

What Do You Do With An Idea?
How an Idea shaped the History of UUCOD
By Kevin Brandt

The word *ecology* has its roots in the Greek words “oikos” meaning house or households and “logos” meaning to gather, count, recount, say, speak. Ecology is understood as the legend or logic of the dwelling place. In its essence it is the story of where we live. This story of the house instructs us and informs our actions in managing this household we call Earth.

--From “Earth as our Home,” by the Catholic Sisters For a Healthy Earth

CHALICE LIGHTING

A man came upon a very large construction site and there were three people there who had just started work. He walked up to the first and asked what he was building. The man replied “ I am laying cement blocks in cement for a foundation.” He asked the second man, who replied: “I am building a wall.” Interrupting the third man’s humming, he asked the same question. The man smiled, look up at the sky and replied: “I am building a cathedral!”

OPENING WORDS

Why did we come to this Church? Why do we continue to come? Where do we see this Church going? We thought that if we could answer these questions, we would know what makes people financially support this Church.

The Board and many of our lay leaders have been grappling with very similar questions, but this time primarily arising out of our circumstances over the past 6+ months in which:

- (1) Our congregation’s first Settled Minister unexpectedly died, and her death prompted questions and speculations about events, real or imagined, that occurred or might have occurred, but much more importantly, what type of Minister do we want going forward.
- (2) Our Interim Minister resigned after her first month.
- (3) Our Congregation has a pervasive sense of unease, and in some quarters, mistrust about what has happened and whether the Congregation is being properly informed about circumstances surrounding the events just noted.

This service is meant to offer what I believe to be an essential beginning to our moving forward together.

But where to start? Bear with me a second: The Christian Gospels of Matthew and Luke provide a genealogy of Jesus. Matthew starts his through Abraham, via King

David. Luke, the more ambitious of the two, starts his with the Son of David, and works backward to Adam, of Eve and Serpent fame. Both Gospels make the point that in order to understand the present you need to know the past, or as lyricist Scott Witman put it in the song *I Know Where I've Been*, "I know where I'm going - Lord knows I know where I've been."

What is the history of this church? Well, it all began with a question and an idea. The children's story What do you do with an Idea (by Kobi Yamada, and illustrated by Mae Besome, 2013) relates very closely to our history.

One day I had an Idea.

"Where did it come from? Why is it here?"

I wondered, "What do you do with an idea?"

At first, I didn't think much of it. It seemed kind of strange and fragile. I didn't know what to do with it. So I just walked away from it. I acted like it didn't belong to me.

But it followed me.

I worried what others would think. What would they say about my idea?

I kept it to myself. I hid it away and didn't talk about it. I tried to act like everything was the same as it was before my idea showed up.

But there was something magical about my idea. I had to admit, I felt better and happier when it was around.

It wanted food. It wanted to play. Actually it wanted a lot of attention.

It grew bigger. And we became friends.

I showed it to other people even though I was afraid of what they would say.

I was afraid that if people saw it, they would laugh at it. I was afraid they would think it was silly.

And many of them did. They said it was no good. They said it was too weird. They said it was a waste of time and that it would never become anything.

And, at first, I believed them. I actually thought about giving up on my idea. I almost listened to them.

My idea grew and grew. And so did my love for it.

I built it a new house, one with an open roof where it could look up at the stars - a place where it could be safe to dream.

I liked being with my idea. It made me feel more alive, like I could do anything. It encouraged me to think big... and then, to think bigger.

It shared its secrets with me. It showed me how to walk on my hands.

"Because," it said, "it is good to have the ability to see things differently."

I couldn't imagine my life without it.

Then, one day, something amazing happened. My idea changed right before my very eyes. It spread its wings, took flight, and burst into the sky. I don't know how to describe it, but it went from being here to being everywhere. It wasn't just a part of me anymore... it was now a part of everything.

And then I realized what you do with an idea.

You change the world.

OUR FOUNDING

On October 19, 1959, an ad appeared in The Desert Sun captioned: "Are you a Unitarian and don't know it?" It had been placed there by the Reverend Ray Manker, the Universalist minister from The Universalist Church of Riverside. The first meeting of the "fellowship" was held in the Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce building, 36 people in attendance, excluding Rev. Manker. Reverend Manker gave the fellowship its first sermon at that meeting. Due to his obligations to the Riverside Church, Reverend Manker's involvement was limited to the placing of the ad and the first sermon. He early enlisted the aid of the Reverend Steve Fritchman, a retired Unitarian Minister from the first Unitarian Church of Los Angeles, to assist the fledging fellowship. Shortly after that first meeting, the fellowship selected as its name: The Unitarian Fellowship of Palm Springs.

REFLECTIONS ON OUR FOUNDING by Marion Ellson (joined in 1967)

In the early years the fellowship members decided to be different from other churches. And although it happened before I joined the Church in 1967, services were held on Wednesday nights, rather than on Sundays! Our beginning members were very diverse, especially in age, with many younger members with families as well as retired persons. Even then, we had members who were people who had second homes in the area or were snowbirds.

Children's religious education was very important, since many of the founding members had small children. They ranged in ages from 3 to their teens, and our church offered the only liberal religious instruction in the valley.

Our early members were united in support of the civil rights movement, but

divided on the Vietnam War.

Our service leaders were lay people, retired ministers, and a rabbi. One of our earliest regular ministers was a retired Minister from Claremont, the Rev. Walton Cole, who came here monthly starting in 1967, and did so for a couple of years. He was followed by another regular though very part time minister, the Rev. Steven Frichtman, who was with us from 1970 to 1978.

OUR WANDERINGS

Judeo/Christian literature tells us that Moses and his people wandered in Sinai for 40 years. We did so, in the Coachella Valley basin, for 46 years! Judaic history tells us that the great temple in Jerusalem existed in two different forms. Roman Catholic history tells us there were two St Peter Basilicas in Rome. If you count member's homes as a single location (inaccurate; but it results in an understatement of the numbers), we have had 14 places of worship!

We first started meeting in the Palm Springs Chamber of Commerce Building, and met there for a few years. The fellowship then met in member homes, and did so for almost 4 years. Starting in 1963, the fellowship met at the Palm Desert Country Club, followed by the Palm Valley School, where it met for 18 years! In correct order, we thereafter met at the following sites: a conference room at the Quality Inn; the Masonic Temple of Palm Springs; the Presbyterian Church of Cathedral City; the Catholic Newman Center; the Senior Center of Palm Springs; the Mizell Senior Center; the Palm Springs Youth Center; then, back to the Palm Valley School; followed by our penultimate location, the Joslyn Center in Palm Desert.

OUR WANDERINGS – REFLECTION by Leslie Gephart

Preparing these reflections brought back a LOT of memories! Of all the places in which we met, the Masonic Temple was my LEAST favorite. There were no windows, it was dark, and it smelled funny. I was never able to figure out the smell, and my imagination went wild on just what the Masons were doing in their secret services that caused it. There was also the time in the Holiday Inn when there was a loud private party in an adjoining room and we couldn't even hear ourselves think -- which, as you know, for a Unitarian is hell on Earth -- assuming there is a Hell.

We continued to advertise in the local paper - usually repeating the question "Are you a Unitarian and don't know it?" in the ads. One of the by-products of the advertising and our meeting in such diverse locations is that we tended to get VERY unusual guests that would show for a single session, or a few

sessions. At any point in time we were a VERY DIVERSE gathering.

The Fellowship continued to be lay led and having to plan and arrange for speakers every week was a challenge, but the people that volunteered for it did a wonderful job, and while some of the speakers and services were exceptionally good, there were others at the other end of the spectrum. I still cringe when I recall the service where the arranged speaker did not show, and one of our colorful periodic visitors stood up and started to read her poetry! We were dying to stop her, but no one had the heart! My strongest memory of the people in those wandering years is that we laughed a lot! As diverse and crazy as we were, we laughed!

After the end of the Vietnam War and the fall of Saigon, we were still able to find many social issues about which to disagree! It probably is hard to believe looking back on it from 2017, but the “Up with People” movement was one such issue. The young happy scrubbed faces and catchy music was enchanting, but many felt that there was something unsavory that lurked behind the façade! I wonder what the Koch brothers were up to then?

As Marion noted, Children Religious Education was VERY important to the Congregation, and many argued that we would never be able to develop a full program without a building of our own. We discussed whether to embark on building our own building for DECADES, with sound arguments on both sides about whether it was a good idea at each point in time.

FINDING OUR HOME

In early 1992, during the time when the Reverend Doctor Ken MacLean was first with us, and the year that Carol and Bob Woolfson joined the Fellowship, the Church established a long range planning committee to look into finding a permanent home. It initially searched for a building rental, with an option to buy. It soon became apparent that no suitable structure at a reasonable price could be found.

In 1993, however, the Long Range Planning Committee became aware of a vacant 3½ acre parcel of land at the intersection of Via Vail and Key Largo Streets that was owned by an evangelical Christian Church in Cathedral City, and it was for sale. The congregation decided to build its own church on the site, and a capital campaign was launched to purchase the land. The land was purchased for \$169,000, and a loan incurred for part of the purchase price.

The fellowship continued to raise funds to pay off the land loan mortgage, which it

did in 1998, five years after having purchased the land. From 1998 until 2000, the fellowship started its campaign to raise funds to build its home. Late in 2000, During the tenure of Carol and Bob Woolfson as co-Presidents, the fellowship hired a local architect, and preliminary plans were drawn. An estimated \$640,000 would be needed to commence the final planning and construction process.

FINDING OUR HOME REFLECTIONS by Bob Woolfson

I remember that it was in January 2001 when things began to really start rolling. We rented a room at the La Quinta Resort for a day-long retreat, and the architect presented the construction plans for approval. After a lot of discussion, they were approved. We also started the capital campaign.

Four members, including Carol and I, pledged enough to raise \$300,000 to jump start the campaign. It represented HALF of the amount we hoped to raise! Carol and I have been very fortunate that our hard work in starting our own business was beginning to pay off, but what many people don't know is that in order to pledge that amount, Carol and I agreed we would take no vacations for a couple of years in order to fund our pledge. Other members made similar sacrifices. By March, two months later, \$565,000 was pledged, and by campaign end, we had received \$606,000 in pledges from 67 persons. An additional \$10,800 in other donations, and 3 grants totaling \$65,000 were also obtained! Adding to those sums the \$33,000 which had raised in 1998-2000, and the Church had \$714,800 in cash on hand or pledges to start our construction.

BUILDING OUR HOME

In late 2002, early 2003, final plans for the 4,600 square foot church were agreed upon. Bids for construction were solicited, and the winning construction bid of \$820,000 was accepted. This was within the budgeted amount, but higher than the \$714,800 raised or pledged.

On March 1, 2003, having changed its name the previous year to the Unitarian Universalist Church of the Desert, the congregation met at the construction site, and the groundbreaking ceremony was held.

The following month, Janine Schoncite, who had joined the Church in 1998, was elected President of the Board. Janine had a Bachelor's of Science degree in physical engineering from Ohio State, and had the perfect background to guide the church during the construction years. Janine kept a detailed log during the entire period.

BUILDING OUR HOME REFLECTIONS by Janine Schoncite

Even though we had our groundbreaking ceremony in March 2003, we weren't able to start site grading until late 2003! This is my journal entry for September 5, 2003:

I had my heart set on getting this [grading] permit done today, but Donna was not in today. I went to see Fernando in Public Works; he was helpful but realized that he had made a mistake in calculations, as I had told him, and the check was for the wrong amount. However, there is still a grading bond to be paid for - \$14,250. Now we need another check for \$13,750 instead since the error was \$500 in our favor, Fernando needs time to redo his paperwork and I will return Monday morning with the other check and the proof of insurance that I acquired from Hal Hall's office.

Once we started construction, it was slow and tedious. For 15 months, construction progress was measured in inches. By the end of summer, 2004, walls were up, and electrical and wiring completed. A late fall, 2004 completion date was set, however massive November rains disclosed construction defects, and the scheduled dedication was put on hold while corrections were made.

Cost over-runs, always expected but never pleasant to experience, caused the Congregation to decide to cut back on some of the building plans, most notably: the size of the parking lot was halved! On March 20, 2005, at its final service at the Joslyn center, the congregation was informed that earlier in the week the City of Rancho Mirage had given its final approvals, and that our next service, March 27, 2005, co-incidentally Easter Sunday in the Roman Christian tradition, would be held at our new home.

OUR PRESENT FUTURE

So the \$169,000 land purchase price was fully paid. In all, including architect permits, fees, and Planning Commission costs, cost over-runs -- the total building cost ended up being \$1,021,100, for a combined cost of \$1,190,100. The initial mortgage, consisting of two tranches, was \$425,000, with a current mortgage balance about \$200,000. Our predecessors raised and paid nearly *one million dollars* to build our spiritual home.

Since that first service in 2005, our church was certified as a Green Sanctuary Church - the smallest member church west of the Mississippi to be so designated. Our Performing Arts Auxiliary Group Stage 2 Script 2 Screen (S2S2S) was created and it has made a major impact on performing arts in the Coachella Valley, having

been nominated for over one hundred Desert Theater Guild nominations in performing theater categories.

Another major turning point occurred in 2012, the year the world was supposed to end based on interpretations of the Mayan calendar. After having ten part time Ministers since 1968 (twelve [12] if you count Ken MacLean for the two additional times he came out of retirement to help us out) we hired our first full-time Settled Minister - Reverend Suzanne Marsh!

Our Church activities have been the subject of numerous Desert Sun Articles, TV broadcasts, including our *Not one More Project*, and MLK activities, and our Ministers and lay leaders have been interviewed numerous times by our television and radio stations. KMIR and KESQ interviewed one of our Congregation members yesterday and this morning, concerning yesterdays march in Palm Desert.

We are making a difference in the Coachella Valley, and with everyone's help we can continue to make a difference!

OUR PRESENT FUTURE REFLECTIONS by Nancy Boyce

This community is all about looking forward. As more people join, and hopefully, more people become more involved in the committees and governance of the church we will build that strong community we all yearn for. This church is what we make it.

OUR PRESENT FUTURE REFLECTIONS by Reverend Nica Eaton-Guinn)

My Congregation is composed of people like me.

I help make it what it is.

It will be friendly, if I am.

It will be kind, forgiving, and welcoming, if I am.

Its seats will be filled, if I help fill them.

It will do great work, if I work.

It will make generous gifts to many causes, if I am a generous giver.

It will bring others into its worship, if I invite them and bring them.

It will be a Congregation of loyalty and love, of fearlessness and faith, of compassion, charity and mercy, if I make it what it is, filled with these things.

Therefore, I dedicate myself to the task of being all things that I want my Spiritual Home to be.

“Thank you, for doing all you do and being the person you are.

CLOSING THOUGHTS

So, what *do* you do with an idea? For decades, our UU forbearers discussed - probably argued - over whether the time was right to build a permanent home. They floated the idea until the time was right, and they put a lot of money (four people put in \$75,000 each and 67 people put on average over \$4,500 each) into the effort. Countless people put countless hours into the project, and we are the custodians of the fruits of their efforts.

For years, people had the idea that we needed a full-time minister to aid us in our spiritual growth, and they discussed for years whether the time was right to do so. Eleven people put thousands of hours into a 4 month period for a minister search process--doing in that time what the UUA recommends congregations take a year to do-- and all of us here today are the beneficiaries of those efforts.

So, did we build the cathedral referenced in our Chalice lighting? Over 25 years ago, our forbearers laid the cement block foundation for our current building. Five years ago, the congregation was continuing the building of the cathedral, starting to build the wall if you will, when it voted *unanimously* -- something unheard of in UU congregations -- to call the Reverend Suzanne Marsh as our first full time Settled Minister.

Now each of us has to answer the question for ourselves -- do we want to continue to reach higher -- continue building our spiritual cathedral if you will -- by celebrating our differences of opinion without letting them separate us, as our forbearers repeatedly and consistently did for the benefit of the body as a whole. Do we want to continue to place this church on a sound financial footing? Do we want to continue to grow in numbers and in spirit for the benefit of those who come after us? Each of us must decide for his or herself, but as Reverend Nica Eaton-Quinn put it, "*My Congregation is composed of people like me. I help make it what it is.*"