

Creating a Life Vision  
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Channing Memorial Church  
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There are certain songs in our hymnal that I would like members of this church to be able to sing by heart. I am glad that “Come Sing a Song with Me” and “Spirit of Life” are two Channing favorites. However, in reviewing the hymnal, I noticed a few of my personal favorites remain unfamiliar. As you might have guessed, “I’m On My Way” is one of them.

“I’m On My Way” is an African American folk hymn. Like many folk songs that emerged in the mid-eighteenth to mid-nineteenth centuries, the lyrics helped runaway slaves along the Underground Railroad. Slaves often had their own churches although they were closely monitored. During Sunday worship secret messages about meetings and escapes were passed along. Many spirituals were “map songs” containing coded directions to safety zones on the route to freedom. It is believed that “I’m On My Way” was an announcement of an escape and an invitation to join, veiled in religious language.

Why is this song in our hymnal? “I’m On My Way” is a part of our liberal religious tradition—proclaiming the march toward freedom, justice, and equality that is such an important part of our faith movement. Slavery was abolished thanks in part to the vision and prophetic voices of some of our Unitarian and Universalist ancestors, including, William Ellery Channing, Theodore Parker, Lydia Maria Child, William Lloyd Garrison and other progressive leaders.

In order to move beyond the structures and powers that enslave, vision is needed. Slavery was an ingrained part of American society that contributed to the economy and many believed was part of the natural order. The pressure from merchants and plantation owners to maintain the institution of slavery was tremendous. It took men and women of vision and courage to speak to the inherent worth and dignity of the slaves. As you know, slavery was one of the most contentious issues leading to the bloody American Civil War.

When this congregation was founded in 1835, slavery was still a part of American life. When this beautiful sanctuary was dedicated in 1880, Congress had passed the 13<sup>th</sup> Amendment, abolishing slavery, only fifteen years earlier. Julia Ward Howe, whose plaque marks the first pew, was part of that struggle, writing another song that inspired the march toward freedom, “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”

Why do I want you to be able to pour your heart and soul into “I’m On My Way to the Freedom Land”? I am not preaching to you about salvation in a time to come. Thankfully, none of us are slaves looking for a covert means to escape captivity.

Last year, this congregation engaged in a process called “The Year of Decision.” During the 2006 Board Retreat, one church leader commented that it felt as if the

congregation was stuck in a rotary, going round and round, not sure which on-ramp to take. What we discovered last year through study, questionnaires, and focus discussions, is a growing consensus, a shared vision about the kind of faith community members want and need. Instead of trying to stay here or going back to a smaller size, “We’re On Our Way and we won’t turn back!”

The yearlong process culminated in the creation and approval of our Vision Statement that was included in your order of service. Now, I understand that Vision Statements are very trendy these days. Last year, several church members pulled me aside rolling their eyes saying they had recently written a Vision Statement at work. The power point presentations and flip-charts reminded them of a recent professional conference.

Another member remembered writing a Vision Statement for this church several decades ago. “What ever happened to that one?” she asked. I pulled a framed document from a shelf in the Parish Hall, wiping off layers of dust. “Do you mean this one?” I asked. She confirmed that the statement so carefully printed in calligraphy were the words she vaguely remembered. What is going to keep our new Vision Statement from literally being put on the shelf and collecting dust?

Our Vision Statement is more than a marketing tool or a business plan it is the statement of our shared commitment and goals as a faith community. In capturing our aspirations for our church, we articulated our shared values and our vision of what it means to live a good life.

Our Vision Statement begins, “Believing the true expression of religion is the way we live our lives.” Our vision for our faith community is not separate from our lives. Our vision for the church speaks to our vision for our lives.

So, I want you to take a moment now to consider what the Freedom Land means. I am not talking about Easy Street. The Freedom Land is different from the Playboy Mansion or MTV cribs or lifestyles of the rich and famous. The Freedom Land is the vision of a just, fair, equitable world where actions and values are in alignment.

When Betsy Leerssen’s father died, she found “The Creed of the Happy Life” among his belongings. She shared these words from Unitarian minister Charles Dole with her adult children and she shared them with me. I was touched by the message. I was also touched by the source. For any of you who had the honor of knowing Arnold Shaw, you know that he was always a true gentleman and that service was an important part of his life. Likewise, Betsy herself grew up in the church, becoming the President of the Youth Group and later President of this congregation. Her son, Chris Yalanis has now followed in her footsteps becoming Vice President of the Governing Board and his wife, Mohini is one of the Religious Education teachers we dedicated this morning.

What strikes me about this family and so many other leaders in this congregation is the dedication and steadfast support of the ministry of the church. That is why the

second line of our Vision statement is key: “We, the members and friends of Channing Memorial Church, commit to use our diverse gifts in shared ministry.”

Ministry is using our gifts to bring about the Freedom Land or the Kingdom of God, as our Christian brothers and sisters would call it. Some of us have gifts as educators, others in the area of finance, among us are actors, storytellers, musicians, singers, writers, graphic designers, architects, gardeners, artists, computer programmers, therapists, nurses, military officers, scientists, conflict mediators, woodworkers, parents, cooks, and tour guides, to name only a few. Whatever your gift, whatever makes your heart sing, can help us reach the Freedom Land.

This is different from your skills there are lots of things that we are good at doing. For example, I once served as Treasurer of a student theatre group. I can balance a check book and write financial reports efficiently. However, this is not my gift. My time and the organization was much better served when I was acting and directing.

As Frederick Buechner wrote,

Vocation is the place  
Where our deep gladness  
And the world’s deep hunger meet.

As a church, we are on our way to a more gift-based approach to ministry. Instead of plunking people into positions to fill slots, the Nominating Committee has been trying to develop future leaders and have the roles fit the talents and interests of the members.

However, in keeping with our Vision Statement, each one of us also needs to ask ourselves what we can do to “make the good grow” and take action accordingly.

So, what if you are not sure what makes your heart sing? What if the challenges and responsibilities of your life make it difficult to even remember a time of “deep gladness” let alone a way to find “where your deep gladness and the world’s deep hunger meet”? I encourage you to join a small group.

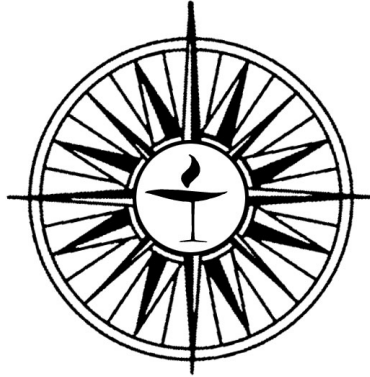
Following today’s service, my husband, Peter Freedman Bowden will lead a session called “Getting to Know UU”. This is modeled on our small group ministry program and is an opportunity for you to get to know in a deeper way other members of this community. Small groups meet every other week to discuss spiritual and philosophical issues. It is a good way for you to become more intentional in your own life vision by offering a time and place for you to reflect on meaningful questions and listen to the perspectives of others. This program is called Small Group Ministry because the circle of people offer support to one another and take on a service project together.

Listen once more to the Creed of a Happy Life (adapted):

This rule constitutes life: to do all we can, at all times and for all, and as long as life lasts. The more completely we give ourselves up to [service], the more are we satisfied- Rest and refreshment and open visions lie this way. We draw on the

inexhaustible fountains; we live as sons and daughters of [sacred Creation]; we share in [universal consciousness], we share in the work of [Love], we share in the [Spirit of Life] which guides the world.

Instead of accumulating more and more for ourselves, our faith calls on us to minister to the needs of others. When each one of us is committed to “creating a wellspring of caring and compassion” and bringing about “positive change within our community and the world” remarkable things can happen. Our vision is not only for this church but for our lives. Lives made meaningful in service to the common good.



## **Our Vision Statement**

Believing that the true expression of our religion is the way we live our lives –

We, the members and friends of Channing Memorial Church,  
commit to use our diverse gifts in shared ministry as a catalyst for:

Creating a wellspring of caring and compassion  
within a vital and inspirational community of all ages  
that values individuals throughout their lives,

Spiritual growth and intellectual exchange,

The honest & responsible use of the democratic process,

Stewardship of our historic sacred spaces,

Peace, justice, and respect for all people and our planet,

Positive change within our community and the world.