

God's Great News for Humanity's Great Problem *Paul's Letter to the Romans*

Reconstructing Hope: Exploring the Dreams That Refuse to Die¹ *Introduction to Romans 5:12 – 21*

Introduction: The Dreams and the Urgency

Well the reason we're here tonight is to explore dreams that we have that refuse to die. They are not simply childish dreams that I'm talking about. These are dreams that guide our vision and haunt our steps. These are dreams about quite urgent and important issues having to do with how our lives go, how our lives feel, and how our lives look. I'm going to talk about three dreams: the dream of love, the dream of meaning, and the dream of a more just world. All of us have dreams of this sort. For some of us, our dreams are in our conscious mind. We wonder about them. For others of us, our dreams are buried a bit deeper. Things have happened in our lives to cover them up. But nevertheless they're still there.

The Dream of Love

The first dream we have is the dream of love. I felt torn between believing in this dream and being fairly cynical. Part of it was that my parents didn't have a pleasant marriage. They started arguing about divorce when I was a sophomore in high school. Because I couldn't see any reason why I wouldn't have a better marriage than them, I was cynical, on the surface. Yet deep down, I believed in the dream of love. That same year, I met this girl who was a year older than me. She was this cute ice-skater who flirted a lot with me. We had this whirlwind hang out time that Christmas, but by the same time in January, we had just dropped it. I learned later that she was just rebounding from her old boyfriend and from the abortion she had. It left me more cynical, but I wanted to believe in the dream of love.

I thought I realized that dream the next year. This time, I liked a girl in my class. On one of our first times hanging out, I took her to Huntington Beach at night. We walked on the sand to a lifeguard station where we sat under the stars. We talked and drank hot chocolate from two lunchbox thermoses that I had brought. It was like mixing Charlie Brown with Zac Efron and Vanessa Hudgens in Hawaii before the premiere of *High School Musical 3*!! But despite our highly romantic beginning, the relationship didn't go well. Maybe it was because I thought I could help her not cut her arms, because I thought she needed me, but I only complicated things. Maybe it was that I'm Japanese and she's Korean, and her dad didn't really speak to me, and we knew we weren't really thinking about the future. Our relationship became more empty than anything. It became clear that it was more based on shallow words and shallow kisses, and after our times together, I'd feel more and more hollow. I'm sure she felt the same way. And yet there were these moments when the dream of love would glimmer again. One time we took her mom to a play. And her mom had a problem with her eyesight, seeing depth perception. So she had a hard time going down stairs. So my girlfriend would take her mom's hand and help her down the stairs. Seeing that sparked something in me. I thought, '*That* feels right. *That* is respectable. *That* is an act of love.' I knew that I was feeling something that came close to real love, but I didn't really have it all that much, and neither did she. We were just mutually using each other. We wound up going through a painful month-long breakup where we couldn't decide what to do. Ouch. By the time I entered college, I was jaded, but I knew I was still looking for the dream of love.

Illus: There's a song called *Fast Car* by Tracy Chapman. Listen to her life story and how she was looking for the dream of love:

You got a fast car
I want a ticket to anywhere
Maybe we make a deal
Maybe together we can get somewhere
Anyplace is better
Starting from zero got nothing to lose
Maybe we'll make something

¹ I am indebted to N.T. Wright and his messages at Harvard in November 2008 for the title and general idea of exploring human hope.

But me myself I got nothing to prove

You got a fast car
And I got a plan to get us out of here
I been working at the convenience store
Managed to save just a little bit of money
We won't have to drive too far
Just 'cross the border and into the city
You and I can both get jobs
And finally see what it means to be living

You see my old man's got a problem
He live with the bottle that's the way it is
He says his body's too old for working
I say his body's too young to look like his
My mama went off and left him
She wanted more from life than he could give
I said somebody's got to take care of him
So I quit school and that's what I did

You got a fast car
But is it fast enough so we can fly away
We gotta make a decision
We leave tonight or live and die this way

I remember we were driving, driving in your car
The speed so fast I felt like I was drunk
City lights lay out before us
And your arm felt nice wrapped 'round my shoulder
And I had a feeling that I belonged
And I had a feeling I could be someone, be someone, be someone

You got a fast car
And we go cruising to entertain ourselves
You still ain't got a job
And I work in a market as a checkout girl
I know things will get better
You'll find work and I'll get promoted
We'll move out of the shelter
Buy a big house and live in the suburbs

You got a fast car
And I got a job that pays all our bills
You stay out drinking late at the bar
See more of your friends than you do of your kids
I'd always hoped for better
Thought maybe together you and me would find it
I got no plans I ain't going nowhere
So take your fast car and keep on driving

You got a fast car
But is it fast enough so you can fly away
You gotta make a decision
You leave tonight or live and die this way

I love that song because it's so poignant. Did you hear the words 'I'd always hoped for better'? You get the sense that that feeling is lurking behind the song at all times. In spite of how bad it's been, I still hope for better.

I think many people, including you, have had similar experiences. The hard thing about trying to keep the dream of love alive is that you get disappointed. Or you get frustrated waiting. So why not just fool around with casual hook ups? Maybe you should. Never mind the question of whether patience is a virtue that is cultivated in this area of life just like any other area. Never mind the question of whether it takes character in you to know character in someone else. Maybe you should. But consider this: You might actually be reminding yourself of disappointment even more. In a survey of Tufts students last year, 100% of freshmen and 79 percent of seniors said that they preferred monogamous romantic relationships – meaning where there was an attempt at real love – over hooking up, 'friends with benefits,' or even a monogamous sexual but not romantic relationship. That's what Tom Cruise and Cameron Diaz were in the movie *Vanilla Sky*: sex buddies. In some ways, hooking up just reminds you even more of what you don't have. Why? Because, as the student who writes for the Tufts Daily as the sex columnist wrote, the hook-up culture is 'a game where you go out, hook –up, and don't talk to that person afterwards. Hook-up culture plays on insecurities. You don't have the self-esteem to demand better, to ask for exclusivity.' Reducing people down to conquests makes the conquest inherently easy and basically meaningless.

Well now, wait a minute. Why don't you go one step further and ask yourself, 'Why do I believe in the dream of love in the first place?' In reality, love might just be made up. The bare naked truth might be that human beings are nothing more than a bunch of chemicals wrapped up in skin, because in the larger story we're the result of a random universe, and we just went from the goo to the zoo to you. As atheist biologist Richard Dawkins said, 'Sex is the gene's means of making more genes.' It's nothing more, not sacred, not anything. What about love? Love is something you young people idealize about until you get older. It's a construct in our heads. Sex is the fundamental reality that we want, chemically. We want to preserve our genes. With who? Well, to a certain degree, people are interchangeable. You may have your likes and dislikes, but there's nothing sacred about relationships. There's only how you feel in the short term, and that's governed by your emotional-chemical balance. So, when you have problems in relationships, just move on!! Wouldn't that let you do whatever you wanted, especially now? Yes, IF you could kill the dream of love. Sigmund Freud tried that. With his psychoanalytic theories, he concluded that we just want sex, and maybe a feeling of safety. It's all about yourself, your self-centeredness. Who you're with at the time doesn't really matter. In his story, in his framework, you can't rationally say that love is real, or that it exists. There's no such thing as love, rationally speaking. But, when Freud wrote to his fiancé, he wrote, 'When you come to me, little princess, love me *irrationally*.' Let's pretend that love is real, that we are special. He wanted love anyway. Even though he thought there is no such thing, really. HE couldn't kill the dream. YOU can't kill the dream. It is a dream that refuses to die.

The Dream of Meaning

Let's talk about the second dream, the dream of meaning. A BC student I was talking to last year said, 'I don't know what meaning my life has. When I think about it, I get depressed. So I don't think about it.' But it's hard to just do that forever. Viktor Frankl was a neurologist and psychiatrist, and a Jewish survivor of the Holocaust. During the Holocaust, he watched many of his fellow Jews ordered to shovel dirt or whatever from one spot to another. Then, the next day, they were ordered to shovel the dirt back to the original spot. It was meaningless, and it drove quite a few people to suicide. So Dr. Frankl wrote in his book *Man's Search for Meaning*: 'What man actually needs is not a tensionless state but rather the striving and struggling for some goal worthy of him. What he needs is not the discharge of tension at any cost, but the call of a potential meaning waiting to be fulfilled by him.' We long for meaning. But how do we chase that dream?

Illus: Here's a great illustration of that. It's the movie trailer of the new movie Bolt. [clip] Bolt the dog, as you can see, lived in this stage world where he had special powers. Then he finds that the real world is different than what he originally thought it was, and that he doesn't have special powers. And he has to adjust to that reality. Being significant is a dream that refuses to die. How many of you feel like at some point in your life, you've had to do that? Some of us have gone down a similar path and have had to adjust. You were a good student in (say) elementary school (!), but then middle school and high school really made you question things. Or maybe your bubble didn't burst even through high school, but now you see that your world was small. Back then, wasn't it easier to think of yourself as having above average powers? But now, the real world is hitting you, and you feel insecure. So you start off wanting to find the cure to cancer, and now, you want to find the cure to...bad breath. What's the *meaning* of your life? You're looking for *meaning*. But what is it?

What's kind of troubling is that we adults don't seem to have the answers you thought we might. For years now, our parents have been able to say that your dream of meaning is really reducible to a dream of being better than other people. I remember my parents saying, 'You can do better than those white kids.' I thought, 'Uh, gee, maybe; I don't know; some of them are pretty smart...' So then the dream gets whittled down to a dream of security. Especially for Asian Americans, we hear, 'Be a doctor, a lawyer, a business person, because all you can really do in life is work hard and have a nice secure job, to support a nice, secure family.' In a recent article in the San Jose Mercury News, students and teachers joked about the 'Asian grade scale': A = Average; B = Bad; C = Catastrophe; D = Disowned; F = Forever Forgotten.² It's funny, but you do wonder what lies beneath? Why do 30% of Asian girls from 5th to 12th grade show symptoms of depression?³ Why do Asian Pacific Islanders commit suicide at high rates? API young women ages 15 – 24 years old more often than any other group;⁴ API men and women both aged 25 – 34 years old have the highest proportion among other ethnic groups of suicide as a cause of death: 16.8 percent.⁵ I've wondered why it is that of the 7 years that I've been involved in campus ministry, I've known of two suicides who have both been Korean American students, one at MIT and one at Wellesley. Both students had very complicated relationships with their parents. So I've wondered about parental pressure as I'm sure some of you have, too. Is that just the cost of trying to live in the model minority myth?

And not just that, but I've also wondered whether the dream of meaning really is reducible to a dream of security? Is it true that if you feel secure you feel meaningful? The global economic crisis has meant that people who worked very hard climbing the corporate ladder are now staring at the wall. Some of the highest trained and highest paid business people are out of work, wondering not only how they're going to pay the bills, but also the deeper question: What did it all *mean*? Back then, we called it predatory lending to exploit black people in the inner city. But we renamed it 'adjustable rate mortgages' and 'subprime loans' and mainstreamed it so people could sink further into debt. Or we took direct marketing to children and gave people longer lines of credit so they can sink further into debt. What does it all *mean*? If our achievements were based on a legalized form of trickery and extortion, did we accomplish anything with real meaning, of lasting meaning, of eternal meaning? And somehow all this is related to the rising cost of *everything*, like...health and education and...world peace, where everyone is wondering, 'What kind of world is this? What about the global food shortage, the global energy crisis, the environmental crisis, the massive budget deficits, the wars and the violence, the coming water crisis? Is the world actually going to be worth living in 20 or 30 years from now? Where on earth are we going? And what are *you* going to be doing in it?' Will you want to bring children into *this world*, just to provide *yourself* with some meaning? You see, our parents lived in an age where they could avoid those questions, but we cannot. The world has changed. Whether or not you can have ever security, I don't know. But I do know that striving for security is not same as pursuing the dream of meaning. Either you are going to inflict this world onto your children without any real sense of meaning or way to make sense of it, or you will live with meaning and bless your children, if you have them, with a sense of meaning.

So what is meaningful? When you do PULSE, or when you watch a superhero movie and see the great battle of good versus evil played out, or sometimes even when you make someone else smile because you're serving them, because you're making a difference in their lives, so you know you're doing something meaningful.

Illus: One way that I've felt this is to trace through a thread or a theme in my life. And it's a thread of failures. When I was 23, I moved into East Palo Alto, CA, a city that once had the highest per capital murder rate out of any city in the country. I was part of forming a team of people that lived in apartment complexes reaching out to Mexican immigrant families and engaging with parents, kids, youth, youth involved in gangs, and so on. It went well for a while. We saw differences in the lives of youth. But then the city evicted everyone, shut down the apartment complex, tore it down, and built an IKEA there. And was the meaning of all I had done? Then, I came out here to Boston and joined a startup company. My friend who founded it, an African-American guy, and I had

² Sharon Noguchi, "High grades, high stress for Asian-American students in Bay Area", San Jose Mercury News, January 4, 2009 at http://www.mercurynews.com/education/ci_11357452

³ The Commonwealth Fund Survey of the Health of Adolescent Girls. The Commonwealth Fund, 1998, cited by <http://www.naapimha.org/issues/index.html>

⁴ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center of Health Statistics. cited by <http://www.naapimha.org/issues/index.html>

⁵ Eliza Noh, assistant professor of Asian-American studies at California State University-Fullerton, interviewed by Sharon Noguchi, "High grades, high stress for Asian-American students" in Bay Area, San Jose Mercury News, January 4, 2009 at http://www.mercurynews.com/education/ci_11357452.

visions of bringing employment to the inner city. We had one contract. But then in 2000 – 01, the dot com meltdown happened. We wound up owing some money, folding the business and putting it on the shelf. What was the meaning of that? Now, my wife and I along with our two kids live in a high crime, low income neighborhood of Boston, a mostly black neighborhood. We own a three story house. We and our housemates reach out to our neighborhood and do some community organizing. A few years ago, we took in a young man who lived right next door who wanted to turn his life around. He had barely graduated from high school. He wanted a fresh start as he enrolled in Roxbury Community College. He had one good semester, but despite how much we tried to encourage him and help him along, he fell into some old habits. He got involved in a very serious crime, and went to jail. It left me wondering, ‘I know it was still meaningful, but how?’

So I know a bit of what you feel. You have these glimpses of the dream of meaning. It’s like a brief flash of light in the dark where you walk by the visual imprint it leaves in your eyes. That image stays for a while on the back of your eyelids. But the imprint fades and after a while you’re trying to find your way around in the dark again. Part of it is because you go back to ‘life as usual.’ You’re not really sure you can make a difference. You’re not sure whether life can be meaningful if you put your heart into it. If you call yourself a Christian, part of the issue is that you’re half-hearted and you never try the really *meaningful* stuff; you don’t live the way Jesus lived, because you’re afraid to, even though you know that loving Jesus *means* so much more than just listening to some preacher’s words and just getting your praise on every now and then. So you wonder whether the Christian life is meaningful but you’re the one holding back. Or, if you live in some other story where human life is just a cosmic accident, then you have a different problem. No matter what you say, in that story, people are just not that meaningful. And you can’t make sense of why you feel inside yourself that we should be meaningful, when the larger story you live in tells you that we have no meaning and that you have no meaning. The atheist story kills the dream of meaning. But deep down, the dream refuses to die. You believe that you *can* be meaningful, and that you *should*. We all do. You see, you can’t kill the dream of meaning. It just refuses to die.

The Dream of a Just World

The third dream that refuses to die is the dream of just world. You don’t need to take philosophy classes or have a precise definition of human rights to dream this dream. My two kids, who are 8 and 6 years old, know when something is unfair. If John gets dessert but Zoe doesn’t, Zoe cries, ‘No fair!!!’ You don’t have to tell people that justice is better than injustice. We want a world that is fair.

So it bugs you on some level, doesn’t it? What is that level? Some of you know it’s unfair when a guy and a girl start dating, and one is bad for the other. You know what I mean? It is just sad, and sometimes you get mad. Some of you know that it’s unfair when people who are dumber than you – and less ethical – make more money than you, right?!? How is that just? For some of you, you know it’s unjust that rich kids get into BC because their parents went here, and donate money to the school? Legacy admissions. Some of you know it’s unjust that your parents have suffered through so many things. So many. Perhaps they’ve been victims of racism in the States, but it’s something they keep suffering through. You’re reminded of their sacrifices by the lines etched in their face, and the dream of a more just world has to do with things that they’ve faced. Some of you know it’s unjust that children are born into severe poverty when many of us are not. It’s unjust that children are born to parents or a parent who didn’t want them, or weren’t ready. You know it’s unfair. Perhaps you are that child in some way, and you’re upset that other people don’t care, and that reflects on the fact that the world is unfair. The dream of a more just world keeps poking into your mind. And that dream, too, refuses to die.

Illus: Over Christmas, we got a Christmas letter from a married couple who are friends of ours. In their letter, they quote from Dr. Paul Farmer, the well known doctor who started health clinics in Haiti because poverty in Haiti is the worst in the Western hemisphere. He helped start the organization Partners in Health to draw more attention to the health care needs of the world’s poorest people. Some of you know, for instance, that 90% of the world’s health budget goes to treating the wealthiest 10% of the world’s population. Paul Farmer thinks that is unfair, and he has dedicated his life to changing that. It is an impossible task. This quote read, ‘I have fought the long defeat and brought other people on to fight the long defeat, and I’m not going to stop because we keep losing. Now I actually think sometimes we may win. I don’t dislike victory... You know, people from our background... we’re used to being on a victory team, and actually what we’re really trying to do... is to make common cause with the losers. Those are two very different things. We want to be on the winning team, but at the risk of turning our backs on the losers, no, it’s not worth it. So you fight the long defeat.’

Now, some of us become calloused and hardened to the world. We say, 'Well, that's just how it is. Life is unfair.' But even that statement reveals something, some deep awareness that it shouldn't be this way, that we should not be apathetic. No one says, 'Actually, the world is fine as it is.' No one says that. Why? Because you know that disadvantaged kid could have been you. You could have been born into some other family, maybe to a mom addicted to crack, or whatever. You see, your very language reveals that you know something. The dream of a more just world just refuses to die.

Why Do We Dream?

These are dreams that refuse to die: the dream of love, the dream of meaning, the dream of a just world. They are the dreams that help make us who we are. Do you feel them? At some point, as we're doing now, we will each need to step back and ask, 'Where do those dreams come from? Where do they come from?' Are they just wishful thinking, pie in the sky, youthful idealism, the projection of some longing you have? There are many ways of trying to explain the presence of these dreams. Reductionist evolutionists, like Richard Dawkins, would say that it's just a part of our evolution, something that helps us cope with the nightmares of the real world. So in that story, the dreams are not part of anything real. In fact, because human beings are just one big cosmic accident, on some level, who really cares about these dreams? If we're just a weird blip in the universe, then let's just eat, drink, and be merry for tomorrow we die. The only point of exploring these dreams would be if we want to be entertained. We could go down that path and others. The Eastern traditions tend to say that those desires just need to be forgotten and not felt. Forget where the heck they come from, just don't dream the dreams.

But there is another tradition that takes these dreams very seriously: the biblical tradition. In the biblical tradition, these dreams are planted there by a good and wise Creator God who designed us. And this God did not design us capriciously or to haunt us or to torture us with these longings. Many of the ancients believed that. The Chinese, the Greeks, the Persians, and the Romans at different periods of history fell into despair and fatalism because they couldn't make sense of the dreams they had – in fact, what many modern people do because they can't make sense of the very same dreams they dream today – but the Jews knew where those dreams came from. The Jewish people told a different story. It made them unusual, if not exceptional, in the world. Their view was that this God had designed humanity as good, and endowed with the capacity for love and meaning and justice. And those things would come from a living connection with the God who loved us and desired meaning for us and justice through us to make the world more beautiful and more ordered as a reflection of His goodness and wisdom. And although something went horribly wrong in a human decision, this very unusual and exceptional God remained committed to humanity and the outworking of His original plan. And so the dreams lived on.

For those of you who were raised in Asian churches or just Asian culture in general, I hope you are struck by the fact that God always wanted to lead and guide us from within, through these deep dreams that He placed in our heart. Many of us have absorbed this view of ourselves that we are entirely bad, and that all our desires are always wrong. Therefore God must be barking tough orders, and our job is just to follow the rules, because the rules are clearer guides to life than our dreams. That is not the case. Granted, some of our desires are misleading because we are broken people. But that leads to a false view of God. God is not someone who wants to just give us orders and guide us from outside of us. He is someone who wants to be present at the level of our deepest desires, so he can guide us from inside of us. Psalm 32:9 says 'Do not be as the horse or as the mule which have no understanding, whose trappings include bit and bridle to hold them in check.' God wants us to internalize Him. We can get to the point where His deepest dreams for us become once again our deepest dreams for ourselves. All the great spiritual directors especially Ignatius of Loyola, the founder of the Jesuits, talk about this. My hope for you is that as you connect with these dreams, you'll experience God in a whole new way.

Of course there were problems and there are problems. People were and are mostly self-centered and not loving, or couldn't and can't find a way to live meaningfully, or couldn't make their world a better place even on those rare moments when they tried. But they still knew those dreams were in them. But, the Jews themselves realized that they also could also be unloving, and live in a chaotic way without meaning, and oppress each other with injustice. So while they were the dream-bearers, they noticed as much as anyone would have in their position, that they were as much part of the problem as much as they were part of the solution. From Moses, to the prophet Jeremiah, in some sense through Sigmund Freud, to the modern author William Golding, author of the book *The Lord of the Flies*, that is the deeply Jewish insight to human nature. Humanity needs to be healed and made new. So they hung on to those dreams as the undying hopes of the human heart, planted there by good God who would one day make those dreams a reality.

Well in the biblical Christian tradition, which of course I stand in, that very unusual God has acted by sending Jesus of Nazareth to transform humanity into people like himself, so that those dreams would start to become reality in the here and now. And I do think that Jesus – the guy, the Jewish carpenter from Nazareth – accomplished something unique through his life, death, and resurrection that would transform humanity back to the way we were always meant to be, so human beings could live in the dreams that we were always meant to live in. We will explore that tomorrow. But for now, I want to leave you pondering your dreams and reconnecting with them. What best explains those very deep dreams? Are they just random ideas floating around the chemical soup of your brain, because we are random chemicals wrapped in skin? Or are they pointers, hints, and evidence of a good and wise God who has made us, who still loves us, and who still calls us to share in the dreams He has for us?