

Pitching dreams: Prosperity thinking

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [April 17, 2007](#) issue

When I was nine years old I dreamed of being Bobby Feller. I forget about that dream for long stretches, but then something comes back to remind me of it. Recently it was a profile of Feller by Tyler Kepner in the March 7 *New York Times*. I learned that at age 88 Feller suits up every day. He is often called a hero because of his World War II service, but he responds to this term by saying, “Heroes don’t come home; survivors come home.” In prewar 1938 he made the cover of both *Life* and *Time*.

As a boy, many a summer morning I’d (mentally) suit up as Bobby, and for a couple of hours I’d pitch a rubber baseball at a chalked strike zone on the steps of my house. (Though the big *Ds* of my childhood—Drought, Depression, Dust Bowl—were ending, investments in chalk and a rubber baseball were still luxuries.)

I pitched and dreamed. Later I retired from baseball, having attained entry to the Hall of Shame by being passed up during “choose up sides” for right field as a freshman in high school. What good did that baseball dream do? For one, it is a bracing alternative to the dream talk that afflicts us now. When Oscar-winning star Jennifer Hudson visited her old high school in Chicago, for example, Centralia Gilmore, age 39, cheered the singer at a rally. “She shows that anything is possible. If you dream and you hope, you can do anything” (*Chicago Tribune*, March 7). Ms. Hudson set her Oscar before the students and said, “If you can see it, you can achieve it.” Then she sang a dream song from *Dream Girls*.

I don’t want to speak ill of the singer-actress or of the high schoolers. I do think there’s something to setting goals and dreaming, or better yet, hoping. More power to them. However, one also welcomes the dose of realism supplied by the sophomore boy who said, “She’s really not that famous, but we got out of class.”

In a third item in the day’s papers, Neil Steinberg counsels us not to waste \$1 in seeking a \$370 million Mega Millions jackpot—odds against winning are one in 176 million. “Too many people spend too much money and too much time chasing a dream that will forever elude them. The lottery is a stupid tax” (*Chicago Sun-Times*,

March 7). Don't throw the dollar away, he advises. Instead, imagine getting \$370 million. "You still have the dream, the results are exactly the same, and you're up a buck."

My choice of topic is prompted by Peter Birkenhead's devastating critique of Rhonda Byrne's book *The Secret*, which might as well have been named *The Swindle*. Birkenhead criticizes Oprah for plugging this book, which argues that "people need only visualize what they want in order to get it." In the age of AIDS Byrne dared to write, "You cannot 'catch' anything unless you think you can." And this: "The only reason any person does not have enough money is because they are blocking money from coming to them with their thoughts."

Byrne goes on: "Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, Moses and Jesus were not only prosperity teachers, but also millionaires. . . ." The patriarchs millionaires? Maybe. Moses and Jesus? Hardly.

As for Oprah, Birkenhead writes: "The most powerful woman in the world is taking advantage of people who are desperate for meaning, by passionately championing a product that mocks the very idea of a meaningful life."

I am sure I dreamed of being Bobby Feller more intensely than Byrne or Oprah dreamed of anything. This spring, by the way, he will autograph anything for a \$5 donation to his Van Meter, Iowa, baseball museum. A dream fulfilled.