

Dream Without Limits!

Revolutionary Common Sense by Kathie Snow, www.disabilityisnatural.com

The American Dream. It's what motivates us to believe we can achieve our fondest hopes. Collectively, we may not share the same definition of The American Dream; to some it's a house with a picket fence, to others it's a college education or owning your own business. What we *do* seem to collectively hold dear is the *idea* that we can pursue and achieve whatever is important to us.

Unfortunately, this doesn't always apply to individuals who have been diagnosed with disabilities. The dreams that parents hold for their precious baby often evaporate in the wake of a disability diagnosis and a physician's dismal prognosis.

The carnage may continue throughout a person's life. Special services, interventions, and therapies can be effective dream-smashers. Instead of supporting the heartfelt hopes of an individual, they generally focus on addressing a person's "problems" (as determined by others). This is enough to erode a person's self-esteem and plant the seeds of hopelessness. Moreover, the time spent in these activities reduces the amount of time one can spend pursuing one's dreams.

Special ed preschools, segregated special ed rooms in public schools, group homes, sheltered work settings, and other unnatural environments can also successfully destroy dreams. In these environments, "success" is measured by a person meeting goals that have been written by others, instead of by the achievement of personal hopes and dreams. In the process, the freedom to explore—and to succeed and fail—is replaced by regimentation and routine. By the time children with disabilities have grown into adults, many have lost the will to dream. The fading glimmer of hope is extinguished. (When service providers lament that it's hard to find a job for a person with a disability because he's "not interested in anything,"

they might consider looking at his past. If he wasn't permitted to dream as a child, he may need lots of encouragement to dream as an adult.)

Interventions and unnatural environments aren't the only dream-crushers, however. The words and actions of parents, educators, service providers, doctors, and others can devastate a person's hopes and dreams, and so can the *absence* of words and actions. What we *don't* do or say about dreams can contribute to a person's belief that he *shouldn't* dream.

Hopes and dreams are the daily fuel that energize people who *don't* have disabilities. Some dreams are realized, others aren't, and still others change. Again, the final outcome isn't as important as the *idea* that a person can influence her present and future through her hopes and dreams. If we expect individuals with disabilities to succeed, they must be able to dream. Each of us has an important role to play, and there's a cardinal rule that can guide us: help a person dream, but if you can't help, *at least do no harm.*

I DREAM,
THEREFORE I BECOME.

CHERYL GROSSMAN

Brianna, 14-year-old who did *not* have a disability, loved being with young children and decided she wanted to be a pediatrician. Her mom didn't say, "You can't be a doctor—you hate needles and blood!" She didn't want to dampen her daughter's enthusiasm, and felt Brianna might decide to tolerate needles and blood in order to achieve her goal. So she suggested Brianna become a hospital junior volunteer to see if she liked the medical environment. After a year of mostly enjoyable experiences, Brianna decided the medical field wasn't for her! She felt a little lost then, not knowing what type of career she should pursue, and she wondered if the year was a wasted effort. But her parents helped her recall the interesting experiences, which had contributed to her growing maturity. Further, they helped her see that knowing what she *didn't* want to do was valuable knowledge.

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Dreaming inspires curiosity—a willingness to try new things. Poking a hole in someone’s dreams can diminish this curiosity. Do we have the right to do this? On the flip side, telling someone she can’t do something may motivate her to pursue it just to prove the naysayer wrong. How many have traveled such a path, doing something they don’t really want to do, and making themselves miserable, in order to save face?

Jonathan, a teenager with a disability, has dreamed of many careers since he was a young child, including being a firefighter and a basketball player. His parents never said, “You’re not being *realistic!* You can’t be those things—you have a disability and use a wheelchair.” Instead, they responded with the same words they said to their other children: “You can grow up to be anything.” They knew *all children* need their parents to believe in them so they can believe in themselves. They also knew children change their minds countless times! How many adults are doing the jobs they dreamed of as children? As children, we don’t *know* about the countless career opportunities that may be available, *and* our interests change as we grow. And once a career is begun, how many people stay there for thirty years? Many have enjoyed multiple careers in different fields!

Jonathan’s parents also trusted in their children’s ability to learn what they’re capable of and what they aren’t. In Jonathan’s case, they knew that (1) he would probably figure out fighting fires and playing basketball weren’t the best choices or (2) if, as an adult, he still desired to pursue a career in a field that’s considered “off-limits” to a person using a wheelchair, he would figure out how to make it work.

So, encouraging a person to dream requires trust. When we trust in a person, we also send the message that we believe in him, which enables him to believe in himself. We’re also sending the message that we have *great expectations*, and this is in sharp contrast to the low expectations that many people have routinely assigned to individuals with disabilities. Is there any

greater hurt we can inflict on a person than to have no hopes and expectations for him? The trust and belief of others—especially parents—are pillars of strength that can support a person throughout his lifetime, even during difficult times when he may temporarily lose trust in himself.

Trusting can come only when we rid ourselves of the arrogant belief that we “know” what a person can/can’t do. *We don’t know*—we can only guess. Even an informed opinion is just that: *one person’s opinion*. Do we dare let our opinions crush the life out of another’s hopes and dreams?

When a person with a disability has a dream that seems unachievable, we can learn more about what the dream really means, instead of dismissing it as “unrealistic.” The late Jerry Kiracofe shared an experience that illustrated this important lesson.

Jerry was helping a man with a disability find his place in the community—a job and home—so he could get out of an institution. Steve’s dream was to be an astronaut. In his gentle fashion, Jerry let Steve know that he didn’t have the qualifications to be an astronaut, then asked what other jobs he might like. “Astronaut,” Steve replied, and he wouldn’t budge from this position.

Jerry realized he needed to discover *what* about being an astronaut was so appealing. Since Steve had grown up in the institution, his only exposure to space travel was watching it on TV news. After getting to know Steve better, Jerry was able to find a job that fulfilled Jerry’s hope: working at the Smithsonian Air and Space Museum as a custodian. Steve didn’t really want to be an astronaut, he wanted to *wear* a snappy uniform (like an astronaut) and *be around* airplanes and spacecraft. Only by really listening to Steve (and not pooh-poohing his idea) was Jerry able to help him achieve his dream.

Joan, a wise mother of a teenager with a disability, helped her son’s dream come true by listening *and* by removing barriers to her son’s success. At 17, Jim languished in the special ed room at school, hating every minute of it and hating himself, too. Joan said enough was enough; she was tired of her son being hurt by the low expectations of educators. Jim quit

**Reality can destroy the dream;
why shouldn’t the
dream destroy reality?**

George Moore

school, Joan helped him prepare for the GED, and they began thinking about jobs.

Jim—like lots of us at that age—didn't know *exactly* what he wanted to do, but he pictured himself driving a truck and wearing a uniform. Mother and son explored their community and soon, Jim was working as an apprentice at a pest control firm. With his eagerness, determination, and newfound self-esteem, he quickly moved beyond apprenticeship. Not only did he get to wear a uniform and drive a truck, it was a cool truck with a bug on top (for a pest extermination company)!

Do we have the *right* to question the value or validity of another's dreams? Wearing a uniform may meet someone's need to be "part of something," perhaps it's desired as an expression of authority, or it can mean anything else. Who knows? Dreams are precious possessions; *their value can only be assessed by the dreamer.*

To support my son's dream of being an actor, we enrolled him in drama classes. For two years, he pursued this dream, via drama classes and performing in several plays. Then a new dream took him on a different path. He now wants to be a writer, specifically a movie critic (he wants Roger Ebert's job). One-finger typing has served him to this point, but his dream may be more achievable with the notebook computer and voice-to-text software we recently purchased for him. Does the person with a disability in your life have the assistive technology, accommodations, supports, *and* the opportunities and encouragement she needs to enable her to pursue her dreams?

Methods to encourage dreaming and support a person's dreams are infinite; a few examples have been described. Generally, each of us can critically examine our past actions and do whatever it takes to improve our efforts. Parents can *choose* to restore the

same dreams that grew in their hearts before their child was diagnosed. Educators, service providers, and others can *choose* to soften the hard shell of "professionalism" (which often equates to cynicism, pessimism, and "delivering bad news"), and reacquire the capacity to inspire hope.

We can also initiate—on a regular basis—conversations about hopes and dreams with the person we care about. Dreams come in all shapes and sizes: seeing the latest movie, having a birthday party, going on vacation, pursuing a particular career, or anything else! And *respecting* those dreams—whether we agree with them or not—is crucial. When we can't share honest enthusiasm, we can use a middle-of-the-road approach by saying, "That sounds really interesting," or something similar. Supporting someone's dream doesn't mean we must agree 100 percent; it does mean, however, that we don't diminish the importance of the dream—and by extension, the importance of the *dreamer*—by dishing out insults, disbelief, or any other negative reactions.

With our misguided assumptions and beliefs about the abilities and potential of people who have disabilities, we have unintentionally limited a person's opportunities to dream. We can get beyond these self-imposed barriers if we suspend belief in the traditional disability paradigms: "problems," "not ready," "needs to be fixed," and more.

Basking in the joy of anticipation that comes with dreaming, working hard to achieve a dream, and replacing old dreams with new ones are integral parts of life for *everyone*. What kind of life would *you* have today if you hadn't experienced all of these? The need to dream is a universal human trait that we can no longer deny to others on the basis of disability.

Stories were full of hearts being broken by love, but what really broke a heart was taking away its dream, whatever the dream might be.

Pearl S. Buck