

The Gift of Vision
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There are so many ways to approach this theme. I would start by noting that our literal vision may be the most exquisite of our five senses. On the other hand, hearing is the sense most critical to our social connection, and life without Bach or Beethoven (among others) would certainly diminish our understanding of, and appreciation for, being human.

As I prepared this talk, I have deliberately chosen words that refer to vision just to underscore how central sight is to the way we relate to the world around us. When I hear Louis Armstrong's slow, prayerful tune (What a Wonderful World), it evokes an instant meditative reflection on the preciousness of life and the infinite beauty of the world. For our prelude, we seldom stray from instrumental music (words get in the way sometimes), but I was not able to find another piece of music that conveyed such reverence and joy about the rich experience of being alive. Since I was a little girl, I have loved seeing the world through this piece of Louis Armstrong's music.

Much of the hard work of being human comes from our need to continually rediscover that each of us brings a unique perspective to our world. The strength of any community has to do with the fact that we do have these differences, and we bring those differences with us when we gather. Sharing our perspectives and appreciating the differences enriches each of us—we see more of life and its possibilities. We find inspiring role models who are conducting life in ways we never might have thought about. At other times we need a shared vision if we are to move in the same direction.

The “vision thing” (as George H. W. Bush referred to it) is a metonym—a shorthand figure of speech that clearly conveys an important idea or principle that helps shape and drive opinion and action. What I want to do is review some of the many positive things that have gone on under this single roof, and consider where our vision lies today. Let me list a few of the “visionaries” that live or have lived among us. They are especially clear cases of how a unique vision or skillset has contributed to the group, and to our shared spiritual community.

Sally's artistic flair enriched us with banners, signs and altar arrangements, to name just a few contributions. Michelle's discerning eye guided us to choices in colors of paint and window shades, among other things. These two artists have allowed us to see and experience things that we otherwise would have done without. Mary and Kris have created fabric art that brings us pleasure each week.

Ronn Smith, on the other hand, was motivated by a different kind of vision. He envisioned a liberal spiritual community that would provide an example to his children as they approached their teens. He wanted them to see what it was like to be free of dogma, to think for themselves on the big questions in life. To realize his vision required that he reach out to other like-minded people and invite them into his home. The Smith's generosity of spirit and hospitality enriched us all, and met a real need for an alternative kind of worship in Sheridan. Once their children were grown, the Smiths continued to participate over the years, recognizing the contributions they could make to the group.

Chuck Graves was another visionary, perhaps a classic example. He served on the Board for many years as Chair of Long Range Planning, back when that meant planning for a building. I'm sure it was Chuck who proposed that we have such a Committee, too. During those early years of Long Range Planning, being in a Board meeting with Chuck was like having a mosquito zipped inside your tent at night. He was relentless, always returning the discussion to raising money. We were not a wealthy group, and I hoped the topic would go away. When it was clear he wasn't going to relent, I finally changed my mind: let's pony up some money and get this guy off our backs. Checks were written. End of story? Not for Chuck. Things were finally getting started. Now it was time to lay down the gauntlet. Board members would raise \$20,000 and challenge the congregation to match it. What??? Somehow, dutifully, the Board scraped together \$20,000 and presented the challenge to the membership. When the congregational deadline arrived, it looked like we weren't going to make the goal. It occurred to me that this crazy obsession of Chuck's was about to die a natural death. On the final weekend, a member came forward with a substantial boost to the total. He had just acquired an inheritance check that he donated to the cause. What a completely generous act. We were on our way.

Chuck taught us that a visionary must also have a plan—a step-by-step progression to get from where we were to where he thought we should be. It must have been something like: start with a small goal; as soon as it is achieved, move to the next step, increasing the goal and the pressure.

From Chuck I learned that a visionary has to have practical knowledge and experience in the real world—he knew how to get things done. Chuck was an attorney; he helped us with the paperwork to set up the fellowship as a 501c3 (charitable) entity, and wrote the Bylaws.

Chuck was a kind and pleasant person, but was not a people pleaser—being a visionary is not a popularity contest. He had reasoned through his opinions and was firm in his own convictions. As an example, Chuck took on the case of the Black 14, representing the members of the UW football team who were sacked in the middle of a winning season in 1969. Their “crime” was wanting to wear black armbands in protest of BYU team members racial slurs in a previous

game, and to protest the fact that (at the time) the Church of Latter Day Saints did not allow black members into their organization. Chuck was an attorney practicing at the time in Cheyenne, and the cause of the Black 14 was not a popular one. Their successful defense became the hallmark of Chuck's many years of practicing law.

This unflappable, principled man had decided that Sheridan UUs would have a building. He was forever organizing field trips to some plot of land or building that was for sale. Eventually we had raised enough money to buy a lot on Lincoln Drive, off of East 5th Street. We showed it to Nancy Bowen, at that time our Mountain Desert District Executive, whose response was, "It's too small." Boom, we'd run headlong into the visual field of another visionary and realist. And so it went. A few years passed, we consulted with an architect to work with the lot. Although some very appealing ideas were generated, the cost of a new building seemed completely out of reach, and the dreaming or visioning lay fallow. Then one day as Chuck passed by this property on the way to his home in Eastern Hills, he saw a "for sale" sign. He brought it to the attention of the group and set up an appointment for some of us to come take a look. The building was unappealing, with many issues of deferred maintenance. My heart leapt for joy, and the vision reignited in my head. We might just be able to afford this dump.

Over the years of fundraising and different efforts to find the right spot, we spent many hours in Annual Meetings and Special Meetings hearing each other out, exploring ideas and objections, taking votes on this or that. Visions aren't much good if they can't be transmitted and shared. We talked and planned and worried, and the vision took root in the minds of many members of the group.

Ultimately, we reached near unanimous consensus to buy this property, and those who had long been opposed stepped up and threw in their support. We asked for more money from the group to make the down payment, and members came forward. One person of very modest means sent in a check with a note, "Here's a thousand dollars. I may never have this much to donate again, but I can give it to you now." It was so gratifying, and humbling.

Next we had to share the vision with the UUA folks in Boston in order to apply for some seed money. They talked the talk of five- and ten-year plans, projected growth, staffing patterns, environmental assessments, etc. It took lot of work (writing, graphs, tables, pulling out numbers from our modest habits of record keeping) to bridge the gap between their East Coast expectations and our small town vision on its very modest scale.

Next was a phase of grunt work. You may recall we had a number of competing visions when it came to painting the outside of the building. How do you prepare these exterior walls to receive a new coat of paint? Different parts of

the walls received different preparations, a spontaneous in-vivo experiment. We learned anew the importance of a shared vision when it came to this real-world task, and we struggled mightily because we had no shared plan, or vision, and no designated leader, but somehow the walls all turned out to be the same color and the paint stayed on. I would advise any couple planning to marry to share a bucket of paint and go find a shabby house that needs a facelift. By the time they have finished, they will have learned a lot about each other. They will know a few things about how the other sees the world, and completes a task. They may end up gazing into each other's eyes, or seeing red, but they'll know a lot about what the other's vision looks like.

For the congregation, there followed a lot of interior work on this fellowship hall. After that, do you suppose Chuck rested on his laurels? No, he had an idea: why not get Peter Morales, President of the UUA, to come to dedicate the building? He attended the celebration of a new building for big congregations, why not for this small building of this small congregation in this out-of-the-way place? Of course, Chuck had led a life of service, and was well known within the Mountain Desert District, where Peter had been a minister. So Chuck invited, and Peter Morales came, and spoke, and it was quite a thrill. We took pictures with our backs to the east, where the most beautiful white clouds towered above us. Phil saw fit to plant a tree on that wonderful spring evening.

The next year we voted to do a major gutting and remodeling of the kitchen and bathroom area. The old kitchen was kind of a maze of walls and turns and poorly organized space. Only the mice seemed comfortable in it. It took Phil Gilmore's engineering eye to come up with a plan that turned that dark, slightly creepy area into the arrangement we have today. Phil's eye, plus more fund raising, a Mountain Desert District Chalice Lighter's Grant, a construction crew, and finally, many volunteer hours of painting. Chuck was on a step stool painting the ceiling mere weeks before his passing. Within this project were countless conversations in which a vision of what the kitchen space could be, was turned into a real space.

And so on, and on. One generous member saw the need for dishes. "How many sets of durable, lightweight china do we need? Sixty? Consider it done." The same person heard a cancer patient concerned about the volatile organic compounds a new carpet gives off. She paid the upcharge to obtain carpeting that was low-VOC. We learned again that a vision shared was more effective than a unilateral action, which often was at cross purposes with another's intention. The second intention, which was probably just as good, was different. In other words, when the vision was not communicated and processed, we got in each other's way. This has happened now and again, but we have become pretty considerate about backing away, starting again, and working toward consensus, or a shared perspective. When you share an important vision, it is easier to assume your coworker is well-meaning.

Think about the wealth of visionaries we have here: teachers, musicians, handyman and women, seamstresses, speakers, engineers, artists, community leaders, gardeners, and landscapers. Is it any wonder that the co-chairs of the building and grounds keeping committee both have military experience? When they come on a site, their natural impulse is to create order and eliminate hazards. They see things some of the rest of us may not notice, and they work toward solutions.

In the life of this fellowship (from my perspective) “the vision thing” has been key to achieving as many goals as we’ve accomplished. Without Chuck’s experience and drive, I don’t think we’d be sitting in this building this morning, but it took other kinds of visionaries before and after to keep us moving together. From my years in the fellowship, I have encountered so many good people with an “eye” for constructive causes and thoughtful service. I get a glimpse of what is possible, how generous people are, what I might become if I continually made excellent choices about how to conduct myself. At times we fall short of our best, but this is the place we can come back to try again, and to be inspired again. The visions we have shared together have given us opportunities to know each other in particular ways. Circumstances have demanded things from us. We have been challenged to mature, to deepen, to strive, to go the extra mile, dig a little deeper, back up, withdraw, shift gears, start again.

The greatest power of a vision is that it can be contagious. I’ve seen it jump from mind to mind, and heart to heart. That is what gives this congregation a sort of “stickiness” in the best possible sense. We keep coming back, we have needs that can be met together, we are better together than we are separate, we move each other forward

Unitarian Universalist minister, Roy Phillips, wrote, “Here is one vision of a possible world. It is a world

- 1 in which people sense their own worth deep down and enjoy being alive in a reality they experience with awe;
- 2 in which people feel the worth of others;
- 3 in which people take advantage of opportunities to develop and to express their gifts and values; and
- 4 in which people see their lives as arenas in which to live out those gifts and values—alone and with others— for the glory of self-expression and the enrichment of the world.”

Phillips concluded, “The mission of a local congregation must be to help bring such a possible world into being.”

In the past several years we have ramped up programming, although that vision was shared by a subgroup rather than the whole congregation. In addition to our shared beliefs, it is a shared vision that binds a group together, and makes it vibrant. I wonder, as some of us step away from the Board and make space for new ideas and young energy, if there is a new vision that will engage our collective imagination and spark our enthusiasm. I believe one could be found, and nurtured. In turn, we ourselves would be nurtured by our work together. May we continue to support and challenge each other to make it so.