

While I feel qualified to tell the story of Sheridan UU's origins, I'm probably the wrong person to speak about vision. The closest I have come to any feeling of destiny is what I would call "blind vision," if you'll excuse the oxymoron. Blind vision invades the imagination without any form or path to fruition. I believe it played a role in our decision to start a UU group.

I attended first grade in a small community, founded by and filled with Mormons. Only one of my classmates was non-Mormon. The rest of us were not mean to him, but we never reached out to befriend him either. He was an enigma to those of us who from birth had been sheltered by Mormon doctrine. It is human nature to fear what we don't understand. But a part of me felt sorry for this outsider and guilty for avoiding him. Instead of doing something about those feelings, I merely fantasized a different world where everyone in the community went to the same church, organized around where you live not what you believe. I guess that was my first blind vision.

My sense of mission has been equally nebulous. At age 19 I embarked on a church mission without the slightest idea of what to expect. I only knew I was spiritually destitute. I wasn't sure whether Mormonism was the solution or the problem, but I suspected that immersing myself in it for two years would answer that question.

The missionary regimen included a daily dose of prayer, proselytism, and study. To offset the barrage of church literature, I covertly read a book from the early twentieth century titled "The Varieties of Religious Experience" by William James. I just picked it up in a Chilean bookstore out of curiosity, with no inkling the Modern Library board would one day declare it the 2nd-best nonfiction book of the 20th century.

Celebrated as the father of American psychology, James honored the subjective truth embedded in a person's experience of the divine. But as an eminent philosopher he did not mistake this for objective truth. Indeed, to do so for one belief system would have negated all others. By subjective truth I mean that the experience is real but the interpretation of it may be shaped by the underlying religious or cultural context. For objective truth, not only is the experience real, but the interpretation of it is verifiable by others through impartial inquiry. As a pragmatist James identified a third category he called "truth in the making," whereby religious experience stimulates moral behavior. He offered ample evidence of this principle, but I've never been convinced of its universality.

Nonetheless, the book was a turning point in my life. James' recognition of an unseen reality and his first-hand research into the authenticity of religious experience gave me permission to respect devout believers without having to endorse their beliefs. What's more, his contention that humans have differing aptitudes for religious experience relieved the existential guilt I felt from questioning the most sacred tenets of my Mormon heritage.

During this same period, my girlfriend and future wife Linda joined Campus Crusade for Christ. She was soon turned off by the inward obsession with one's personal relationship with Jesus, and the notion that the minutia of one's existence should be manipulated by a capricious God. So, both of us had become disillusioned with orthodoxy.

Home from my mission a year early, but still without a plan, I chose to study physics in college. Not because I envisioned a career in physics, but for the sheer joy of learning. Making a living from what I learned was a happy accident – the product of incremental decisions rather than some master plan.

Marriage was another tenuous vision. Linda faithfully held onto it against all evidence, while I struggled to find my place in the world. So it was with parenthood. While Linda knew from an early age that she wanted children, I was a reluctant father who only warmed up to the idea after I met our newborn daughter (and later, our son).

Mostly for our children's growth, we started attending Foothills Unitarian in Fort Collins, Colorado. We were enthralled by the Reverend Roy Jones, a gifted orator and disciplined thinker who later spearheaded a major upgrade to the UUA statement of principles and purposes. When we moved to Wyoming in 1978, we missed that connection.

Five years later it was blind vision that prompted me to write a letter to the Sheridan Press. The letter included an agnostic's confession and a plea for like-minded souls to join us in a uniquely Unitarian Universalist exploration. Our reaching out was an act of faith more than foresight. It felt like tossing a fishing line in the stream with no bait, hoping that somehow, we might get a bite.

Those were the years of Ronald Reagan and the emergence of the Christian Right. All the folks we had met in Sheridan were believers of one stripe or another. My closest friend was a lay minister in the Baptist Church and a forceful witness for his evangelical faith. Linda and I were torn between alienating our friends and offering a more liberal religious framework for our children, who had begun to question us and be questioned by their peers.

An opinion editorial in the Billings Gazette put an end to our ambivalence. It was written by Dana Kopp, a medical doctor in the mold of Albert Schweitzer and a member of the Billings UU Fellowship. His article enumerated the charges leveled against secular humanists, who were particularly maligned in those days. Dr. Kopp then pled guilty to every charge. His courage jolted my conscience; Linda and I agreed that it was time to act. Hence, the letter. To our surprise, we got several bites. So, the Sheridan UU Fellowship began as a small group of freethinking adults and their children, gathering in our home every other Sunday to console and challenge each other.

As we grew in numbers, we rotated the meeting venue from house to house. Within a decade we began to use public meeting places like MDU, Sheridan College, and the Masonic Lodge. With the energy of Michele LaGory and others, religious education became a mainstay. When we reached the minimum membership of 30 adults, we formally affiliated with the UUA and adopted the necessary structure. I attribute this largely to Victor Ashear's vision. By then, so many members had stepped up to share the load, that I could not name them all. But some examples of people who committed themselves to the vitality and growth of Sheridan UU during its formative years include Lani and Ginny, Janet and Victor, JoLynn and Bruce, Michelle and Bill, Sally and Ted, Stacy and Roger, Janelle and Phil, Halene and Chuck, Kris and Bill, Lorna and George, and Jerry Kresge. I count nearly 20 young people who grew up in the Fellowship, and a comparable number of members who have passed on. I dare say over its 37-year history Sheridan UU has touched hundreds.

Among its leaders, Chuck Graves was the consummate visionary. This was evident when he defended the University of Wyoming's Black 14 football players in a racially and religiously charged court case that drew national attention. His clear vision was manifest when he dubbed us the "Little Fellowship That Could" and prodded us into acquiring our own meeting house. Chuck even coaxed UUA President Peter Morales to travel to Sheridan and dedicate our Fellowship Hall. In a speech that packed the house Rev. Morales quipped, "Chuck Graves will not take NO for an answer."

That day in June of 2010 may have marked the coming of age for Sheridan UU. As if to sum up our reason for being, Rev. Morales offered his own vision of the role that UU can play in contemporary America. He cited people who are driven away by a fundamentalism that asks them to believe in creationism and miracles. He mentioned others that find no room in traditional religion for serious doubt. He lamented that “millions of Americans have been banished, driven out, rejected by the religious communities in which they were raised. When they could no longer utter the words of a creed, they left the church behind. And many of them left all religion behind.”

Rev. Morales also spoke of a growing number of people who left a church then raised their children with no religious affiliation. This younger generation comes to UU “wondering if there is something more than a life spent pursuing secular success.”

He suggested belief is over-rated and unreliable. Referring to the Pope’s acceptance of the reality of evolution, he said, “one can be a Catholic today and believe what a Catholic would have been [tried] and punished for a few hundred years ago.” He called belief the enemy of religion, that too often stands in the way of love and kindness.

His message culminated with a challenge, “We want a place where we can come together to remind ourselves of what is truly worthwhile. That is what worship is—it is literally an affirmation of worth.” Citing James Carse, he said what we need instead of creeds is a “higher ignorance.” Religion should “help us move to an awareness that we do not know everything, to a place of profound humility and curiosity.” You may have recently encountered the term “aspirational faith,” which embodies an ideal without claiming absolute truth. Agnes Callard, philosophy professor at the University of Chicago wrote, “What keeps aspirational faith honest is its provisional character, the aspirant’s recognition that she still has a long way to go.”

Franz Kafka said, “the meaning of life is that it stops.” A few years ago, Linda and I began to seriously ponder the end of our journey. Answering yet another blind vision, we left the beauty of Sheridan, the comfort of our friends, and the solidarity of the UU community to squeeze one more new experience out of our brief existence. We had no clue what would happen. But the move has enriched our perspective and rewarded us with renewed purpose. Of course, it hasn’t diminished in any way our 38 years in Sheridan. We cherish those years, the lifelong friends we made, and the opportunity to participate in an intentional community like the UU Fellowship.

Thanks to you, no less than your predecessors, the enterprise lives on. As to its source, who is to say where a river begins? It has countless headwaters and tributaries that contribute to its gathering momentum. Linda and I may have occupied the farthest upstream point, but our influence was a mere trickle compared to all who joined us along the way. Without them our little stream would have soon dried up. We all need each other to make sure our blood, sweat, and tears will eventually reach that great sea we call posterity.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to any new institution is to outlast the generation of its founders. I commend both the older and the younger leaders who continue to carry the Sheridan UU Fellowship into the future.