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 Arlington Street Church
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Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast

“Sometimes, I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast,” said Wonderland’s White Queen, having just told Alice that she’s “one hundred and one, five months, and a day.”

“I can’t believe that!’ said Alice.

“‘Can’t you?’ the Queen said in a pitying tone. ‘Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.’

“Alice laughed. ‘There’s no use trying,’ she said: ‘one can’t believe impossible things.’

“‘I daresay you haven’t had much practice,’ said the Queen. ‘When I was your age, I always did it for half-an-hour a day. Why, sometimes I’ve believed as many as six impossible things before breakfast.’”¹

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Are we limiting ourselves by what we believe to be true? What if a belief is only a thought we’ve had over and over again? And what if it’s no longer true ... if it ever was?² How do we engage unimagined possibilities?

Consider the Queen’s directive for engaging the possible: “Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.” Shut your eyes, and open that door you’ve slammed on possibility. Suspend your disbelief.

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If you never read Norton Juster’s *The Phantom Tollbooth*, I commend it to you now:

¹ Lewis Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, Chapter V, “Wool and Water”

² Questions inspired by Polly Noble, “Six Impossible Things Before Breakfast,” 3/2/12, at mindbodygreen.com/0-4155/6-Impossible-Things-Before-Breakfast.html

“‘That’s why,’ said Azaz, ‘there was one very important thing about your quest that we couldn’t discuss until you returned.’

“‘I remember,’ said Milo eagerly. ‘Tell me now.’

“‘It was impossible,’ said the king, looking at the MatheMagician.

“‘Completely impossible,’ said the MatheMagician, looking at the king....

“‘Yes, indeed,’ they repeated together; ‘but if we’d told you then, you might not have gone – and, as you’ve discovered, so many things are possible just as long as you don’t know they’re impossible.’”³

We know that’s true. Before 1954, no one believed that a human being could run a mile in less than four minutes. And then Roger Bannister *just did it*: 3 minutes, 59.4 seconds. And almost immediately, lots of other athletes ran sub-fours. Once the impossible became possible, breaking the four-minute barrier became the standard of all professional middle distance runners. Over the next 50 years, the mile record was lowered by almost 17 seconds.⁴

“... So many things are possible just as long as you don’t know they’re impossible.”⁵ Think Sir Isaac Newton. We know of his laws of motion and gravity; he also believed things no one had ever imagined. Light, he said, is composed of all the colors; and sound travels at a measurable speed. He was certain that precious metals “[possess]⁶ a sort of life.” Who would believe that? Someone who never accepts impossibility at face value.

“‘Impossible’ just adds two letters to the word ‘possible.’ [We] could just as easily take them off again.”⁷ How about flying to the moon, heart transplants, the Internet? I’m thinking, why stop at six impossible things before breakfast? Why not seven? “‘Impossibility,” said Walt Disney, “is only the figment of an insufficient imagination.”

³ Norton Justor, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Chapter 19

⁴ Please see en.wikipedia.org/wiki/four-minute_mile

⁵ Norton Justor, *The Phantom Tollbooth*, Chapter 19

⁶ originally “possessed a sort of life.”

⁷ source unknown

This is a true story from my colleague, Robert Fulghum, who turned 80 this week.⁸

“We say the young have much to learn, but I find they know and do things unfamiliar to me, so I am pleased to learn from them when I can. Example: Two young college men asked me for a ride, because they were late to work. Their summer construction job was near my office, so I was glad to oblige. On the way, I asked, ‘Besides working hard and playing hard, what’s happening in your lives?’

“They exchanged glances. Then one said, ‘We’re eating a chair.’

“*What?*”

“Yes. It seems that their [philosophy professor] gave them an extra-credit assignment: Do something unique and memorable – not dangerous or foolish, but something imaginative, inventive, and instructive. Write it up, and explain what was learned and how it might apply to their philosophy of life.

“So. They are eating a chair.

“They bought a plain wooden kitchen chair at an unfinished furniture store. Using a wood rasp, they have been shaving away at the chair, mixing the dust into their granola for breakfast, and sprinkling the dust on their salads at dinner. So far, they have consumed most of a leg, two rungs, and a back piece. And while they don’t want to overdo it, the pace is picking up. Still, the project may not be finished before summer’s end, so they may enlist friends, who, it seems, are enthusiastically willing to help eat a chair.

“And yes, they consulted a physician to make sure the wood dust was not harmful. And no, it doesn’t taste bad – especially if they mix in a little cinnamon at breakfast and a little lemon pepper at dinner. And yes, they have learned a few things along the way.

“‘Like what?’ I asked.

⁸ 6/4/37

“Like how amazing long-term goals can be achieved in incremental stages. Like how something seemingly idiotic affects your thinking about other things you do. For example, they routinely run about fifteen miles a week to stay in shape – around and around a lake. They wondered where fifteen miles a week would take them if they ran in a straight line. So they got a road map and have been marking off the mileage, headed south [from Seattle]. They could be in Portland, Oregon, in a couple of weeks. But that’s boring, so they have a European map now and are starting out in Vienna, headed for Athens. Using guidebooks, they’re figuring out what there is to see and do along the way. They’re touring the world in their minds.

“And, of course, they’re very pleased with themselves. They’re sure they’ll astound their professor when he asks for their report. ‘We ate a chair.’

“‘It will blow the dude away,’ said one.

“For all the goofiness of the project,” concludes Robert Fulghum, “these young men are learning patience and perseverance. Some things cannot be had except on a little-at-a-time, keep-the-long-goal-in-mind, stay-focused basis. Love and friendship are like that. Marriage and parenthood, too. And peace and justice and social change. As wonderfully silly as it seems, eating a chair may lead my young college friends to wisdom and nobler aspirations.

“In their foolishness lies the seed of What-Might-Be, little by little.”⁹

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Beloved spiritual companions,

“Impossibility is only the figment of an insufficient imagination.”

Let’s listen to the White Queen:

Try again: draw a long breath, and shut your eyes.

Let’s listen to the king and the MatheMagician:

So many things are possible

just as long as you don’t know they’re impossible.

⁹ Robert Fulghum, Chapter 9, “The Chair Men,” in *What on Earth Have I Done?* pp. 29-31

Six impossible things before breakfast
... or why not seven?
Who's in?