

"Living the Vision in My Own Life" by Cynthia J. Dahlin

Seekers Church Sermon, June 25, 2006

Cynthia J. Dahlin

Living the Vision in My Own Life

I want to talk about Living the Vision in my own life. I organized my [N Street Village autobiography and poetry classes](#) to serve women who were lucid, able to share, and capable of forming community. I articulated my call as challenging and helping to develop the inner life of women who were functional, serving the needs articulated in a book that Jeanne Marcus and I bought after she saw a review in the New York Times, called "Random Families". I was addressing the numbing boredom, lack of attention to self-expression, and lack of trusting or caring community the women on the streets have experienced. I had a clear and defined call. I could see the world clearly, and had found a little corner where I could make the world better – Living the Vision.

As time passes, though, the women at N Street are less and less mentally healthy, (Is this because of welfare reform?) Remember how Clinton included 5 years of welfare and then people were supposed to be ready to go to work and support themselves? However, mental health services and halfway houses did not increase to help those for whom this was not a realistic goal. Do we have more people homeless with no access to services except through the shelter system? Over the past two years, I have found myself learning to deal with women who

are capable of giving each other some quiet and listening without criticism, but what they write is not necessarily inside the boundaries of what one would expect.

I think, that just as I have begun to wear reading glasses more over the past year, my eyes do not see as clearly as I thought I did, and God is helping me in a whimsical way, to accept and deal with a more challenging, even more marginalized part of our homeless population. God heard my articulated call, and started to work with it, asking me to be more inclusive, stretch a little more.

For example, we are currently working through the decades of our lives, describing what we were like, and what was important to us, and sharing this with each other. Two weeks ago, we were writing about the teen years, and it was important to hear that some women had good family support systems then, and liked school, while some were already mired in misery and hopelessness. Lynn was one of the last to share, and this is what she wrote:

“The idea of being born on a space station in orbit has come up in the media, leading me to think that my teen years were filled with scientific encounters with other space beings. Since I orbit around the planet, my citizenship is international, and I have established naturalized citizenship (as a teenager) in this country. I studied the history of the American Revolution, the Civil War and the World Wars as a teen. My background may be mixed-up with other locations, but this is my true home, and I moved here as a teen and am next to enjoy the benefits of being able to live for myself. Since certain information is causing my previous work to be revised with this current information which is not impossible, just usually done with a computer and laptop and phone system; yet

a television system is good for remembering my teen years and moving these programs to the present system of shows here. (People here can thereby get on their own, and stop making me support them, but not letting me do so.)

So musical training and personal singing experience is paramount in those early years, not to be confused with similar personalities, who can take their own interpretation of current events and information in their own way. So the television can communicate with them, when I cannot."

Lynn is very articulate, went to college, gentle, and usually polite to everyone. At previous sessions, she has demurred when asked to share a couple of times, and has written that she thinks the government is secretly keeping her from getting a job or finding relatives. However, this is the first time she shared her beliefs in detail, and suddenly all head swiveled to me – all eyes were on me. What should I say? The goal is to build community and allow each woman to see her own value in the community. I said, "It sounds like singing was an important part of your teens. Were you in a choir?" "Oh, yes, I was in the school choir at my high school, and the church choir. I loved being part of the group, and I still find myself humming the songs we sang." She filled in a more conventional story of living in New Jersey, and everyone looked happy and relieved. They could live bed-by-bed with Lynn, knowing that she would not be a danger to them, and I had shown respect to her, not breaking the norms of the group. Other women went on to share stories of not feeling loved, or of feeling that a million doors were still open to them, and the group appreciated each one.

What does this mean to me, when I have found that while I had stated that I was not dealing with the mentally ill women, I am? I think that in this case, God is giving me corrective

lenses, to try to include more marginalized women. I have gotten lazy eyes, and I need to see more need and see my surroundings more clearly. I struggle with inadequacy when the women who suffer from paranoid schizophrenia express distrust and cannot share what they have written as they think I will use it against them, or beg for help in getting them special access to Congress or the Library of Congress to get proof that the world has conspired against them. However, it seems like listening – usually after class, as they do not trust the group is enough for now. I am trying and I will let you know how it turns out.

I want now to tell you a story of where I had blinders on. My oldest daughter, Margaret, wrote her honors thesis at Harvard on the Transgender Day of Remembrance, and the discrimination that transgender people face. She uses the term “erasure” to discuss the kinds of discrimination covered. Erasure can be erasing transgender people from our discussion and consideration, from having rights, such as employment or insurance coverage, or in the extreme form, erasure from existence. The Transgender Day of Remembrance recognizes that around the world there is one murder per week that is a hate crime against a transgender person. I knew that I should be open to discussions about transgender issues, but I knew I had a bias. For example, in Sydney, [I worked with women in the sex industry](#) who were heroin addicted. They had no sense of self, needed to open up, find themselves and then value themselves. When transgender persons came to our shelter, they had a self – they had worked very hard to claim who they were, and were fighting society to do it. However, their strong selves closed down the other women, and we enforced the rule that the transgender sex workers go to the transgender safe house a few blocks away. I do think this was in the interests of the women I served, but their needs conflicted with the transgender sex workers, and I had joined the group who sided with the women.

When I went back to WomenSpace in Sydney this March, I found that they are trying to accommodate the “trannies” as they call them, and also to point out to them that they need to share conversational space, and allow other women to complain without trying to fix their problems – perhaps letting the other women show them the different conversational norms that would allow them to avoid the “fitting in” or “fitting with” problems we had had originally. My WomenSpace colleagues had not forgotten the problem as I had when I left Sydney and it was no longer facing me daily; they had worked with it, and were trying to serve both groups equitably. I had continued with my blinders, not aware that I was wearing them. When Margaret graduated a couple of weeks ago, we went to a Harvard Gay and Lesbian Assoc

iation Dinner where she was honored for her work on campus on Gay and Lesbian and Transgender rights. She had been a student voice in changing the Women’s Studies Department to the Women, Gender and Sexuality Studies Department, reinstating a sexual harassment against students rule which had been eliminated by then President Larry Summers, working on a gender neutral bathroom policy, and serving as the executive director of the campus counseling center for Gay, Lesbian and Transgender Students. I was interested to hear the professor-student panel she was on, to hear about the university politics and issues facing the Department and to meet many of her professors and some of her friends. However, what I was shocked at was the degree of pain many of these people felt about their treatment by Harvard, by their families and by society. If I feel that “Living the Vision” should include watching out for people who are marginalized and finding a way to be with them, I know that I had not done this. This group was so happy to have our family present – they had never had a family there to support a student who was being honored. Everyone was so friendly to us that I felt guilty about it. Margaret wrote in her thesis about the pain of transgender people who cannot get a job, then do not have income, and then are turned away from shelters. I know that I need to address this – I simply have

erased these people from my awareness in the past.

My trip to Sydney also warned me that my lenses might simply get old and need adjusting. HopeStreet, the new name for Baptist Inner City Ministries, where I worked in Sydney, has a new office in the part of town where more gay men and transgender people tend to live. The WomenSpace ministry, where I worked, now has stable funding (unfortunately, partly due to giving up the controversial needle exchange component of its work), and the Gambling Counseling ministry now has a stable income from the Casinos, as the New South Wales government required this, similar to our country's tobacco company settlement. The new Supervising Ministry for HopeStreet asked me if Seekers would consider giving its money to the group as a whole to support new ministries, as well as to Gatherings, the project for performance art by homeless people, which was thought up by Sondra Kalnins, who worked with me for three years at WomenSpace. She talked to me about how they try to have meetings occasionally of all the workers and volunteers and watch for new evidence of hate and discrimination – to identify the new groups of marginalized people. The belief is that some people make it into the mainstream, and new minorities emerge. This insight alone was worth the trip. How comfortable I am with my homeless women in a setting where I know I have the structure to allow me to serve in a way that I feel I can use my gifts at N Street Village. However, I have not tried to think about what other groups are emerging, and how Seekers or I might be called to address them in some way. I think this is a hole in our way of supporting individuals in their call. There might not be a responsibility to require us to work in all areas of discrimination or marginalization of people, but there might be a requirement that we recognize what people are subjected to in our midst.

In doing her research for her forthcoming book on Seekers, Marjory Bankson found that – think it was Liz Vail – had asked the community to look at its attitudes about sexuality. I cannot remember what was done; was it a class in the [School of Christian Living](#)? Nevertheless, I think that we have an occasional obligation to look at issues that we ignore, even if out of busyness, when others' lives are affected. I have noticed in my travels that there are many groups I have “discovered” and then realized I have ignored; for example veiled women in Moslem societies, the Seiks, who were counted as Moslem after 9/11. There is a painful scene in the thriller “Inside Man” where the police take the turban from a Seik man and refuse to give it back to him, even after they have searched it. And – despite my putting it as a priority when we were making plans to move to Carroll Street – I have not learned Spanish, and ignore the fact that increasingly I do not try very hard to communicate with a lot of people who may feel disenfranchised by lack of communication. I know that I need to update my lenses, take off my blinders and be more aware of people around me. I invite you all to consider if there are any people or groups you “erase” from your world, and, whether or not you feel personally called to serve them, at least give them the respect and dignity of inclusion and acknowledgement.