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## **Vision quest**



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### **Platform Address**

In traditional Jewish, Christian, and Moslem worship, the sermon is based on a text from sacred scripture. In our Ethical platforms, there are many texts which we may, from time to time, include in our own definition of sacred scripture. I'd like to begin this morning with a lengthy reading from the American Indian tradition, from a musician named High Eagle:

"In life, many thoughts are born in the course of a moment, an hour, a day. Some are dreams, some visions. Often, we are unable to distinguish between them. To some, they are the same; however, not all dreams are visions. Much energy is lost in fanciful dreams that never bear fruit. But visions are messages from the Great Spirit, each for a different purpose in life. Consequently, one person's vision may not be that of another. To have a vision, one must be prepared to receive it, and when it comes, to accept it. Thus when these inner urges become reality, only then can visions be fulfilled. The spiritual side of life knows everyone's heart and who to trust. How could a vision ever be given to someone to harbor if that person could not be trusted to carry it out. The message is simple: commitment precedes vision."

When I first discovered this quote, I had just completed one of the most incredible years of my life. I had finished my last year of theological school, had just completed an intensive six months of internship during the Gulf War. I had been ordained into the Unitarian Universalist ministry and had been called to serve at both the Ethical Society of Chicago and the Berrien County, Michigan, Unitarian Universalist Fellowship, each halftime. I had spent a very intense week over the summer as a member of the staff at the MidWest Leadership school — in a curriculum from which our own AEU Summer School's curriculum is derived. During that week, I mentored and taught leadership skills. I learned at least as much about leadership as I taught. Most importantly, we were successful in building an intentional community for that week. I

learned a lot about myself — I learned an immense amount about the theory and practice of building community.

The image of the Vision Quest struck me as fitting very well my own experiences of the year. It was not so much that I changed as a person, but that my experiences had led me to a changed perspective, a vision, of what a community might be, and what my role in building such a community could be. I also found that the image of the Vision Quest matched closely my vision of the way we, in an Ethical Society, can go about learning and seeking.

Let me take you with me as I share what I learned of the Vision Quest.

The Vision Quest is a practice of many North American Indian — or Native American — communities. (As an aside, I'll note that I use both terms — colleagues and friends and teachers I've had from that culture have used one or the other term, Indian, Native American. I would like to respect the wishes of those in the culture to be named with the name they choose. I find it difficult to do that, when different subgroups in the culture have conflicting preferences. So, I may be inconsistent in whether I use Indian or Native American — I will use both, out of respect and friendship for people I have known who ask for each of the names.)

The Vision Quest is older than written records, so we do not know exactly how old it is. But the Vision Quest is similar to practices of those peoples of Asia to whom the Native Americans are most closely related. This would suggest the practice goes back, in some form, before the time before the great migration of Asians to the Americas, perhaps some fourteen thousand years ago.

The Vision Quest is practiced in many forms, adapting to geography, climate and environment. The forms I will draw from today are mostly from the Plains Indians of North America.

The Vision Quest was often a coming-of-age process during adolescence, but it was also practiced by adults, whenever they felt a need. We each can "come-of-age" at several different ages. Finding the vision for each age as we mature is a gift and an honor.

What is the vision that the Vision Quest brings?

The idea of visions — seeing things that aren't really there — may turn off many people in this modern, secular, scientific world. That may be the reaction of some of you to the concept of the Vision Quest. Yet, while part of the Vision is literally to see visions, these are not really the center. The message that the visions bring — the vision itself, rather than the visions — is the focus of the Vision Quest.

Instead of the kind of visions that are illusions, think of the kind of visions that show us a direction for our lives to take. We all *wish*, sometimes, maybe even often, that we could change. When we *wish* we could change, though, we are unlikely to change. A wish is a way that we tell ourselves and others that we are not satisfied with how we are now, what our role is, or what our life is like. But a wish is a weak way to express dissatisfaction.

A dream is more concrete than a wish. A dream is more fully developed — more details, more nuances. We all have dreams for our lives. But a dream does not become a vision unless we test it, unless we truly commit ourselves to it. A dream must become a *vision* before we can make it real. Thus, a vision is stronger than a wish or a dream.

Another important quality of visions: Visions are not all the same. We are not all searching for the same vision. Visions are not creeds or religious dogma, where we must all adjust to the same perspective as others have defined it for us. Each of us must search for our own vision. Out of our many different visions, though, comes a harmony. Like music, there is an added richness with harmony that comes through the differences.

When I was in my teen years, I had a sudden insight that the primary dilemma of religion — of ethics — of life — is this: how to balance individuality and community. In some ways, most of the platform talks I give are related to that topic, which I still believe is the most central question of our lives. How can we move appropriately between being a strong-minded, self-motivated, active individual, and also be caring, responsible, and service-minded in our relationships with others? How can we harmonize our individualism and our communitarianism?

That Vision Question year helped me become very clear that it is possible to harmonize the two. In fact, I have come to believe that individualism and communitarianism must harmonize, must reinforce each other, for each to be experienced in its richness. The harmony between individual and community is not always simple — but it is necessary.

Many Native American traditions talk of the four or five worlds that existed before this world. Each has been destroyed when people destroyed the harmony. So the Vision Quest is about finding a way to live as oneself, in community. In harmony, in balance.

A Vision Quest has three simple steps. The first and last are the ones that are often forgotten, and they are just as important as the middle one.

First, the questor prepares for the quest. Second, the questor goes to the wilderness for the vision. And, finally, the questor returns to the community and lives out the vision. Three steps. All crucial.

The preparation step is the first one. In the original Vision Quest, part of the preparation is a cleansing and fasting ceremony. The person who is going on a Vision Quest clears both body and mind for the experience that will come. The questor seeks simplicity.

But beyond this immediate preparation for a vision quest is a more profound and more difficult preparation. An Indian teacher I learned much from regularly scoffed at what he called "instant Indians" — folks who expect that they can pay some huge sum of money, experience some ceremony, and they will be changed. After a few years of preparing, perhaps, he said, people are ready for the ceremonies.

Yet our modern culture prefers instant enlightenment. When we fail to find instant results, we too often turn away quickly, going instead in search of a different enlightenment. The Vision Quest requires more commitment than that. The first commitment is to preparation — not just for a few days, not just on the surface. This more substantial preparation is the necessary first ingredient of a Vision Quest.

Many people find that they have an experience much like a Vision Quest when they are on a retreat. For a retreat, we go away from home, away from the familiar. We strip ourselves of our ordinary responsibilities that will remind us of the selves we usually are. This is part of the preparation for a Vision.

In order to be open to any deep educational or spiritual or personal transformation experience you must give yourself to it. You must rid yourself, however temporarily, of the extraneous, of the unnecessary.

And so the Vision Quest takes place in the wilderness. For the Indian of the Plains, it was often far from the village. On the Plains, for your quest you would dig a deep pit and stay in that pit for the period of four days and four nights.

The Vision Quest typically takes place outdoors, removing the sense of limits, barriers, confinement — at least those limits created by human beings. The Vision Quest takes you into the untamed, the undomesticated. Into Nature at its most real.

On the Plains, the Vision Quest would usually take place during thunderstorm season. This ensured that the questor would face the natural elements in all their terror as well as all their beauty.

Away from the familiar, we are without the ways we've learned to control our lives to be more secure. In this environment, our experience of time changes, and our experience of space changes. The only time that matters is the immediate. The only place is here, at that moment the center of the universe. You are truly centered.

You experience your environment in a new way. The wilderness is no longer the place you pass through on the way from one place to another. It is immediate, real. It responds to your presence, as you respond to its presence. You and the wilderness are not separate, but interact with each other.

And so, out there in the wilderness, the Vision Quest asks that you answer just one question.

What is your name?

Think about that question for a moment. *What* is your name? *What is* your name? What is *your* name? What is your *name*?

It sounds at first like a simple question, one that shouldn't take four days and four nights to answer. Yet the simplicity of the question is its point. The simplest questions are often the most difficult.

Across cultures, one of the most important life tasks is to discover your own true nature. Who am I... really? What is my *true* name? What is my purpose in life? Why am I here? Am I doing what I came to this world to do?

So the Vision Quest seeks to return us to, or to find, or to discover, our true selves. To dis-cover is to uncover — to remove that which is not essential, to understand what is beneath the surface, to find what is really real.

The Vision Quest is, in this sense, a learning through unlearning. Unlearning the expectations of your parents, your peers, unlearning the adolescent attempts to disappear into the crowd, to be just one of the girls, just one of the boys. Out here, in the wilderness, alone .. What is *my* name?

The Vision Quest was practiced most often at the leap from youth to adulthood. The Vision Quest seeks to distinguish expected roles from your true role, the role you are meant to take. It is an affirmation of individuality, of freedom. What if we'd all had the experience of questing for our own unique role at that crucial age?

As I read in the papers about teens and preteens shooting their peers and teachers, I wonder: What do we lose in a culture which does not have a Vision Quest? I know that the Vision Quest model has been used

very successfully with teenagers who've landed in the criminal justice system, especially with those considered difficult to "reform." It's a model that helps them discover their real strengths and weaknesses.

And not only highly troubled adolescents need the opportunity for a Vision Quest. Learning to be oneself, and learning to be responsible at the same time — that's something all adolescents need.

Inspired by my experiences of Vision Quest at that summer institute, I helped organize a curriculum for a youth group that ended with a coming-of-age ceremony. Part of that curriculum included a Vision Quest. Well-adjusted teens — with their share of family and personal problems — yet they too, on spending just four hours in isolation on an island out of sight of each other, learned a lot from considering, What is my name? They came back with new perspectives. Not the full Vision Quest — but an adequate taste of it. The whole curriculum prepared them for that question, and the answers were creative and interesting. The participants came back with new perspective, and came back far more mature than when they'd begun. It was a major leap of growth for most of those involved.

What if there were, in our culture, a ceremony for finding our way again, whenever we realize that our role needs to change? What if we could go questing for a new vision, when we first have children? when the children move out to their own lives? after a divorce, after a death? when we realize we're in the wrong role? when we know we need to change? We all may need to take a Vision Quest, at any time.

One of the important reasons for being out in the wilderness, facing the terrors as well as the beauty of nature, is that we discover our true strengths and our true limitations.

In our culture, there are few safe ways to explore our weaknesses, and to discover that we can still survive, and even transcend, those weaknesses. We need to find our limits in order to truly see ourselves.

Most of us believe, deep down, that our faults and limitations are only there to "fix." I believe this is a great lie. Self-help is too often directed at "fixing" us or "healing" something that is wrong, and rarely to getting a better sense of where our limits are. We cannot all do everything well, and there is always room to improve, room to grow. But often we would do better to acknowledge our areas of weakness and learn to work around them. We waste too much of our lives and our personal energy on trying to fix everything about us. Or paralyzed because we wish we could, we dream we could, and we recognize that we are not capable of fixing it all. That — our inability to fix everything — is perhaps our greatest limit and weakness that we need to face.

When we explore our limits, when we explore those boundaries where we need to grow, we also find and face and acknowledge our strengths. In our culture, we are often deprived of fully exploring the strengths that we have, of discovering new strengths, and of claiming those strengths.

The Yurok Indians put it this way: only fools try to be other than what they potentially are, and only fools fail to take responsibility for their full potential.

These are all a part of the Vision that the Quest seeks to discover.

We cannot predict what our Vision will be. The Indians believe that there is a Vision for everyone — not the same one for each, with different visions for different times in life — but the vision cannot be forced.

Some Indians of the Plains tell of a young man who is convinced as he is growing up that he will become the wisest person of all time. He prepares for his Vision Quest, helped by some of the older ones of the

community, but convinced that he already knows what he will learn. He goes into the wilderness, digs his pit, and darkness falls.

He calls to the spirits to bring him his Vision. But, to his surprise, the spirits do not bring him the expected vision. Instead, they taunt him, and tell him to go home. This is their wilderness, and they do not want him there! He refuses to leave — after all, he is convinced he will have his great Vision — and suddenly he sees a boulder rolling down from the nearby mountain. It rolls towards his pit, and finally, he jumps clear of the pit just before the boulder smashes that very spot.

Three more nights this is repeated. He chants and prays, calling for his vision, but the spirits tell him to go away. Each night he refuses to leave until he gets his expected vision — and each night, a boulder rolls down from the mountain, smashing into the pit that he narrowly escapes.

After his four nights, he goes home, discouraged. He tells the elders that he has failed. "No vision."

"Well," says one of the wise ones, the elders, "you did find out something. You went after your vision like a hunter after buffalo. You were fighting the spirits. You thought they owed you a vision. Suffering alone does not guarantee a vision, and courage and sheer will power alone will not, either. A vision comes as a gift born of humility, of wisdom, and of patience. If from your vision quest, you learn nothing but this, then you have learned much. Think about it."

The vision, then, is more a call than a choice. We need to be open to the call. We need to listen carefully. We need to eliminate distractions. We cannot, however, control or totally predict the result.

This is a lesson for all of us as we learn anything. Learning is not collecting a bunch of facts. Learning is not a memory exercise. Learning is successful only if we are open to unimaginable possibilities. The Vision Quest is a model of education.

A true vision is also *responsive* to the powers that we encounter. Thus a Vision Quest is not like some religions, where a particular vision is defined and prescribed. When Joseph Campbell wrote of the Vision Quest, he titled his work, *Beyond Dogma*. Dogma has no place in the vision quest. Dogma is the attempt to pass on a transformational experience to those who will not have the experience for themselves. Dogma is petrified transformation, just as a petrified tree is not the same as a growing tree.

The Vision Quest seeks to provide an opportunity for the experience for anyone, and teaches that it is there for all. And, unlike dogma, the idea of the Vision Quest assumes that we will each experience the vision differently - and that, if these different visions are true, they will harmonize even in their differences.

Every Vision is individual, every vision is different, special for the person who receives it. But, the Vision is not *for* the individual. The Vision, ultimately, is for the community.

The Vision Quest does not end with the gift of a vision. The third step of the Vision Quest is this: The questor must return and *live out* the vision. Returning is the hardest, and perhaps the most important, step. In the end, we must return to the real world. We must eventually see familiar faces, get involved in life again, and apply our vision.

It is not so much that the questor returns as a changed person, but rather that the questor returns with a new perspective, a new way of looking a life and at the community.

A traditional prayer of the Vision Quest: "Not only for myself do I ask this, but that the people may live, that the people may live."

The Vision is about how you interrelate with the community and with the world around you. It is about how you, as a unique individual, fit into the community, come into harmony with the Universe, while contributing and developing your unique gifts. The Vision is a responsibility you receive, a duty. Your purpose in the world is not separate from your relationship to the world. Purpose and relationship are intertwined. The individual and the community reinforce each other, when they are in harmony.

When we connect with the system we are in — with the community, with the Universe — we make our own energy part of the system. We become interdependent, neither separate nor inconsequential. We need to be part of the whole, and the whole needs us and our Vision.

The individual, in the Vision Quest, proves that she or he can survive as an individual. But this survival is by relating to the powers of the universe, including the human community. Not by separating from them.

Individuality and diversity and difference are honored — yet that which is beyond any individual is also honored. The vision requires a basic ethic and morality.

The Vision is not a wish or a dream. You must do something with it. I think of it like weaving.

You discover the true pattern of your nature, and so you pull those threads which do not contribute to the pattern. You reweave other threads to enhance the pattern. You work at getting rid of those habits that are not in harmony with your nature, you build habits that you need in order to develop your nature fully.

The Vision is of yourself, as the best person you can be — for the benefit of all. So, you must become your vision — you must BE your vision.

To use another metaphor: A Vision Quest is not a straight line, a journey from one place to another. It is not a straight line because you *do* return — to yourself, to home. But the Vision Quest is also not a circle. Although you return, your relationship with the community and the world has changed. You don't return to exactly the same place, because with your new perspective, it is a different place than it was.

It makes sense, then, that in many societies, it was the custom to paint the symbol of the spiral on the body of the vision questor. The sacred spiral — ancient symbol of birth and rebirth — the circle turning, but never coming back to the same place.

At the end of the vision quest, you return, with new vision — and you are expected to share it. A vision is a responsibility, a duty, so that the vision can become part of the community.

Compare these ideas with words spoken in 1908, 80 years ago, by Anna Garlin Spencer, who was a leader in the New York Society for Ethical Culture and the person whose work helped organize the American Ethical Union. I find it fascinating how her words echo, in some accents of her particular time and place, many of the sentiments found in the Vision Quest:

"Every human being can ... become a larger, finer, and fairer specimen of the human race. This is the gospel of religion and this is the gospel of personal ethics.

"To put forth all one's strength," ... to become that better creature one sees in vision — this is to "verify one's credentials" ....

Be and do the best you see and can gain strength to realize, wherever life has placed you and at whatever cost of struggle."

And so I close with these words to consider:

If you go on a Vision Quest — to whatever wilderness you go, for whatever reason you go — you must go with commitment, or the vision will not happen. Commitment precedes vision. It is the very reason for the vision. Wishes can help us express our need for change — dreams can help us to see what kind of change is possible — but visions make change.

Where is the space in your life to seek your vision? Where do you find the wilderness to challenge you to discover your strengths and limits? How do you simplify your life, even briefly, in order to better seek your vision?

Do you know the answer to that question, What is your name? In this world, in this small part of that world, in your family, or even at the Northern Virginia Ethical Society, what is your name? How do you live that name?