

VISION

No vision and you perish;
No Ideal, and you're lost;
Your heart must ever cherish
Some faith at any cost.
Some hope, some dream to cling to,
Some rainbow in the sky,
Some melody to sing to,
Some service that is high.

—HARRIET DU AUTERMONT

VISION

AWAKENING YOUR POTENTIAL TO
CREATE A BETTER WORLD

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TEMPLETON PRESS

Templeton Press
300 Conshohocken State Road, Suite 550
West Conshohocken, PA 19428
www.templetonpress.org

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Typeset and designed by Gopa and Ted2, Inc.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Benson, Peter L.

Vision : awakening your potential to create
a better world / Peter L. Benson.

p. cm.

ISBN-13: 978-1-59947-248-5 (pbk. : alk. paper)

ISBN-10: 1-59947-248-1 (pbk. : alk. paper)

1. Self-actualization (Psychology). 2. Social action.

I. Title.

BF637.S4B464 2009

158—dc22

2008040962

Printed in the United States of America

09 10 11 12 13 14 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

*For James Dittes, Bernard Spilka,
and Merton Strommen—
beacons on the path*



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VISION



Another world is not only possible,
she is on her way. On a quiet day,
I can hear her breathing.

—**ARUNDHATI ROY, INDIAN AUTHOR
AND PEACE ACTIVIST**

1. VISION

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vision: vizh en (n) **1:** the act or power of imagination
2: the act or power of seeing **3:** unusual discernment or foresight **4:** an imaginative conception of the future

.....

THE CAPACITY to generate vision is among life's most beautiful and unheralded gifts. As the definitions above reveal, it is a powerful act—this art of seeing and articulating what's possible. As with other human capabilities, however, too often we fail to recognize this power. And too rarely do we engage in vision-making, much less make a commitment to realizing our vision.

Many of us don't take the time, first of all, to inhabit visionary space, to discern and honor our inner promptings and passions. Regrettably, many of us also believe that vision-making is a province reserved for a select few. Regarding George Bernard Shaw's famous saying, "You see things and you say, 'Why?' But I dream things that never were and say 'Why not?,'" some are apt to assume that the words apply only to him and other renowned dreamers, not to themselves.

Others equate a vision with a goal. Our diverse goals—to lose weight, to sail the Aegean, to earn a certain salary—may involve *envisioning* a desired end, but vision goes far beyond mere goals. Goals, of course, encourage us to improve and enrich our lives. They give us a sense of control, order, and direction. From month to month and from year to year, however, they are likely to change. If you're like me, you may revisit a few of them on New Year's Eve and lament how lit-

the progress you made toward reaching them over the course of the previous year.

VISION: INSPIRED AND INSPIRING

Vision, on the other hand, is of another order entirely. It's inspired and it inspires. That is, we sense that the conception is rooted in something greater than ourselves or our individual concerns, something enduring. It often encompasses a big truth, a higher purpose. It pulls us toward the future.

Vision is a summons. Values come into play when we imagine what can be. Accordingly, the result is also an image of what *should* be. Any vision, at its best, excites people to join hands in advancing the greater good.

Consider one example of vision-at-its-best: the Declaration of Independence, a document that helped to birth a nation grounded in "certain unalienable rights . . . among these . . . life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."



So many of our dreams at first seem impossible,
then they seem improbable, and then,
when we summon the will,
they soon become inevitable.

—CHRISTOPHER REEVE,
AMERICAN ACTOR AND ACTIVIST

And recall the words of the American visionary, Martin Luther King Jr., whose word-pictures in his memorable “I Have a Dream” speech, described what, with shared vision and will, could and should be.

King expressed a dream that descendants of former slaves and former slave owners would be able to sit down together, creating a new community. He shared his vision that his own four little children would one day live in a nation “where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.” And he invoked a biblical vision, adopted as his own:

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain shall be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together.



If I were to wish for anything, I should not wish for wealth and power, but for the passionate sense of the potential, for the eye which, ever young and ardent, sees the possible. Pleasure disappoints, possibility never. And what wine is so sparkling, what so fragrant, what so intoxicating, as possibility!

—SØREN KIERKEGAARD,
DANISH PHILOSOPHER

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Hope is a waking dream.

—ARISTOTLE

It was nearly two hundred years after the framing of the Declaration that King dramatically and poignantly reminded Americans of the most central value in the vision of the nation's founders: "We hold these truths to be self-evident—that all men are created equal." King was still holding fast to the dream, even while it remained for many a promise unfulfilled, as he stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial. He said, "I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the meaning of its creed."

ENCOMPASSING THE "BIG PICTURE"

The thread that extends from the Declaration of Independence to King's 1963 speech, and beyond, is a symbolic one. The enduring existence of these threads, whether they extend from one community to another or from one generation to another, are characteristic of the way vision plays out in history—personal or

public. It is the nature of vision to encompass the “big picture.” Implicit in a vision is the understanding that it may well take a long time to achieve what is imagined, if indeed the vision is ever fully achievable.

The election of Barack Obama as the forty-fourth president represents both vision achieved and vision renewed. On the one hand, we see America rising above race to choose a man based on his merits, on character. When we listen carefully, however, to Obama’s message, as articulated during his acceptance speech at the Democratic National Convention on August 28, 2008, he says that the idea of a just society for all still awaits us. The American promise—of prosperity and opportunity for each and all—is the shared vision that still “binds us together in spite of our differences, that makes us fix our eye not on what is seen, but what is unseen; that better place around the bend.”

FORGING A COMMON PURPOSE

Vision-at-its-best captivates and energizes people. The vision and the en-visioner inspire a collective enterprise. One by one, each “owns” the vision, personally. Together, all join hands in repairing one or another aspect of a broken world.

Thus, two key characteristics of vision are that, first, it is usually long term and “big picture” and, second, realizing it requires many hearts and souls, committed to a shared and common purpose.

RECOGNIZING OUR INTERDEPENDENCE

There is a subtle—and I think critical—idea implicit in the sustained pursuit of an inspired vision that relates to *interdependence*. The framers of the Declaration clearly recognized its importance, that my right to pursue



Give to us clear vision that we may know where to stand and what to stand for—because unless we stand for something, we shall fall for anything.

—**PETER MARSHALL, U.S. SENATE CHAPLAIN**

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The failure to read good books both enfeebles the vision and strengthens our most fatal tendency—the belief that the here and now is all there is.

—**ALLAN BLOOM, AMERICAN PHILOSOPHER**

happiness is inextricably intertwined with yours.

Perhaps the silver lining in the current global environmental crisis is the reiteration or rediscovery of this essential truth: All of life exists as an organic web of connectedness. My carbon footprint impacts your life and your children's, and yours has the same effect on mine. Creation of a carbon-neutral world calls for all hands on deck. If we are to preserve the planet and life as we know it, each of us—not just a few of us—has to find the vision compelling enough to act on it, and to act in concert with the global community.

One Example: My Nonprofit

The nonprofit organization I lead, Search Institute, involves this kind of long-term, “big picture” vision and great interdependence among those who commit to it. We use the tools of social science research, publishing, and training to mobilize and equip

citizens and communities to “grow great kids.”

Creating “a world where all young people are valued and thrive”—the core of our vision statement—may seem like an overwhelming or hopelessly idealistic dream. Just think about the scope of the problems of youth—both domestically and internationally—the complexity of changing public policy, and the massive number of economic, political, and social issues that come into play. Considering all these issues, the challenge of realizing this vision seems daunting, the vision itself almost ridiculously audacious.

It’s our mission statement that provides our rallying cry—to “provide leadership, knowledge and practical resources to promote healthy children, youth and communities.” Here’s the reminder of the concrete steps we take day in and day out to keep the dream alive and to bring it closer to fruition, as hundreds of communities across America

join with us to realize the ultimate vision. We focus on what is immediately before us—making a contribution—and hold fast to the dream.

As we envision the change we seek, we anticipate how that change will play out in the real world. This anticipatory hope inspires continued action. Our mission gives us the impetus to be faithful to the vision and reminds us of how we are making a contribution, along with many others around the world, all of whom are dedicated to growing great kids.

The audacious dream becomes doable as we acknowledge all the other persons and organizations on the planet working toward permutations of this vision in the interest of children's well-being. We are better when they are better. They nurture us, inspire us. We inspire and nurture them. Spiritually speaking, countless interdependent others simultaneously move toward the light of a



We are approaching a new age of synthesis.
Knowledge cannot be merely a degree or a skill . . .
it demands a broader vision, capabilities in critical
thinking and logical deduction without which
we cannot have constructive progress.

—**LI KA-SHING, CHINESE MULTIBILLIONAIRE
ENTREPRENEUR**

.....

Vision is perhaps our greatest strength . . .
it has kept us alive to the power and continuity
of thought through the centuries, it makes
us peer into the future and lends shape
to the unknown.

—**LI KA-SHING**

new day for *all* children and young people everywhere.

VISION-AT-ITS-BEST: GROUNDED IN OUR SEARCH FOR MEANING

Vision-at-its-best calls forth the celebration of interdependence, whether these visions relate to preservation of the natural world, world peace, thriving youth, or innumerable other exhilarating ends, requiring all kinds of cooperation and collaboration.

It is in our nature to see and imagine what can be. Helen Keller wrote: "The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight, but has no vision." Keller makes it clear that we do not have to be visionaries like Thomas Jefferson, John Adams, or Martin Luther King Jr. Her words suggest that each and every one of us can lay claim to a visionary calling.



It is difficult to say what is impossible, for the
dream of yesterday is the hope of today
and the reality of tomorrow.

—**ROBERT H. GODDARD, AMERICAN PHYSICIST
AND ROCKETRY EXPERT**

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I dwell in Possibility—
A fairer House than Prose—

—**EMILY DICKINSON,
AMERICAN POET**

Whether vision rises up out of our own life experiences and dreams or comes to us via another's bold example, which we feel inspired to adopt as our own, it is the spark that links us to what is meaningful about living in this world. Embracing a vision is a corollary to making a contribution. It follows from our innate search for meaning. It is in our nature to imagine what is possible.