“To sleep, perchance to dream –
Ay there’s the rub.”
William Shakespeare Hamlet (III, I, 65–68)

Hamlet wasn’t in good shape when he spoke those words. He was contemplating suicide (to sleep) but thought perhaps he might dream in these dire circumstances.

Nurses don’t spend much time dreaming, at work anyway. Now I am not talking about dreaming as a trance or a daydream. Sometimes that happens in the midst of it all. It can be hard to stay focussed 24/7. Then there is the giant, Carl Jung, with his interpretation of dreams and symbols. His complicated and fascinatingly layered world of dreams is still not where I am going either. Nor am I going to the place where dreams are a flight of fancy or a castle in the air. Pipe dreams are not what I am talking about.

I am dreaming of nurses taking the time and risk of wishing for a different world in which nursing takes pride of place. To dream dreams where their hopes, wishes, ambitions, goals and desires for a different kind of world of nursing take hold. In the grinding reality of physical work, earning a living and working in crushing bureaucracies nurses too often let go of their dreams and aspirations for a different way of being a nurse. Sure, nurses can really murder a dream, especially when someone fresh and new comes into a set situation. It is a nursing sport to watch a “dreamer” slowly have it wrung out of them. To face the ‘reality’ and the harsh daily grind. There is to be no Martin Luther King for nurses. Having a dream is for others.

Not so. I really could not exist in a world without aspirational dreams where my nursing world was shaped by the status quo and I allowed that to dictate the future. If that logic prevails then nothing will change. Tomorrow will be a succession of todays: repeating in an infinite and immensely tedious soul-crushing cycle.

In the last few weeks I have been very privileged to work with groups of highly qualified, intelligent and articulate nurses. From one end of the country to the other, nurse educators were encouraged to dream. Not only to dream, but to dream big. It was a wonderful and humbling experience. One by one eyes sparkled as the dreams took hold and in some cases the toyi-toying began.

Of course, dreaming is only the first wonderful moment. That is, if you mean to make it happen. I have spent a lifetime dreaming and the poem below by schoolgirl, Glenda Watkins, has always meant so much to me since I first read it in an anthology in the 1970s.

“I want to climb white Everest
Sail a boat round the world single handed.
I want to speak six languages.
Write a book.
Swim the English Channel.
Ride in a balloon.
Paint a recognisable portrait.
Fly a biplane.
I want to experience love at first sight
and cross Africa on a bicycle.
But most of all I want to reach middle age
without having to say too often those wistful, ageing words.
“I could have done,
I might have been.”

Of course, Glenda and I were mere babes back then in the 70’s. Ok, not the modern “babe” with all the sexual connotations! I mean really young, hopeful and dreaming. Three decades later I am certainly deep into middle age and probably Glenda is too. I wonder how she is doing on her list of dreams. I have spent a professional lifetime trying not to say: “I could have done, I might have been.”

Sometimes it works and sometimes it doesn’t. However, the greatest gift of all is to pass the dreaming on and work on the ones that you have. It’s never too late.

Dr Vicki Pinkney-Atkinson, RN, RM, Dip N Ed, PhD
Professional Nurse Dreamer