

The Vision Thing
Sermon by Rev. Amanda L. Aikman
Northlake Unitarian Universalist Church
March 11, 2007

READINGS

Definition of “the vision thing”: a political view encompassing the longer term as distinct from short-term campaign objectives. The expression comes from the response of the first President George HW Bush, who in 1987 responded to the suggestion that he turn his attention from short-term campaign objectives and look to the longer term by saying, ‘Oh, the vision thing’.

18Where there is no vision, the people perish: but he that keepeth the law, happy is he. –
Proverbs 29

SERMON

Now if you are here for the first time today, I want to apologize to you because this is one of those rare times when we’re going to be talking about not a universal topic, but something that relates specifically to this congregation. I actually hope that although you might not get all the references, you will nonetheless think about the relevance of vision in your own life, and also I very much hope you will stay present with this because as a newcomer, your input is especially valuable to us. If you do find this sermon totally useless and irrelevant, well, I do apologize, and hope you’ll come back and try us again.

So. When I was in seminary at Starr King, as impoverished students we were always looking for cheap entertainment. A couple of times we found some old plays about religious topics, and did them as reader’s theater. I wish I still had a copy of this one obscure play we found, by A. A. Milne of Winnie-the-Pooh fame, a family drama about Noah’s Ark. It was a pretty weird little play, dealing with Noah’s family as if they were sort of 1920’s upper-middle-class English people, which was a bit of a stretch. It was called, as I recall, “Before the Flood,” and the first scene is the family sitting around chatting over breakfast, kippers probably, and then the patriarch, Noah, enters – he has just woken up. “How did you sleep, darling?” asks Mrs. Noah, and he replies, in a haunted voice – “I had a strange dream...” and the whole family goes “oh no, not another one.” They seem to sense that dad’s dream is going to mean they have to get to work with hammers and nails on some big boat-building project. Yuck.

Hearing that your minister is going to talk about vision, you may be mentally groaning just like Noah’s family did in the play. “Oh no, not again.”

But! Guess what! I’ve never really talked about this to you before. Two reasons. One, I noticed that when mission and vision workshops were offered here in the recent past, the attendance was low, or they had to be canceled. That might be because people are sick of mission and vision processes from work or other volunteer organizations – and I totally get that. You do all this work and the finished product gets hung up on the wall in nice calligraphy and everyone ignores it. I’m totally with you there. What’s the point? What relevance does it have to the way we do

our daily congregational life together? Or the reason that a vision and mission workshop hasn't happened might be because everyone is perfectly happy with the way things are – no new mission or vision statement is necessary. That's excellent, if that's true.

The other reason I've never preached about vision is simple. I'm kinda slow. Sometimes it takes a long time for a vision to emerge. I've been here for four years, asking Northlakers, "what do you think this church should be?" and everyone has a piece of an answer, you know, someone wants the church to grow, someone else wants the church to stay the same size, someone wants more of this or less of that, but nobody ever seems clear about what they want the church to grow for, or stay the same *for*. No big, inclusive vision has emerged – even when last year, you went through the process of deciding to take the huge step of acquiring the Green's chapel, which is sitting up there in the parking lot waiting to become part of your church campus. And you know, in a way I'm just fine with that, if you are just happy the way things are. It makes my job easy, really. Just maintain the status quo.

* * *

According to the UUA's Congregational Handbook, Vision is "A carefully defined picture of where the congregation wants to be in five or more years. It is the dream of what the congregation can become."

I used to be very reluctant to set goals and have a vision for my life, because I had had a lot of disappointments. Then something totally life-changing happened about six years ago. I was talking to my best friend, Retts, on the phone – grousing about how some job I'd applied for at the University had not come through yet and I was all anxious and discouraged. And Retts, who has known me since we were in college, said, "Amanda – you always get everything you want." I said, "I do?" And she said, "Yep, every time you really wanted something and focused on it, you got it. Maybe not on your schedule, but eventually it always comes to you." And I realized she was right. Now I make a regular practice of focusing on my heart's desire, on a clear vision of something I want to come into my life, and letting myself really want that – and eventually, it comes, in some form or another. Usually not on my schedule, but it does come. Some people call this prayer, and some call it the power of intention – regardless, I believe that if this congregation truly creates a clear vision for what it wants to be, and if you permit yourselves to want it deeply, it will eventually come to be. Do you believe that?

"A carefully defined picture of where the congregation wants to be in five or more years. It is the dream of what the congregation can become."

The dream of what the congregation can become. Well, at the risk of sounding like Noah, I received a vision about Northlake a few weeks ago. I wasn't looking for it. It burst in upon me, in full color and with sound effects and smell-o-vision. And I got so excited, I want to tell you all about it. And I want to hear from you, too, which is what those little yellow pieces of paper in your order of service are for – there'll be a time to share your piece of vision with everybody.

Now I'm feeling a little nervous – what if I tell you about my vision and you all sit there politely, thinking – oh, I don't know, thinking about what you're going to have for lunch, or that this isn't really very interesting to you? So maybe – yes, why don't you go ahead now and think about your vision – your dream of what this congregation can become. The desire of your heart. I

invite you to become still, and quiet, sink into the music that David will be playing for about five minutes, and let yourself dream about the future of this church. What is a piece of your dream for Northlake, in five years? And then write down some aspect of that, one sentence or phrase, in your very very best handwriting, and after the music is over, we'll collect those and Linda will read them aloud. What I'm hoping for is a sort of patchwork quilt of what your collective vision is for Northlake, and my goal is very simply to encourage you to start thinking and talking about this. Maybe enough energy will be generated that you'll actually have a successful vision-mission workshop sometime within the not too distant future.

* * *

So, here we go, I'm going to be brave and tell you about my vision. So. A few weeks ago, I was in the "Making Art from the Heart" class that Susie Wind was teaching, downstairs. Let's see, who was in the class? -- there were about 8 of us -- mostly newer folks, several people who are parents of young children -- and also one or two older members. And something magical happened in the middle of the class. People were so excited about what we were doing -- connections were being made -- someone said, let's start an ongoing art group, and we got all excited about that -- and people's talents and ideas were flying back and forth -- I found myself doing some very imaginative artwork that I never ever thought I could do -- creativity was being liberated, big time. . [tell about and show the pictures we did collaboratively; pass them around]

When I got home that night, I couldn't get to sleep for ages
A vision was trying to break in. And all of a sudden, I saw it -- it was as if this vision was like a culmination of everything I've seen and observed and heard here at Northlake for four years, and it seemed both absolutely obvious and wildly exciting at the same time. Okay, so here it is -- my vision for Northlake -- and it's not really *my* vision at all -- it's my perception of what I think Northlake wants to become, what Northlake is being called to become --

A congregation centered in and oriented to the arts.

Isn't that great!?

Okay. So -- imagine this, with me. I'm going to paint my picture for you, and then we'll hear what you all wrote.

To be centered in the arts, first of all, you need space. Now I know that the chapel will be a whole lot of additional space for religious education classrooms, but I really don't know what the usage plans are for that space -- will it be primarily for the congregation, or for renters and income? My fear, frankly, is that if there is no clear vision for what that space is to be used for, it will be eaten up by renters. Forgive me if there is a clear plan that I have not paid enough attention to; at Reverberations time, you can clarify this for us.

Not really knowing what that chapel space is destined for, I'll focus on my vision for *this* church building. A first step would be to clean up this building and make it an aesthetically pleasing home for activities of all kinds.

A second step would be to incrementally reclaim this building from all the renters. Most importantly, to be able to bid a fond farewell to the Apostolic Assembly, which meets here on

Sunday afternoon and Wednesday evening.

Why is that crucial? They are very, very good renters. This church receives an income from them of about \$7,000 a year.

But because they come in and start their own worship service at I think it's 2 p.m., you can't have any Sunday afternoon activities. That means that your congregation comes to church, and then scurries out. There's a coffee hour, and people try to make some contacts then, but it's not enough. When you can't stay around on Sunday and participate in after-church activities, eventually, the church building becomes just another thing you drop in to, or visit, like the mall, instead of a holy place that you own a part of, and care about. Have you taken a good look around at this building? Have you been in every room of this building? It looks battered and neglected and over-used and junky and littered. Not cherished and cared for and welcoming.

Imagine what it would be like if, instead of scurrying out after church, you could stay for a couple of hours. You could have a potluck once a month. Or every single week, why not!? – a potluck lunch, followed by an adult education class, or a presentation or a forum on a topic of current interest, or an all-ages art project or redecorating project. You could show a movie and have a discussion. You could do art together, bring in a teacher and make pictures to hang on the walls. Invite the community in for special conversations on race or religion or politics. Have a worship service in the late afternoon geared especially to young adults, a worship service centered around the arts, Soulful Sundown.

Have you ever tried to have a committee meeting or other activity here on a Wednesday night, when the Apostolics are having their worship service in the sanctuary? They have really really loud worship services, that's what these drums are here for. It's really hard to have anything else going on in this building when they're singing and rejoicing and stomping around up here.

Lifespan religious education – the amazing ministry to families that Shannon Gordon is leading – imagine tapping that energy, the creativity of our children and youth, the energy of the families with young children, and having truly intergenerational social and learning events, with folks of all ages playing and creating and doing social justice projects together. People of different generations truly making friends with each other. People celebrating life together, and showing their appreciation of one another.

I've noticed that you as a congregation don't express your appreciation very much. I don't recall ever seeing a ceremony in which you honor your volunteers or Board members. And you could do a lot better at showing appreciation to your staff, who serve this congregation with a lot of love. I think I received about three or four Christmas cards from members of the church. And it's my birthday this Wednesday, but I'm not at all sure folks have remembered it. This is nothing personal, I know, and I don't take it personally. But how a congregation appreciates and celebrates its volunteers and staff and ministers is a real indication of where its heart is. Perhaps the relationship with your staff is kept on a shallow level because your relationship with the church as a whole is not very deep. And perhaps that's because a vital, meaningful vision and mission have not been articulated and brought forth and cultivated and loved and lived with.

More of my vision: extending your ministry to include young adults, people 18 to 35 years old, having special arts-oriented worship services for them, at times that they want to go to worship –

and believe me, it's not 10:30 on Sunday morning.

Adult religious education classes are the number one best way for adults to connect, make friends, get to know each other, and deepen one's faith. Would everyone on the adult religious education committee please raise your hands? Oh, that's right, there isn't such a committee.

There is not one room in this whole church that's decorated nicely and has enough flexible seating for a good adult religious education class of about 20 people. Not one! There is a room that would be ideal, and that's the room downstairs that's occupied by another renter, the Audubon Society. It would be such a great adult classroom! To have our arts series, I had to carry lamps from my office, and rearrange furniture in Adams Hall, every single time, and it still wasn't adequate – badly lit, hard to make hot water for tea, and, quite frankly, dirty. And the chairs are really uncomfortable. Imagine being able to reclaim the room that the Audubon Society rents. It could be two classrooms for kids on Sunday, and a wonderful classroom and meeting room for adults on weeknights. The whole building is used by so many renters that often on Sunday mornings, Shannon Gordon spends about two hours just straightening up the classrooms downstairs and making them welcoming for your children. Is that how you want your DRE to spend her time?

Imagine, folks, imagine, this building being used just for Northlake's activities, six nights a week, and all day and evening on Sunday. Enriching, meaningful activities and programs that carry our liberal religious good news into the community, and that bring people in from all over the community. Imagine this building clean, and safe, and welcoming, and comfortable, every room smelling of fresh paint, and no litter on the grounds outside.

I want to tell you a sad story. This was about three years ago. I was at a clergy meeting and I was chatting with a retired UU minister who used to serve a big east side church. He asked what I was up to, and I said I was consulting minister at Olympic UU in Sequim, and also for the past year, at Northlake. Do you know what this kindly older minister said to me? He tilted his head a little to one side, and said, as one might say of a sick relative, "oh...how *is* Northlake?" I said, "It's just great, what a wonderful congregation, you should come by and see it sometime." That's the kind of reputation this church has had in our District – it infuriates me. "How *is* Northlake?" My vision is that in five, or maybe two years from now, if you were to encounter the same question, you could proudly say, "Northlake? Why, it's busy creating joy and justice within its walls and in the larger community through a focus on the arts." Even better, imagine running into an old acquaintance, and they ask you what you're up to, and you say you go to Northlake UU Church, and they say, "oh, I've heard of that. Isn't that the church with the amazing arts ministry?"

Imagine having famous guest artists come in and give workshops and classes here at Northlake. Imagine creating beautiful collaborative works of art that would become part of the aesthetic surroundings of this building. Imagine a monthly coffeehouse in this beautiful sanctuary, inviting in well-known musicians from all over the Puget Sound to jam and entertain. Imagine these walls covered with quilts and paintings produced right here at Northlake, perhaps on sale to benefit your social justice projects. Imagine a movement choir, bringing people of all ages together to worship through dance. Imagine sing-alongs, hootenannies, folk-dancing evenings, dances of universal peace, storytelling evenings. Imagine Taize services, with readings from world scripture and chanting. Imagine beautiful photographic displays that tell the history of this

church and its people. Imagine writing classes, writers putting out collections of work to benefit the homeless in our community. Imagine meditation groups and spiritual support groups wanting to meet here at Northlake because of the beautiful, inspiring surroundings. Imagine plays being put on in this sanctuary, and concerts, with professional lighting and sound, events that people would gladly pay to see. Wouldn't that be *fun*?!?! Wouldn't that just fill you up with joy and delight and color and music?

That's my vision. What's your vision?

I asked folks to send me emails about their vision for Northlake, so I could incorporate them into this sermon. Two people responded, so I'll read these, and then Linda will read what you all have written this morning.

Dear Amanda,

>>Thanks for asking. I associate the word vision with growth, but I believe
>>the quality of growth is probably more important than the numbers: having a diverse membership is so rich and enriching... One
>>question is what kinds of people are we not attracting that we ought to,
>>and how do we do that? Working for social change attracts people who have been affected by injustice. Having a great choir attracts people who love music. Working on the chapel project attracts people who love to build. RE, the Seamsters, worship, all of our activities attract certain kinds of
>>people.
>>
>>Here's a challenge: a fundamentalist megachurch less than a mile from my >>home has a Mechanics Ministry. I kid you not. One Saturday each month, >>skilled Christian mechanics work on cars for competitive rates, and they >>offer free or reduced rates for car service for people with low-incomes. I >>don't like this group and would not want to give them money, but it's a >>fact that almost every family on the eastside owns a car, and it's probably >>good outreach.

So what kinds of people do we need to make us more diverse and more
>>interesting, and what can we do to attract them?

* * *

Dear Amanda,

I have been on a personal quest to find a more spiritually fulfilling life. One of the (myriad of) things that has turned me off of Christianity is that, at least in my experience, most Christians are only Christian on Sunday. It's not something that seems to truly be a part of who they are. I love the fact that you are encouraging a growth of creative endeavors at Northlake, as that is such a fun way to incorporate spiritual practice into daily living. As much as I would like to be involved with the Social Justice committee more, I am not currently in a place in my personal life where I can expend time, energy, and money on someone else. There is such a need for that, and I think Unitarians are better than a lot of others in responding to that need, but it's not something I can do at present. I want something more personal and more meaningful to me and my family. I want a solid foundation where I can grow into the ability to help others.

I think Northlake has so many good people coming here, who want to see positive things happen in our local, national, and world communities. We could be so much more effective if we had a larger presence. That takes publicity. See how much happened with a couple press releases re: the chapel? If we had more going on here that was newsworthy, we could send PR announcements to the local media. The more Northlake's name is heard, the more the public will remember us and want to experience what we are about.

So, my vision for Northlake is for it to become a nurturing and supportive community that takes a responsible approach to growth in order to better serve the public community, both in terms of assistance we provide and by visibility in our area. Ideally, I would like Northlake to be a place where the "old" members and the "new" members merge into one big happy church family, with an understanding of our collective history but the security with each other to let go of the past and continue moving forward.

(sharing)

* * *

Whatever form it may take, my prayer for this congregation is that you will not dismiss the idea of visioning as "the vision thing," but hold it in the most sacred trust – realizing that it is the very life's blood of a community to have a powerful shared vision; that it is a matter of bringing out your core values and holding a common vision for your purpose as a congregation -- a common vision that accurately shows your aspirations and your values, and that gives life -- both to people within your congregation and to the community at large. A vision that ultimately makes the world a better place. I believe that with the help of the Spirit of Life that dwells within and among us, you *can* conceive such a vision, and birth it into reality.

Blessed be. Amen.

(Reverberations)