

## Daring to Deserve Our Future

Rev. Roger Jones & Rev. Lucy Bunch  
Sunday, March 2, 2014  
Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

### Hymns:

#1020, “Woyaya”; #146, “Come Sing a Song with Me”; #318, “We Would Be One”

### Youth Testimonial

by Elle

### Sermon I – Roger

“We build on foundations we did not lay.  
We warm ourselves at fires we did not light.  
We sit in the shade of trees we did not plant.  
We drink from wells we did not dig.  
We profit from persons we did not know.  
We are ever bound in community.”

*-Rev. Peter S. Raible*

(from Deuteronomy 6:10-12)

These are the words of the Reverend Peter S. Raible, who was a Unitarian Universalist minister. He paraphrased them from the Hebrew Book of Deuteronomy. This morning I would like to tell you about some of those who built the foundations on which I have stood, and those who dug the wells from which we drink as part of this Unitarian Universalist community.

First I want to tell you about an old church building in Chicago. On the near north side of Chicago, a few blocks over from the high-rise apartments and mansions on Lake Michigan and the boutiques of the Magnificent Mile, there used to stand a tall, gothic style church. A Unitarian congregation built it in 1867. Later named the Second Unitarian Church, its members had wanted a church closer to home, as the First Unitarian Church was several blocks to the south. In the 1860s it was a hike. Also, they wanted to reach out to the community on the north side.

The church’s founding minister was a blacksmith from England who had been expelled by the Methodists for heresy. Four years after construction of the church, in October of 1871, was the Great Chicago Fire. The fire lasted two nights

and a day, and was extinguished by the rain, but only after burning down 17,000 buildings and making 90,000 people homeless -- 1/3 of the city. Church members lost their homes and businesses and jobs. On the Sunday following the fire, they gathered at the ruins of their church. The Reverend Robert Collyer spoke to his people but spoke also for the whole city: “We have not lost, first, our geography.”

Nature called the lakes, the forests, the prairies together in convention long before we were born, and they decided that on this spot a great city would be built.

And the great city was rebuilt. So was the church. In one year! The denomination helped, but the congregation did most of the work themselves, giving money and raising money, even though many of them had been devastated. What a daring thing to try to do, after such heartbreak.

They did this for themselves, but they did it for the city as well. They did it for the spread of human dignity and reason, for a growing embrace of nature and the lakes, forests and prairies that sustain all creatures, and for the belief that our deeds matter more than our creeds.

Also, they dared to rebuild for people they would not know, adults and children who would show up years later, seeking a new faith. I was one of the seekers who would later show up at that congregation, over a century later, and in a different location.

A few decades after 1871, the congregation moved. They replanted themselves a few miles north, in a residential neighborhood. Now that area is home to many theaters, eateries, bars, art galleries, the heart of the LGBT community, and the Chicago Cubs of Wrigley Field. Second Unitarian holds coffee house concerts, works on affordable housing in the community, hosts 12-step recovery groups, feeds the hungry, and enjoys lively worship and music. It’s a gem of a church of brown bricks, green and white stained glass, and polished wood floors.

I danced on those hardwood floors at a Mardi Gras fundraiser, learned to sing in the choir there, and bid against my friends at the spring

auction. As board president I stood at the podium letting the church know about a budget shortfall. In worship one Sunday morning I lit a candle in silence after my mother's death. I left Second Unitarian for California, to begin my first ministry. I'm glad they rebuilt that church after the Chicago fire.

Around the time of that church's founding, here in Sacramento a group of 17 families joined themselves together as the First Unitarian Church. That was 1868, when this region was booming from the Gold Rush.

The Reverend Charles Gordon Ames was our Unitarian missionary. He preached in San Jose, Monterey, and Sacramento, traveling far and wide looking for liberal seekers, often sleeping under the night sky in his buggy. Yes, his carbon footprint was made of horse manure.

When this new congregation met for services, we met as guests of others. We rented space at locations like the Metropolitan Theater and the Pioneer Hall. My favorite is the lodge of a fraternal order called the Knights of Pythias. They call their lodge a Pythian Castle. Our congregation's history book says the church had an "efficient choir" –two men and five unmarried ladies. "Miss Gertie Gerrish presided at the piano."

From 1868 to 1915, this was a wandering tribe of Unitarians in downtown Sacramento. Then it all changed. The religious liberals of the Sacramento valley made their decision to stay put. With \$4,500 inherited or given, they bought land in 1911.

In 1912 they revised their covenant, or Bond of Union. Now it would say: "We ... associate ourselves together as a Religious Society for mutual helpfulness in right living and for advancement of sound morals and liberal religion in the community; and we hereby pledge ourselves to bear our part in the common cause and to care for the welfare and influence of the Society."

Then they planted themselves, with a building in Midtown, at 1415 27<sup>th</sup> Street.

They finished it in 1915. It looked like a house, with a front porch framed by cedar log posts. Inside, rolling partitions joined the social room and meeting hall.

An article from that year in the *Sacramento Bee* said the church

is constructed of cedar shakes, with brown stained woodwork. The windows are of amber glass in simple leaded patterns.... A big fireplace of mission tile makes the social room the coziest part of the church. The structure cost \$8,000.

Adding to that/ the cost of the land, the total calculates in 2014 dollars, to almost \$300,000. Of course this year, we need to find a million more dollars to make our current home larger, brighter, more inviting, and energy efficient. But the difference is that a hundred years ago, in June of 1914, this congregation consisted of only 42 members, not almost 400.

They made the choice to plant themselves in the community, in this growing, expanding region. They dared to do something great for themselves and for the future.

Next year, 2015, will be the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary of when the Unitarian Society of the Sacramento valley said: We are here to stay.

They did this for themselves but also for those who would come after them, including you, including me.

They built a Religious Education building later, and they grew. After the Second World War, they grew more, and this region expanded so much, that they found new land on which to plant their community.

In 1959, the congregation bought these five acres, and began raising money, giving money, and working on this bold plan of a building. The dedication ceremony here was nearly 54 years ago.

In our USSS files and archives, black and white photographs show Sunday services, children's programs, and adult education discussions from the 1940s and 50s. In photographs from that cedar-shingle house, men wear jackets and ties, and ladies wear dresses and hats on Sundays. You can see the big smile of Theodore Abel, their minister, whose pulpit robe was given to me by his widow. I'm wearing it today

You can see many smiles in those old photographs, as you would see through the lens of a

camera if you walked around coffee hour today, or if you snapped a shot of the choir at early rehearsal or the kids doing Yoga this morning in Spirit Play.

Yet I can imagine those Unitarians had their own struggles, longings, and losses, like us. They had self-doubt as well as confidence, just as we do in our own lives.

That is why they needed this home. That is why they took a bold risk to plant themselves as a congregation in this region. They built a firm foundation; they welcomed people needing shade and companions on the journey of life and hope.

We are bound up with all of them, in this place, and we carry their spirits and their legacy as we move into our own future.

Right now, the members and friends of this congregation are at a pivotal moment. We are daring to proclaim that we deserve a bold future as a community. We are daring to pursue our purpose in serving the world beyond these walls. And we are daring to build a home not only for ourselves, but also for all those who will yet find this place, and will find in this place, a home.

Imagine them, giving thanks for what you and I have given them by our boldness.

Imagine one of them, or all of them, standing in this place, 50 years from now, or 100 years from now, thinking of us, and thanking us, and saying these words:

“We build on foundations we did not lay.  
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So may it be. Blessed be. Namaste.