

Connecting

Connecting to deepened wisdom and deepened relationship

First Unitarian Church of Des Moines
a Unitarian Universalist Congregation
1800 Bell Ave
Des Moines, IA 50315
www.ucdsm.org / 515-244-8603



2025 Jan

Vow

Chalice Lighting

Words of the Dalai Lama: “For as long as space endures, and for as long as living beings remain, so then may I too abide to dispel the misery of the world.”

Check In

Defining Moment

From Random House Dictionary (at dictionary.com) and thesaurus.com.

vow. n. (1). a solemn promise, pledge, or personal commitment: *marriage vows; a vow of secrecy.* (2). a solemn promise made to a deity or saint committing oneself to an act, service, or condition. (3). a solemn or earnest declaration.

vow. v. tr. (1). to make a vow of; promise by a vow, as to God or a saint: *to vow a crusade or a pilgrimage.* (2). to pledge or resolve solemnly to do, make, give, observe, etc.: *They vowed revenge.* (3). to declare solemnly or earnestly; assert emphatically (often followed by a clause as object): *She vowed that she would take the matter to court.* (4). to dedicate or devote by a vow: *to vow oneself to the service of God.*

vow. v. itr. (1). to make a vow. (2). to make a solemn or earnest declaration.

Synonyms for noun: assertion, oath, pledge. For verb: affirm, assure, declare, promise, swear

Adapted from *The Vow-Powered Life: A Simple Method for Living with Purpose*
Jan Chozen Bays, MD

EXERCISE 1: Identify Your Sources of Vow

Inherited Vow. As you were growing up, what were you given to understand by your parents or primary caretakers was the primary function of a life? They may never have articulated it to you, but if you had to now articulate what your parents' great vows were, what were they?

Reactive Vow. You might, however, have reached age 18 feeling that your parents showed you more about how you wanted NOT to be than how to be. Reactive vows can ricochet through many generations. For example, a child raised by a military father who is precise, strict, authoritarian, and conservative may become a hippie. The hippie's child, tired of dirty clothes, living out of a van, and not having predictable meals, may decide to become an accountant who lives in the same house for forty years and hoards food, toilet paper, and paperclips. The accountant's child becomes a rock musician perpetually on tour; the musician's child, a buttoned-up stockbroker; and so on.

Or reactive vows can be a response to situation faced while growing up. People who become physicians often have had an experience with illness or death in their early years, either in themselves or their family. Their choice of profession may be due to an unconscious desire to gain control over the helplessness and vulnerability they felt as they faced sickness and death at an age when they had no defenses or coping skills. Incidentally, many lawyers seem to be impelled into law after an early experience of injustice.

A reactive source of vows is not a bad thing. It *could* be over-reactive, but not all reactions are over-reactions. What makes it reactive is that it's driven by a desire to avoid something – avoid being like your parents, or avoid a kind of experience, such as sickness or injustice.

Inspired Vow. We pick up inspired vows – often in adolescence or early adulthood – when we learn about someone we admire. We aspire to be like them. Martin Luther King Jr's vow of nonviolence came from an inspired vow – inspired by the life and work of Mahatma Gandhi. Athletes often draw inspiration from a particular athlete they admire. Who are your heroes?

You cannot discover your vows by thinking. Your vow lies within you. To bring it out, to consciously articulate and thereby strengthen it as the orientation of your life, it helps to explore those three questions:

1. What did you learn from parents or primary caretakers about what life is for? What are your inherited vows?
2. What negative lessons did you learn – lessons about what you wanted to avoid if at all possible? What are your reactive vows?
3. Who are your heroes? What are your inspired vows?

In your journal or elsewhere, write down your answers about your inherited vows, reactive vows, and inspired vows.

EXERCISE 2: Five Years to Live

If your doctor told you that you had only five years left to live, could you think of a way to serve humanity or improve society during your remaining time? Here are some examples:

- teach illiterate adults to read;
- make quilts for abused children;
- make a bequest to a charity in your will.

In your journal or elsewhere, write down what you want to dedicate the rest of your life to if you knew you had five years left to you.

EXERCISE 3: Think of Your “Mission Statement”

“I create a world of abundance and responsibility through bridges and opportunities for myself and others.”

—personal mission statement of Jabu Mashinini

Jabu Mashinini was a fruit and vegetable peddler on the streets of Johannesburg when he volunteered to help a missionary learn Zulu, his mother language. She hired him as a facilitator for Project TALK (Transfer of African Language Knowledge), a program to help people in South Africa—a country with eleven official languages— learn languages other than their primary language in order to foster mutual trust, bridge cultural divisions, and help bring about a more peaceful nation. He then became active with the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP) and has brought that training to war-torn regions across Africa, to young people in high-crime areas, and to maximum security prisoners, some of whom have served as AVP facilitators after their release. Jabu Mashinini volunteers 65 percent of his time. He was awarded the international World Peace Flame, a symbol inspired by the eternal flame that burns in Mahatma Gandhi's house.

The Mankind Project, a worldwide movement to empower men, emphasizes formulating a mission statement for your life. During an intensive retreat, they ask each man to answer these questions:

- What do you want for your future?
- What do you want for yourself and others?
- What is your unique purpose for being?
- What will be your action in the world to begin accomplishing that purpose?

A mission statement in this context functions like a personal vow. Action in the world is the means for accomplishing the vow, which involves undertaking sub- or mini-vows. Here are three more examples of the thousands of statements of “mission and action in the world” emerging from this movement.

- Adam C. Personal Mission: I bring more integrity into the world by modeling accountability, mentoring the uninitiated and honoring a “second chance” concept in supporting fellow man. Action in the World: Purchased a town complex which now houses up to 375 formerly incarcerated men (and soon opening to women) for a 3-

month-plus program preparing them to successfully re-enter society, thus reducing recidivism from nearly 60% to 20%.

- Bill M. Personal Mission: I create a world of peace and justice through speaking my truth and empowering others to speak theirs. Action in the World: Provided more than 7,000 haircuts to the homeless community.
- Jimmy N. Personal Mission: To create a sober and healthy world by channeling G-d's healing energy with my compassion, creativity, and love. Action in the World: As an obstetrician, advocated for and treated 320 pregnant women in recovery and their babies.

We are more familiar with mission statements in business, personal, realms. Most companies have a vision or a statement, a succinct formulation of their purpose in the world. Mission statements guide companies, particularly as they critical decisions. When you read a list of mission statements for large companies, you notice two recurrent themes: making a profit for shareholders and being “number one” in some domain. For example:

- The mission statement for PepsiCo begins, “We aspire to make PepsiCo the world's premier consumer products company focused on convenience foods and beverages. We seek to produce healthy financial rewards for investors.”
- Publix Super Markets modestly states, “Our mission at Publix is to be the premier quality food retailer in the world.”
- Qwest intends to be “the premier provider of full-service communications,” while
- RadioShack has a “vision to be the most powerful one-stop shop to connect people with the wonders of modern technology.”
- Raytheon wishes “to be recognized as the world's leading general aviation manufacturer,” and
- Smucker's “will own and market food brands which hold the #1 market position in their respective category.”
- Zale's mission is “to be the best fine jewelry retailer in North America,” while
- Alcoa keeps it simple: “Our vision is to be the best company in the world.”

A personal vow to be “the best physicist in the world” or “to win the Nobel Prize in medicine” might make your colleagues wonder if you have narcissistic personality disorder or make them worry that you'll sneak into the lab at night and sabotage their experiments. Personal vows are not designed to bring you public recognition; they are designed to help you recognize what your life as a completely unique person is about and to begin to fulfill that potential.

At the same time, some aspects of the guidelines for developing mission statements for businesses can be helpful as we shape our individual vows. Christopher Bart writes that there are two purposes of mission statements:

- “to guide allocation of resources in a manner that provides consistency and focus and
- to inspire and motivate employees to exceptional performance—that is, to influence behavior.”

He adds that mission statements are helpful only if they affect behavior.

This applies perfectly to life vows. Vows help us allocate our resources, time, money, and skills in a consistent manner. They inspire us to try and accomplish things beyond what we may have thought possible: learning a new language, starting a business or charity, going on a mission abroad, raising grandchildren, or sitting still and exploring our mind on a ten-day silent retreat. And, like mission statements, vows are only helpful if they change our behavior.

Two other guidelines for mission statements are relevant to our personal vows:

- “Keep the mission statement in front of you constantly,” and
- “Management must say it and live it.”

In your journal or elsewhere, write a mission statement for the “business” based on your name. For example, my “business” would be “Jan Chozen Bays, Inc.” I would write, “The mission of Jan Chozen Bays, Inc., is to _____.” Consider these questions:

- Who are your “customers”? That is, who in the world would you like to serve? (Hint: it doesn't have to be limited to people.)
- If your life produced more of something in the world, what would you like that “product” to be? For example, Disney Corporation wants to “make people happy,” so happiness is their product.
- What would your main means of production be, to create this product? For example, if your product is better health for poor people, your means of production could be becoming a nurse, making low-cost medicine available, and so forth.
- List two values that your company respects.

Here are some key words that might be helpful: commitment, creativity, dedicated, discipline, expertise, goal, growth, joy, opportunities, positive, potential, relationships, respect, responsibility, serve, strength, support, together, unique, vision.

EXERCISE 4: Your Primary and Subordinate Vows

“Spiritual strivings tend to be related to higher levels of well-being, especially to greater purpose in life and to both marital and overall life satisfaction. Spiritual strivings appear to make a unique contribution to well-being . . . When people orient their lives around the attainment of spiritual ends, they tend to experience their lives as worthwhile, unified and meaningful.”

—Robert Emmons

I was surprised to find that the field of psychology can offer us significant guidance as we work on clarifying our life vows. There is a sizable body of psychological research relevant to vows that psychology professor Robert Emmons has kindly summarized in his book *The Psychology of Ultimate Concerns*. Note that psychologists use the terms *personal goals* and *personal strivings* for what we call vows.

The research reveals that humans are goal-making beings, and vows are good for our health. “The possession of and progression toward important life goals are intimately tied to our long-term well-being” (Emmons). Well-being includes a sense of purpose, a feeling of satisfaction within your life, and a conviction that your life has meaning, no matter what challenges you are currently facing. Well-being also includes enhanced physical and mental-emotional health and involvement in meaningful relationships.

In very difficult circumstances, holding clear and meaningful goals for your life can be an important factor in survival. Viktor Frankl, a psychiatrist who endured the horrors of four German concentration camps, found that people who had a “will to meaning” for their life were more likely to live through imprisonment and thrive after their release. In other words, a clear vow helped redeem their suffering and turn it to benefit for others. Frankl credits his own survival to his determination to re-create, one scribbled scrap at a time, an important manuscript that had been taken from him as he entered the camps. The manuscript was the origin of an important form of psychotherapy based on helping patients discover the deeper meaning of their lives.

Certain types of life goals or vows are linked to well-being. They are

- *spiritual* (seeking greater intimacy with the divine),
- *generative* (involving creativity, giving of oneself and serving generations in the future), and
- those that involve *intrinsic sources of satisfaction* (self-discipline, better social skills, and self-confidence).

Types of goals that do not produce well-being, and can even lower it, are those that seek *extrinsic sources of satisfaction* (power over others, material possessions, fame, physical attractiveness). Goals that are positive (actively seeking things that interest you) produce enhanced well-being, as opposed to goals that are negative (avoiding negative consequences). For example, the goal to finish a term paper or presentation can be framed in our mind in a positive way: “I want to research this topic and organize this information, so I will become , a more knowledgeable person and be more skillful at my job.” Or it can be framed in a negative way: “I have to get this done, so I won't get a failing grade or lose my job.”

Psychologists speak of higher- and lower-level goals. Higher-level goals carry more personal value but may be too abstract for one to be able to evaluate one’s own progress toward them and thus may result in stress. Lower-level goals are easier to achieve and thus less stressful, but also less meaningful. For example, it is harder to evaluate progress toward the higher-level vow to “come closer to God” compared to a lower-level vow or goal to “read the scriptures every day.” A vow to “live a life of virtue” is more challenging to monitor than the intention “not to cheat at poker.” The Cambridge psychologist Brian Little has termed this dilemma of undertaking meaningful versus manageable vows “the magnificent obsession verses the trivial pursuit.”

Research also shows that we can become distressed if we experience goals as conflicting (“devote more time to prayer and meditation and attend retreats” versus “spend more

quality time with my family” or “spend more time at work perfecting my professional skills”). However, if our primary vows involve religious or spiritual growth, these higher-order vows can have a beneficial organizing effect on subordinate vows, resolving any perception of conflict and producing a greater sense of an aligned, harmonious life.

For example, if I realize that my spiritual life is not confined to the meditation hall, temple, or church pew, that all aspects of my life are infused with the sacred, then I can find fertile and felicitous ground for fulfilling my spiritual goals by bringing mindfulness to playing games on the floor with my children, or equanimity and compassion to my conversations with difficult patients or clients. Parenting becomes a sacred duty, a way to leave a beneficial legacy in the world; work becomes a calling, a way to serve God or to do my small part to reduce suffering in the world. The real testing ground of my religious life—the place to test my spiritual vows and my assortment of spiritual tools—becomes the marketplace of everyday life.

The Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner has outlined eight inherent and distinct human intelligences that humans possess in differing degrees: linguistic, logical-mathematical, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal, intrapersonal, and naturalistic.

The expression of any one of these intelligences in a certain person depends upon both genetic and environmental influences. Consider the bodily kinesthetic intelligence. Do you come from a line of (people built to be good) athletes? Did your parents play ball with you from the time you were a toddler? Consider musical intelligence. Were you born with perfect pitch? Did your parents play musical instruments and start you on lessons at age three? No matter what our genetic endowment, all the intelligences can, be fostered and enhanced practice.

Emmons argues cogently that spiritual intelligence should be added to this list. He defines *spiritual intelligence* broadly as:

“a realm of life concerned with ultimate purpose and meaning in life, a set of principles and ethics to live by, commitment to God or a higher¹ power, recognition of the transcendent in daily life/ordinary experience, a selfless focus, and a set of beliefs and practices that is designed to facilitate a relationship with the transcendent.”

Many people set goals to develop their skills in one or more of these nine areas of competence. You could, for example (following the list of intelligences above), become fluent in a foreign language in order to become a diplomat, or learn higher algebra in order to become an engineer, or learn celestial navigation to be able to sail around the world, or take a music composition class and write an original piece, or take gymnastics classes with an aim to compete in Olympic tryouts, or practice loving-kindness out of a desire to have a happier family, or go into therapy to learn more about the unconscious conditioning that compels you to overeat, or decide to learn about edible plants so you could survive a natural disaster. A spiritual goal might be to go to church or temple twice a week in order to become a more serene and kind person.

¹ or broader –MG

Emmons states that in the hierarchy of goals, the highest goals are those related to religion or spirituality—that is, to our ultimate concerns. These are the deepest questions we human beings have, questions about the ultimate purpose of our life, of all life, and about what happens to us after death. Emmons writes,

“Above the line of ultimate concerns, no other concerns exist. Ultimate concern is that in which maximal value is invested, which possess the power to center one's life, and which demands total surrender. Ultimate concerns will be reflected in other goals.”

Using the examples above, the goal to learn a foreign language could be viewed as a means to a higher-order goal to become a diplomat. However, there is an even higher goal above attaining a job as a career diplomat. That superordinate goal, or primary vow, has its origin in ultimate concerns. It might be to further understanding and affection among peoples of diverse cultural backgrounds, to work toward world peace or to ensure that future generations can live free of the terrible threat of nuclear disaster. Similarly, the goal of attending religious services more regularly would be a means to a higher goal, to become a better human being. The primary spiritual vow lying above the intention to become a better person might be to emulate the saints and bodhisattvas or to live a more enlightened life or to join God in heaven when you die.

Emmons concludes:

“A life that is centered around authentic spiritual goal strivings results in a life that is meaningful, valuable, and purposeful. Authentic spiritual growth involves replacing the self as the source of ultimate concern with family, community, humanity and divinity. It involves the emptying of oneself.”

The research strongly suggests that if we want to feel satisfied on a day-to-day basis with our life, if we want to improve our health and relationships, if we want our various vows and goals to support and not conflict with each other, then the vow at the top of our list of vows should be a spiritual one. And the subordinate vows should be aligned with, support, and help actualize the primary vow. Here is an example:

1. I vow to become enlightened, however long it takes. I vow to become open to the Divine Mystery.
2. I vow to live a virtuous life, guided by the commandments or precepts for ethical living.
3. I vow to become a better parent/partner, cultivating lovingkindness, compassion, and equanimity with my children/ partner.
4. Remembering the abundance in my own life, I vow to practice generosity. I will do something concrete to help others less fortunate find a better life. I will start by donating money to a college scholarship fund at an all-black college.
5. Remembering the precious gift of human life, I vow to take better care of my body so that I am able to carry out my other vows. My goals (or means) are to exercise five days a week and to eat at least one meal a day mindfully.

6. Remembering that it is more blessed to give than to receive, I vow also to help improve the health of those who do not have access to medical care. I will start by donating money to help restore eyesight to blind people in India.

Look back over your answers to the first three exercises. Is there a clear “primary vow” already there? If not, what overarching spiritual primary vow encompasses them? What are your subordinate vows, and how are they ordered? Write down your answers.

APPENDIX: Sample Vows

1. I VOW TO SEE AND HONOR THE DIVINE IN ALL PEOPLE AND CREATIONS

“To seek the face of God in everything, everyone, all the time, and his hand in every happening.” (Mother Teresa)

“To see Jesus in everyone who comes in the door.” (worker at Saint Vincent de Paul)

2. I VOW TO USE MY SKILLS AND TALENTS TO RELIEVE THE SUFFERING OF OTHERS

“To exist for the future of others without being suffocated by their present.” (Dag Hammarskjold, second secretary general of the United Nations)

“I wish to give myself unconditionally to the poor lepers. I would gladly give my whole life to them. I am not ashamed to act as mason or carpenter, when it is for the glory of God.” (Father Damien, missionary to lepers)

“What do we live for if it is not to make life less difficult for each other?” (George Elliot, 19th-century British novelist)

“When I see / the misery / of those in this world / their sad- ness / becomes mine. Oh that my monk's robe / were wide enough / to gather up all / the suffering people / in this floating world. Nothing makes me / more happy than / the vow / to save everyone.” (Ryokan Taigu, 19th-century Japanese Zen monk)

3. I VOW TO IMPROVE THE CONDITION OF THE EARTH AND ITS INHABITANTS

“To be stewards of the land and all its resources. To treat all human beings with dignity and kindness.” (Koinonia community)

“I vow to do my best to leave the world better than I found it.” (George, hospital administrator)

“To nurture the health of our planet and the people on it for the next seven generations.” (Seventh Generation Company)

“We pledge ourselves to liberate all our people from the continuing bondage of poverty, deprivation, suffering, gender and other discrimination.” (Nelson Mandela)

“To give free access to the sum of human knowledge to every single person on the planet.” (Jimmy Wales, founder of Wikipedia)

4. I VOW TO HELP (A SPECIFIC GROUP OR TYPE OF SUFFERING).

“To put an end to all forms of violence against children: slavery, trafficking, child marriages, child labor, sexual abuse, and illiteracy.” (Kailash Satyarthi, 2014 Nobel Peace Prize winner)

“To stay sober and help other alcoholics achieve sobriety.” (AA Preamble)

“To eliminate smallpox and Guinea worm infection in the world.” (Dr. Donald R. Hopkins, Carter Center, Vice President for Health Programs)

“My mission is to someday create a free gay India.” (Singh Gohil, Indian prince whose family disowned him when he came out as gay)

5. I VOW TO AVOID KILLING AND TO CHERISH ALL FORMS OF LIFE

“I am prepared to die, but there is no cause for which I am prepared to kill.” (Gandhi)

“To choose love over violence.” (Koinonia Community)

“I will treat others as I would like to be treated; and not treat others in a way I would not like to be treated.” (The “Golden Rule”)

“What I wish for myself, seek for all people.” (after a saying of Muhammad’s)

“[Be] tender with the young, compassionate with the aged, sympathetic with the striving and tolerant of the weak and strong, because someday in your life you will have been all of these.” (George Washington Carver, African American botanist and inventor)

Vow

Sarah Lauer

A promise
is such a rigid thing
no room for life to happen.
In an aching body,
a weary spirit,
I have found grace
far more healing
than the stiffness of
contracted obligation.

I want no more promises
I can't keep,
no more expectations
I can't meet.

Instead,
Give me a sigh
over a breath held
Give me flexibility
over expectation
Give me compassion
over recrimination
Give me creativity
over replication.

Give me a moment
to love myself as I am.

Promises vs. Vows

Martha Shen

Deities live within and excavate pathways
in the
mountains.

Their connotations denote meaning into
your

Promises. Short lived:

finite in nature.

You either renege or you give

to Reveal who you ARE: The content of
your character

“Being”: the *groundwork* of Trust,
the *foundation* of Friendship
the *building* of

Community... Or

The fuel for Foe...

to Bring a boon or a bane wherever you
go.

A Vow is **Sacred. Spoken before your
God**

(By Whatever name that might BE)

It is fundamentally **Life Changing.**

It is **Transformative.**

It is the Soul-seed planted in the Ground of
Revelation. The Eradication of ignorance

Watered by the artesian well of
your life

it sends down its radical of “Truth”

and

Draws nutrients from the humus of your
soil

To Anchor its roots into the fiber of your
Being.

Threading Hair roots Dendrites
connecting thoughts into actions into
Being

Stems leaves shoot upward greening
to seek

Sun Power

to flow in your life’s Blood.

to flower

produce Fruit.

Scatter seeds

Become life

in humus watered by your truth.

Vows: Sun powered Earth related Air
breathing Rain watered

LIFE!

True to Death

Soaring upward.²

² My connotations of the words I used in this poem:
We all have things (deities) that dominate our
thoughts and lives...they control the connotations we
place on words, the stories we tell ourselves, and how
we interact with other people. They even determine
what kind of promises we make and whether we keep
them or not. They control the decisions we make and
the paths we take in life. However, when our Soul

(the light of Love, the spark of The Ineffable that we
were born with) is our guiding Light and we make
vows (deeper and More life-encompassing than mere
promises), the Soul-Love will guide. When this
happens then our head and our heart are in one
accord. Love and compassion grow, flower and
produce fruit.

Family Page
Faithyna Leonard

Dear Families,

Have you ever made a promise? A promise is similar to our theme this month of vow – not just the kind you make at weddings but how we use it in our everyday lives.

A vow is simply a heartfelt promise or commitment. It's a way to dedicate ourselves to something important, whether it's a person, a goal, or a value. Vows are meaningful because they reflect what truly matters to us.

When we make a vow, it gives us direction and purpose. Whether it's a vow to be kinder, more honest, or to keep going even when things get tough, these promises help guide us. Vows remind us of what's important, even when life gets challenging. Keeping our promises strengthens trust with ourselves and others. They also connect our actions to our values and goals, adding a sense of meaning to what we do.

Vows don't have to be formal or reserved for big events. They can be part of our daily lives. Promising to really listen when your child talks about their day, committing to being honest even when it's hard, or taking a pledge to care for your health and well-being are all simple but powerful vows we can make.

Kids learn a lot from watching us. Show them how you stick to your promises and share what's important to your family and how vows tie into that. Cheer them on when they follow through on their commitments and help them see how meaningful it is to keep a promise.

Here are some stories to reflect on this month's theme of Vow:

- LeBron James, *I Promise*
- Dr. Suess, *Horton Hatches an Egg*
- Joe Berry, *Breaking Promises*
- Rachel Bright, *The Pandas Who Promised*

* * *

Check Out. What overall message stands out for you?

* * *

Chalice Extinguishing. Words of Martha Graham: “There is a vitality, a life force, an energy, a quickening that is translated through you into action, and because there is only one of you in all of time, this expression is unique. And if you block it, it will never exist through any other medium and it will be lost. The world will not have it.”

Connecting is produced by the First Unitarian Church of Des Moines for use in small groups. Text not otherwise attributed is by Rev. Meredith Garmon. Each month (ten months a year) explores a different theological or spiritual theme. Next issue: 2025 Feb: Borders and Boundaries.