

You Have a Dream

It was Martin Luther King Day recently, and while my fellow president was watching Beyonce and James Taylor, I was talking and listening to our members in the newly established Albany, NY liaison area. Rev. King famously said "I have a dream." You have a dream, too. I am no oneiromantic (though I am clearly overeducated) but I believe you are living the dream.

When you were young, you dreamed of working in the professional theater, of becoming a professional actor or stage manager. You have realized that dream. Perhaps your life may not seem so dreamy right now; your theater work almost certainly doesn't pay all your bills, and it may be a very small part of the mosaic of your life. But you have achieved the distinction of being one of the tiny percentage of wannabe actors and stage managers to receive an Equity card.

I was profoundly moved by the actors I heard in Albany who admitted that they would probably be able to do more work if they were non-Equity, but they were still glad and proud to be Equity. I was equally moved, while doing a reading with one of them, by the tale of two actor friends who are raising a family in New Jersey. Despite their relative success (they have each been on Broadway,) they are currently sinking into debt as they struggle to piece together a mosaic that will pay their bills.

We are the dreamers of dreams. In my acceptance speech for our Tony Award last June (in which your overeducated president managed to misquote both Shakespeare and Yeats in the space of thirty seconds,) I spoke of the centrality of dreams to our artistic lives. I love the quote I read recently of August Wilson, speaking to a young theater director who was thinking of leaving the business in order to make some money: "Your mom doesn't need you to buy her a house. She needs you to do the dreams she planted in you."

This is a maddeningly tough business, one whose default setting is "No." In that same famous speech, Rev. King spoke of having been to "the mountaintop." If there is a mountaintop in the American theater, it is Broadway, and I am lucky enough to have been there many times. Yet despite my unbelievable good fortune, I occasionally find myself in a seeming Slough of Despond, resentful and griping about the roles I didn't get and the yet-more fortunate actors above me on our industry's peak.

When that happens, I remind myself of just how far up the mountain I am, and I remember to be grateful. You too, simply by having your Equity card, are on the upper slopes. Heck, just being an educated American gives you a leg up on the vast majority of people on this planet. So look down and say a little prayer of thanks. Then look up and keep climbing. You have a dream.