

The Thread That Connects Us: A Century of Resilient Women and Men

By David Marmorek¹

Actors and Roles

David Marmorek – as himself (*wearing pants that have a much longer left leg than right, big 'E' on left leg, and big 'R' on right leg*)

Owen Marmorek – as himself (*wearing blue jeans and a Steve Jobs or Apple T-shirt*)

Jack Jefferson - **JB Marshallsay**, (*dressed formally in a suit, as old a style as possible*)

George Morgan – **James Tonkin**, (*dressed formally in a suit, as old a style as possible*)

Patience Towler – **Ada Tonkin**, (*in an elegant dress, as old a style as possible*)

Patricia Starten – **Peggy Woods** (*elegant - 1964 style if possible*)

Isobel Gibson-Flader – as herself 11 years from now (*elegant but flashy, jaunty cap; makeup to look older*)

Anne Nicklewicz – as herself in present day

Eleanore Dunn – as herself in present day

Props

Desk and chair centre stage close to the podium. Sitting at the desk David is looking towards the podium. A laptop computer is on the desk. There's a sewing kit on the floor in front of the desk, with a bright ball of blue yarn sitting on it. Hidden under the podium are some hedge clippers.

¹ With lots of archival and oral history help from Keith Wilkinson, Diana Ellis, Michael Welton, Patience Towler, Jack Jefferson, Eleanore Dunn, Anne Niklewicz, Steven Epperson and Philip Hewitt, as well as written histories from Arthur Peacey and Archie Peebles (1960), and Peggy Woods (1979).

The Play

David is struggling with his pants, mumbling and grumbling, playing with different materials to patch pants, pulling out spools of thread from the sewing kit. He turns to the laptop on the desk, types a few things, grumbles some more, and then looks back at this pants.

Owen enters from stage right (behind the piano)

Owen: What's the problem Dad?

David: Oh, I'm wrestling with how to fix the church's budget deficit, and also fix these pants.

Owen: Yea, I've been meaning to ask you, what's **with** those pants?

David:

On the one leg (*point to left leg*) we have this fantastic community, led by the truly amazing Steven Epperson. It radiates spiritual growth, social justice, environmental sustainability, education for kids and adults, art, music... **and** needs close to \$600,000 to keep it going (that's the **E** for Expenses on my left leg).

And on the other leg (*point to right leg*) we have '**R**' for Revenues, two thirds of which come from pledges.

Owen: OK. But other than your **astounding** lack of fashion sense, what's the real problem here?

David: The real problem is that our expenses (*touch left leg*) are 14% more than our revenues, (*touch right leg*). Doesn't sound like much put that way, but it's \$82,000 per year.

Owen: *Looking carefully at David's legs.* That's more than a 14% difference.

David: Artistic license.

Owen: So how does the Church make up the difference?

David: Excellent question! We've been really lucky to have had some very generous people who gave large bequests, like Julian Fears. But that money's now used up. And we can't rely on people dying to feed the living.

Owen: They did in the movie Soylent Green.

David: Yes, but that was a horrific movie, and definitely not a Unitarian kind of future. *<pause >* I don't know, sometimes it seems like more than just these pants are hanging by a thread. I wonder about the resilient men and women from UCV's last 100 years – how **they** worked through tough financial struggles. I wish I could talk to them.

Owen: You know Dad, I was just exploring this incredible web site where you look up a person, enter a year, and he or she appears as a talking hologram. You can watch them for a while as they were in that year, and then actually interact. I was just chatting with Jimi Hendrix after his 1967 show at the Monterey Pop Festival.

David: Bizarre! Is that the festival where he set his guitar on fire?

Owen: The very same.

David: Wow! Please don't try that at home. But can you show me this website?

Owen: Sure. *Owen takes over the computer.* It should even work on your stability-challenged PC. It doesn't even need a Mac.

Types for a while. Ah here it is. Oh, before we begin you have to agree to all of these terms, including "**assuming all liabilities for changing the space-time continuum and future events**". Can I click "I agree"?

David: Absolutely. This is the canvass. We're **trying** to change future events.

Owen: OK, ready to go. What year do you want to explore, and to whom do you want to talk?

David: Let's start in 1919, ten years after the start of the church, and find JB Marshallsay. He was one of the first members, Chair of the Board of Trustees right through World War I, and delivered lay services when UCV was "between Ministers". That must have been a really tough time.

Owen (*typing*): "J-B MARSHALLSAY 1919". Ah, here he is. *Turns toward the podium, as JB walks up.*

David: (*to Owen whispering*): This hologram looks so real!

JB Marshallsay: (*Facing the congregation as he delivers his sermon*)

Friends -

Another year in our Church Calendar finds us still marking time; that is, still holding "Lay Services", and the thought struck me that this would be a good opportunity to take stock as it were, and in a spirit of self-examination try and determine just where we are and what we stand for. Owing to the Great Conflict, and the enormous sacrifice of life, the veil between life and death seems to be partly lifted, because those who have lost their nearest and dearest, have become deeply interested in the spiritual side of life.¹

David: Excuse me sir? Mr. Marshallsay?

JB Marshallsay: (*Surprised*) Goodness – what's this magnificent building? And who are you? And why are you wearing such awful pants?

David: Um, this is the current Unitarian Church of Vancouver, my name's David Marmorek, this is my son Owen, and the pants are an illustration of the gap between our church's revenues and expenses.

JB Marshallsay: Oh yes, I'm quite familiar with that problem. Why back in 1911 when I was Treasurer, our expenses were \$1,438 and our revenues only \$1,301 – a difference of \$137!! Can you imagine a deficit of that magnitude?

David: Well Mr. Marshallsay, I'd **love** to imagine a deficit of that magnitude. What got you through your difficult financial periods? Didn't you buy the first church property at Granville Street and 10th Avenue in 1913? How did you manage that?

JB Marshallsay: Well there were 3 big things that helped us: a great minister (the Reverend Matthew Scott), money from the American Unitarian Association (or AUA), and a very committed congregation.

Mr. Scott joined us from England in 1911 until ill health forced him to resign in 1913. It's doubtful that Vancouver ever had a more brilliant minister. Two services were held every Sunday, and the evening meeting was packed out. Though at first he wasn't too happy here.

David: Why was that?

JB Marshallsay: Well, I happened to see a letter that Mr. Scott wrote to Dr. Samuel Elliott, the President of the AUA in the fall of 1911, shortly after he joined us. He wrote:

“The bulk of the congregation is made up of people who are struggling to make a living, most of whom are seeking help rather than able to give it. We meet in a dancing hall redolent on Sundays of scraps and stale beer. We meet there simply because we cannot afford anything better... It will take many a day before we can have a self-supporting church in **this** city. Money is scarce, rent and living expenses are abnormally high, and the atmosphere of this place when not directly hostile is quite indifferent to our message.”ⁱⁱ

David: Yikes! And yet, two years later in 1913, you had your first church building at 1550 West 10th Avenue. How was such a change possible in so short a time?

JB Marshallsay: Well first of all, Mr. Scott and the congregation warmed up to each other quite quickly. And then because of that enthusiasm, the AUA lent us \$4500 for the 10th Ave. lot, and \$1500 towards the building. The congregation pledged a total of \$4500 to pay off the land loan, volunteered their time to work on the building, and agreed to pay off the building loan over a 10-year period.

David: Hmm, we don't have the AUA to bail us out anymore, or any other benevolent outside support. We need to rely on ourselves. But you received \$4500 in pledges from the members. How many members did you have in 1913?

JB Marshallsay: Oh, I should think about 45 people.

David: So about \$100 per person in 1913. Owen, how much would that be in 2009 dollars?

Owen: (*typing madly on the computer*). OK, \$100 in 1913, average annual inflation rate of 3.15%, 96 years... WOW - that would be \$2,000 per person in 2009 dollars.

David: That's a lot! Why, if we had an average annual pledge of \$2,000, we'd be able to eliminate the deficit and still have \$200,000 left over. Those members in 1913 must have dug **very deep** into their pockets.

JB Marshallsay: Yes, they were indeed a very committed group. But it did take **many** years to fulfill those pledges, not just one year. Now **I** have a question – how come your typewriter doesn't have any paper?

Owen: Oh - this isn't a typewriter, it's a computer. You don't need paper because everything that you type is stored inside.

JB Marshallsay: Hmm. I should think that without any paper you'd be rather vulnerable if that computing thing ever broke down and you lost what you'd typed.

Owen: Ah, yes... well that does happen occasionally... especially with a PC, the computer that my father has. However, there's another computer called a Mac...

David: (*Interrupting Owen...*) Aaah, let's defer that topic, which I know from past experience could take **quite** some time. Thank you **so** much Mr. Marshallsay, you've been **very** helpful.

We'd like two of our Canvass Committee members, Anne Nicklewicz and Eleanore Dunn, to present you with a symbol of the thread that connects all of us over a century of time.

Anne and Eleanore walk forward. Anne picks up the ball of bright blue yarn from the sewing kit, unrolls about a 2 m of yarn, which she holds onto, and hands the remaining big ball to JB. Together, the two of them walk to the back of the stage, then turn to face the congregation. The three of them continue "talking" silently, mouthing words. Anne stands to JB's right holding one end of the yarn, and JB holds the ball. Eleanore is to JB's left.

From the actors' point of view looking out at the audience, it looks like this:

*LEFT - Eleanore – JB (**with ball of yarn**) – Anne - RIGHT*

Owen: Whom should we look up next?

David: Let's find Ministers James and Ada Tonkin, in May 1932, during the Great Depression, when they were forced to leave UCV and return to England.

Owen: *Typing as he talks:* "James and Ada Tonkin, 1932"

James and Ada Tonkin walk up to the Podium together. Both share the microphone.

James Tonkin: *(Sad but strong)* My dear friends:

These are very difficult times, and an even more difficult day. Ada and I are immensely grateful to have served as your Ministers since we came here in 1926. Ada also served the Victoria Unitarians until she joined the Vancouver Police Department in 1929. During our time together, we have held forums on many religious, social and economic issues, open to all and very well attended by all sectors of society. We have initiated a Dramatic Society and a Literary Society. Most of all, we've experienced great warmth and love from all of you.

Ada Tonkin: *(Strident and strong).* Indeed we have. And with your moral support, I've been able in my job with the Police Department to speak out publicly on crime. Crime is a disease, it should be diagnosed and treated as such, and measures should be taken to prevent crime as we endeavor to prevent disease. The root causes lie in our economic, social, educational and even climatic systems.ⁱⁱⁱ
{Hesitates, weaker} But hard times have hit us too.

James Tonkin: As you know, our congregation has not been growing, and so I felt that it was no longer appropriate to receive money from the American and British Unitarian Associations to support my salary, which I cancelled a few months ago.

Ada Tonkin: James never announced this publicly, but for the last two months he has been working as your Minister without any remuneration. Some people in Vancouver felt that in these hard times it was wrong for both a husband and a wife to have employment, though in fact only one of us was being paid. Unfortunately due to these attitudes, and probably some resentment of a strong woman who speaks her mind, I was **fired** from my job last week at the Police Department. As this has eliminated our only source of income, we must return to England.

David: Excuse me, Mr. and Mrs. Tonkin?

Ada Tonkin: *(both are very surprised)* Yes? *(Looking around)* My, what a beautiful church! What church **is** this?

David: It's the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. In 2009.

Ada Tonkin: Other than being completely incomprehensible, that's the best news I've had all week!

David: I'm sorry to interrupt your farewell speech. But based on your very difficult experiences, do you have any advice for how the Unitarian Church could avoid financial problems now, and in the future? We certainly don't want to lose **our** wonderful Minister!

James Tonkin: As you might have detected by now, I have a wee bit of Scottish background. Which makes me think of three things.

First, it's vital that you are able to pay your Minister what he or she needs to live well, since he or she anchors the congregation. Prior to my tenure of six and a half years, we had 7 ministers who lasted an average of 16 months! In hindsight it was unwise for me to cancel the outside support for my salary. Maintain all potential revenue sources.

Second, build up the Church's savings in good times to cover the unexpected bad times - that's the kind of resilience we didn't have in 1929 when the crash hit. Of course I'm sure by now regulators have figured out how to prevent stock market manipulation.

And third, make sure that your expenses don't exceed your revenues. That would be like someone wearing trousers where the two legs were of different lengths, which I gather from you must be the modern style.

Ada: Modern or not - those pants are ridiculous! I'm going to shorten your left leg right now so that it equals the right leg! (*reaches under the podium to grab some hedge clippers, and walks towards David*).

David: (*Afraid - pleading - talking quickly*) No - don't cut this leg!! It's our expenses, and they're bigger - I mean it's longer, than the revenues, the other leg, but there's flesh and blood under there (*lifts left pant leg*) - religious education, music, salaries, money for maintaining this beautiful building, lots of things.

Ada: (*putting hedge clippers back*) Well, you'd be very wise sir to take a very long look up both pant legs, (*David starts to look up a pant leg - Ada's shocked*) in the privacy of your own budget meetings, and find some way to make them at least equal, plus a reserve for unexpected events.

David: Thank you both **so much** for your insights, and also for putting those hedge clippers back. Please join Mr. JB Marshallsay, whom I'm sure you know well, and the thread that links us all.

Eleanore comes forward, and guides Ada and James to the back. James stands to JB's left, and Ada stands to the left of James. Eleanore stays to the left of Ada. James and Ada shake hands with JB enthusiastically. JB passes Ada the ball of yarn. They engage in mock (silent) conversation.

From the actors' point of view looking out at the audience, it looks like this:

LEFT - Eleanore – Ada (with ball of yarn) – James - JB – Anne - RIGHT

Owen: Who's next Dad?

David: Well, let's talk to Peggy Woods, in September 1964, just at the time of dedication of this church. She was the Administrative Secretary, and apparently a very dynamic person who connected everyone together.

Owen: *(typing)* Peggy Woods, 1964.

Peggy Woods: *Stepping up to the podium.* This is such a wonderful day, in this most wonderful building! I'm so grateful to so many of you for making this possible.

First, I must thank Phillip Hewett who joined us 8 years ago. Our church has grown in size, depth and diversity through your dedication, eloquence and courage. You have spoken out against nuclear testing, the Vietnam War and many other issues, and outpaced us all on mountain hikes.

Second, I'm so grateful to the 50 volunteers who help to teach the 600 children in our Sunday school – you are the foundation of our families today, and of informed, compassionate citizens tomorrow.

Third, huge thanks to all of the people who made this building possible physically and financially – the Board and Finance Committee, the architect Wolfgang Gerson, the builders and craftsmen, Temple Shalom for sharing the space, and – **MOST OF ALL** – the **181 people here** *(sweeps hand across the congregation)*- who guaranteed our mortgage.

Owen: Excuse me, Ms. Woods, how did they guarantee the mortgage?

Peggy: Well, people gave anywhere from \$250 to \$5000, and several members took out second mortgages on their own homes. The total amount was over \$175,000. Without that commitment, this building wouldn't be here.^{iv}

Owen: Wow, \$175,000 in 1964 is \$1.2 million in 2009 dollars! And \$250 then was like \$1,700 today, and \$5,000 then was like \$34,000 today! Those are BIG commitments.

David: Thank you so much Ms. Woods – **your** many contributions are still resonating here today. We are immensely grateful.

Eleanor comes forward, and guides Peggy to the back. Ada passes Peggy the ball of yarn. Peggy shakes hands with the Tonkins and then engages in mock (silent)

conversation with them.

From the actors' point of view looking out at the audience, it looks like this:

LEFT - Eleanore – Peggy (with ball of yarn) - Ada - James - JB – Anne - RIGHT

Owen: Hey Dad, I wonder if you can use this website to look into the future.

David: What an interesting idea! Let's see if we can contact Isobel Gibson-Flader in 2020. She's one of the members of our youth group. Maybe the youth group will be done washing our cars by then.

Owen: *(typing)* Isobel Gibson-Flader, 2020.

Isobel: *Stepping up to the podium.* Welcome members of the 2020 Board of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver. As your Treasurer, it gives me **great** pleasure to report that we again have a balanced operating budget, now for the **eighth** straight year. Our expanded and shared buildings continue to bring in sustainable revenues, and total pledges are up again this year with our expanded membership. This has allowed us to retain our talented staff and amazing Minister Epperson, now in his 18th year with us, but *(Isobel looks over at Steven)* looking exactly as he did in 2009. At the same time, our many volunteers help to keep costs under control. Furthermore, our housing, social justice and renewable energy endowments continue to grow through some very generous donations, enabling continued positive investments in our local community and local planet.

As part of my MBA work this year, I looked back over the turbulent financial history of UCV. Despite the serious recession back in 2009, it seems that 2009 was really the turning point for a whole new era of financial sustainability at UCV. That's when the whole congregation really dug down deep, gave very generous contributions, and made hard but necessary decisions. They set the standard to which we all aspire now.

David: Thank you so much Isobel for this very inspiring future history. It's good to know that our future is in such capable hands, hearts and minds. Please join our friends from past eras.

(Eleanore guides Isobel to the back. She silently introduces her to Peggy, who shakes her hand and gives her the ball of yarn. Simultaneously, David and Owen line up next to Anne and she gives them some of her yarn.)

From the actors' point of view looking out at the audience, it now looks like this:

Eleanore – Isobel (with ball of yarn) – Peggy - Ada - James - JB – Anne – David – Owen

All: *(Holding up the yarn that connects them, high in the air, with their hands above their heads)* There's a 100-year thread (**Isobel:** 111 years!) linking us all together. And now, it's in your hands!

(Isobel throws the ball of yarn into the audience, ideally all the way to the back of the Sanctuary). Everyone exits to their left, following Isobel. Anne picks up the loose yarn so that nobody trips going up to the stage.)

FIN

Notes:

ⁱ From the Presidents Address at the 10th annual meeting of UCV, May 2nd, 1919.

ⁱⁱ From letter excerpts provided by Michael Welton

ⁱⁱⁱ Part of this excerpted from *The Ubyyssey* January 23, 1931

^{iv} From archival records discovered by Diana Ellis.

References:

Arthur Peacey and Archie Peebles (1960). *The Unitarian Church of Vancouver 1909-1959. A Short History.* 21 pp.

Peggy Woods (1979). *A brief history of the Unitarian Church of Vancouver 1909-1979.* 20 pp.