Spirit in a scientific term, "pervasive cosmic energy."

It's helpful to be reminded of where we all came from. I've been fascinated by The Big Bang theory since 1980 when the book, *Cosmos* came out. The author, Carl Sagan, married a friend I was close to in high school, Ann Druyan, who co-authored the book with him and scripted and produced much of the updated *Cosmos* that was televised about five years ago.

In a 2007 interview for the magazine, *Skeptic*, Ann said that Carl was “fearless in pursuing questions.” Scientific knowledge expands with every new discovery and therefore, she and Carl were agnostic because there’s still so much “we just don’t know.” She said she does not believe in the god of Genesis, who created things “separately.” She said, “I know absolutely nothing about god (but) I think I know something about awe and reverence...which is perfectly consonant with the values and methods of science. Darwin’s theory (of evolution)...is spiritually so much more satisfying than any other explanation of how life came to be. In the idea of the oneness of life, that we are part of a cosmic continuation that stretches back (more than) 3.5 billion years...and we’re able to recognize our relatedness to all other life on earth.”

At the Museum of Natural History in NYC Ann Druyan was involved in the creation of a display, a video on the Big Bang. Maya Angelou narrated the story: “Scientists imagine a void...with bubbles of space smaller than atoms. One bubble grew, ballooned, and suddenly exploded in a Big Bang. Space itself exploded, in cosmic fire, giving birth to all the energy and matter in our Universe.”

Space expanded, and is still expanding. It cooled, and gravity pulled it together into galaxies and stars. Galaxies combined, and our Milky Way was formed out of clouds of gas. The Sun and Earth and moon were born. And thereafter everything else on earth evolved into the world we now know.

The cosmic energy of our origin flows in us now. Carl Sagan and Ann Druyan said, “We are star dust,” and Crosby Stills and Nash sang at Woodstock, “We are star dust, and we are golden, and we’ve got to get back to the garden.”

If you could feel and sense within you that energy which scientists call cosmic, and that yogis describe as loving, would you generate more courage to pursue your vision? If you knew you couldn’t fail, what would you do?

Some people are so afraid of failing they censor themselves before they even form a dream; An inner critic might be telling them, you are not worthy, not worthy of

happiness. They may be afraid they can't get what they want and don't want false hope. Or they may feel if they DO realize a dream, everything would change and they couldn't cope.

Mistakes are not nothing to fear – they are natural and necessary. That's how we learn – trial and error. Yogananda says, "We are babes in the woods of life, forced to learn by our own experiences and troubles, stumbling into pitfalls of sickness and wrong habits. Again and again, we have to raise our voices for help. When we tune in with Spirit... help comes." ***

In the realm of creativity – whether in art, science or any field - even the word "failure" makes no sense. If inventors gave up after a few failed experiments we'd still be in the Dark Ages or the Stone Age! Trying to be perfect is debilitating and holds us back. The only failure is to not try at all. So though we face obstacles in the outside world for sure, it's usually the inner obstacles that paralyze and limit us. Let's get out of our own way. Let's clear out the negativity of the past: doubt, fear, shame, feeling unworthy, low self-esteem. And replace it with positive statements in the present. When you repeat these affirmations, the mind begins to act as if the positive thing is actually happening right now.

MEDITATION B –AFFIRMATIONS to OVERCOME BLOCKS (Summary)

Tune in to the intelligent energy within and without your body. Every minute, awake or dreaming, without your conscious control, your body is continually absorbing what you need and eliminating everything you don't need. Breathe in and out of your seven energy centers along the spine Release any fears and negative thoughts.

1. Base of spine. Affirm: I am nourished by mother earth's bounty and beauty. I am healthy. I am grounded. I am strong.

2. Sacral area a few inches below your navel. Affirm: I am creative, I have a bold vision for myself and the world. I am magnetic, and I attract good things to myself.

3. Solar plexus. Affirm: I easily digest life. I am worthy of all good things. I accept, respect and love the whole of me.

4. Heart and lungs. Affirm: I am loving and lovable. I am forgiving and forgive myself and others for any infractions. I make amends when needed. I am like a beacon on a lighthouse spinning in all directions, shining light and love on all.

5. Throat. Affirm: I express my truth. I speak with kindness to myself and others.

6. Third Eye. Say to yourself, I am part of the interdependent web of existence.

7. Crown. Affirm: I am a child of the Universe. I have vast vision and power, I ask for guidance, protection and inspiration in realizing my vision. So be it.

PAIR UP ON REMOVING OBSTACLES. SHARE - with same neighbor, the obstacles you will overcome, and describe your next step to your vision.

BENEDICTION: May all your worthy visions become reality. May your true self shine. May you fulfill your gifts. You serve humanity when you express yourself and share yourself. Now, as Henry David Thoreau urges us, “Move confidently in the direction of your dreams.”

POSTLUDE: “Brave” by Barreilles

*Yogananda in 1920 addressed the International Congress of Religious Liberals in Boston

** (The story, Alexander the Great and the Yogi is adapted by Janet Luongo from accounts of Swamis Vivekananda and Yogananda based on Plutarch and other Greek historians who traveled with Alexander on his expedition to ancient India, 4th century BC.)

*** “Living Fearlessly,” by Yogananda from Self-Realization Fellowship: yogananda-srf.org.)