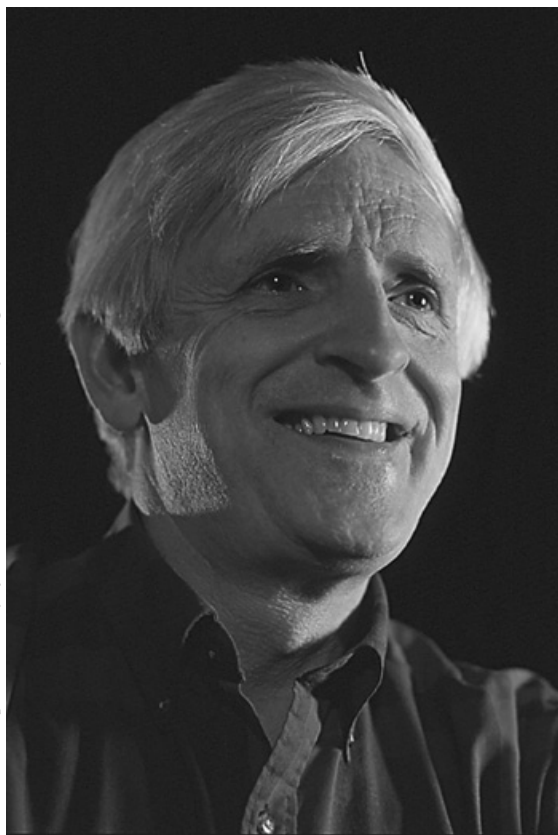


Adventures in Creation Spirituality

CHARLES BURACK

Matthew Fox; photo, courtesy of his website, www.matthewfox.org



I first heard the name *Matthew Fox* in 1997. Ana Matt, a friend from the East Bay Jewish community, told me that she and her husband had taught several courses at the Institute for Culture and Creation Spirituality. She explained that this was an interfaith Master's program that Fox had established at Holy Names College in the Oakland hills. Fox had recently been asked to leave the college because of his deeply ecumenical approach to spiritual education. In 1996 he started up the University of Creation Spirituality in downtown Oakland. Ana thought I'd enjoy meeting him and teaching at his new school.

I didn't know anything about creation spirituality, but I valued Ana's intuition and was excited to meet a man who inspired her and who was a passionate proponent of interfaith education. She said he would soon be reading from his new book, *Confessions: The Making of a Post-Denominational Priest*, at Gaia Books in Berkeley. I decided to go to the reading and try to chat with him afterward.

Dr. Charles Burack is director of the Undergraduate Psychology Program at John F. Kennedy University. A widely published writer and award-winning scholar, he is author of two books: D. H. Lawrence's Language of Sacred Experience (Palgrave Macmillan, 2005) and Songs to My Beloved (Sacred Arts, 2004). He is completing a new book on creative living, as well as a new book on integral spirituality. He is actively involved in interfaith education, arts, counseling, and chaplaincy and can be reached at www.charlesburack.com.

MEETING MATTHEW FOX

Gaia Books had one of the best collections of spirituality resources in the Bay Area. Almost every night it offered book talks and readings with many of the luminaries in the fields of religion, mysticism, and personal development. When I arrived at Gaia in the early evening, the store was packed.

Fox was a slim, fit man whose face radiated vitality and intelligence.

More than a hundred people were sitting in folded chairs or milling around the book shelves, waiting for the reading to begin. Ana was there and had saved me a seat.

At 7:30 the store owner approached the mic, welcomed us all and gave a brief introduction of Fox. Then she handed him the mic. Fox was a slim, fit man whose face radiated vitality and intelligence. Only his white hair gave away his age. He did not wear a collar or other priestly garb.

Fox spoke with passion and humor about some of the highlights and lowlights of his career. In the late 1960s he had studied in Paris with Father Marie Dominic Chenu, who had identified a “creation-centered spirituality” tradition in Christianity and Judaism. This tradition honors the sacredness of creation, esteems women and feminine values, embraces the arts, prizes love, wisdom, prophesy and mysticism, and seeks to bring about gender, social and ecological justice. It affirms the presence of divinity in all things, ensuring that the world

and human beings are basically good and holy. Electrified by his discovery of this biblically-based tradition, Fox saw his task as deepening his understanding of creation spirituality in the world’s religions and beginning a cultural translation of it. He also discovered in contemporary cosmology a reverence for the evolving universe. Several years

Fox identified four major ways that people connect to divinity in and beyond the world.

later, while teaching at Barat College in Lake Forest, Illinois, he was invited to conduct a study on “Spirituality and Education”, and from that study was inspired to formulate an educational curriculum based on creation spirituality. The curriculum responded to what he saw as the tremendous need for spirituality; its aim was “to train mystics and prophets”.

The curriculum was not accepted by Barat College; so in 1977, Fox established the Institute in Creation-Centered Spirituality at nearby Mundelein College in Chicago. The curriculum was structured around what he called “the four paths of creation spirituality”. Building on Meister Eckhart’s mystical vision, Fox identified four major ways that people connect to divinity in and beyond the world. The first two paths are of ways of being, while the second two are ways of doing. The first path, the Via Positiva, is encountering divinity through experiences of awe and delight in the cosmos. The second path, the

Via Negativa, is encountering divinity through experiences of loss, suffering, darkness, and the emptying out of the self. The third path, the Via Creativa, is meeting divinity through creative activity, especially through contemplative approaches to the arts. The fourth path,

row can inspire holy acts of creativity and justice – and inspired art-making and activism can evoke experiences of numinous bliss, grief, peace and wonder.

After six years at Mundelein College, Fox moved out to the Bay Area in 1983 and established the Institute for



Lotus Mountain; original art, Liz Gill Neilson

the Via Transformativa, is becoming an agent of divinity by using one's creative energy to transform self and society through acts of compassion and justice.

he was criticized by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, for being a feminist theologian, for calling God "Mother" and "Child", for preferring "original blessing" to "original sin"

The four paths are interconnected; they are more like facets of a single prism or aspects of a complex symphony. Thus, our experiences of sacred joy and sor-

Culture and Creation Spirituality at Holy Names College. He hired a group of deeply spiritual and creative teachers from Western, Eastern, and indigenous religions to teach in the program, which offered both academic seminars and art-as-meditation classes. Shortly after his arrival at this small Catholic college, he received a letter from his provincial in Chicago indicating that the Vatican had received complaints about his books and that a commission was set up to review them.

Although the commission found his ideas undeserving of condemnation, he was criticized by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger, then head of the Vatican's Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, for being a feminist theologian, for calling God "Mother" and "Child", for preferring "original blessing" to "original sin", for associating too closely

with Wiccans and Native Americans, for not condemning homosexuals, and for critiquing and replacing the traditional names of the stages of the spiritual journey (Purgation, Illumination and Union) with the four paths of creation spirituality. In 1988 Cardinal Ratzinger silenced Fox for one year and forced him to step down as director of the program. In 1993 Fox left the Dominican Order rather than comply with their summons to return to Chicago and leave his program in Oakland. The following year he became an Episcopal priest. In 1996 Holy Names College terminated the ICCS program, and soon thereafter Fox founded the University of Creation Spirituality in downtown Oakland. Many of the ICCS faculty joined him there. Fox said one of his main aims in founding the university was to keep together the amazing ecumenical faculty he had assembled.

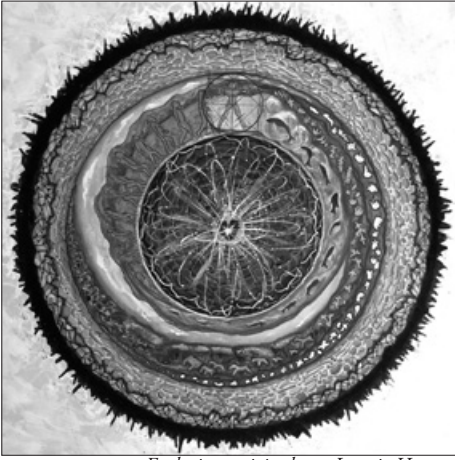
I was impressed by Fox's courage and interfaith vision. He was someone unafraid to challenge his religious denomination for the sake of a greater spiritual vision and practice of diversity-in-unity. I was also impressed by his passion, brilliance and sense of humor. Despite his ecumenical vision, however, it was also clear that he still harbored a lot of anger and resentment toward the Vatican and toward the "fall-redemption theology" it stood for. My sense was that an inclusive interfaith vision required some degree of acceptance and reconciliation with persons, peoples and groups who held radically different views.

After the talk, a line of people formed to speak with Fox and have him

autograph his book. I decided to go to the back of the line so that I could have a minute or two with him. When it came my turn, I briefly told him my background as well as my interest in teaching at his new university. He said I sounded like I might be a good fit and encouraged me to contact the university. He gave me the name of one of the university administrators and said to call her.

That week I contacted the administrator but received a cool response. She said the program was small and already had many instructors who had come from Holy Names. Though she was not encouraging, she suggested that I stay in touch.

In late 1997, I published my first article in *Tikkun* magazine. Entitled "Cultivating Oneness". It describes my early experimentation with interfaith approaches to prayer and meditation. Some of these experiments involved praying with different names for divinity and broadening traditional Jewish prayers to include all peoples and all beings. Several months after the article appeared, my intuition told me that Fox might appreciate it, so I decided to send him a copy. He immediately contacted me, said he liked the article very much, and wanted to try me out as a teacher by having me teach a weekend workshop. When I contacted the university administrator again, she was now welcoming and encouraging. We set up a workshop for September 1998, during the week between Rosh HaShanah and Yom Kippur. It was designed to help students write their course papers, Master's theses, and doctoral dissertations.



Evolution; original art, Lonnie Hanzon

THE SPIRIT OF THE PLACE

One of the things that first struck me was the building. The university was located on the northwest corner of Broadway Avenue and 22nd Street in downtown Oakland. The building had a nondescript exterior, much like

you realized how brief the evolution of life is in comparison with the evolution of the entire of the cosmos, and how even briefer is the evolution of human existence

the other office buildings in the neighborhood. But as soon as you opened the front door, you felt like you were entering another world. You were met by a long steep carpeted stairwell with several dozen steps. To your left was a wall painted from floor to ceiling with cosmological events from the big bang to the creation of galaxies and stars and

Earth and the evolution of life. You literally ascended the stairs from the beginning of time to the present moment. What an awesome experience! And as you reached the top of the staircase, you realized how brief the evolution of life is in comparison with the evolution of the entire of the cosmos, and how even briefer is the evolution of human existence: just a sliver of time – a tiny, tiny fraction of the mural – compared to the 14-billion-year-old universe. The opposite wall had paper placards with quotes from creation-centered mystics and scientists, such as Meister Eckhart, Hildegard of Bingen, Thomas Aquinas, Albert Einstein, Teilhard de Chardin, Mahatma Gandhi, Abraham Joshua Heschel, and Thomas Berry. Quotes included: “Just to be is a blessing. Just to live is holy” (Heschel); “Imagination is more important than knowledge” (Einstein); and “Isness is God” (Eckhart). Being surrounded by the evolution of the universe and by inspirational sayings from around the globe gave me a feeling of wonder and joy. It was as if by ascending the steps I was literally participating in a rite of passage: a movement through time and eternity and the wisdom of the ages.

I was also struck by the interior design of the university’s main space, which was designed and built by Fox’s friend Ben Yee. The long staircase led to the second floor, which had a large open space with skylights and was surrounded by classrooms with large interior windows. Above each classroom door was painted the name of a mystic – Aquinas, Hildegard, Heschel, Gandhi, Sojourner

Truth, and Hobday-Ghosthorse – and each door frame was painted a different color, giving the collective sense of a rainbow of mystics from different traditions. It was literally an ecumenical experience to stand in the center of the open gathering space and look around at the beautifully painted rooms honoring the world's mystics. One unique windowless room was known as “the cave”. It was a small dark space in which classes, meditations, and rituals were sometimes held. It was a kind of primal sacred space at the center of the university that transcended any one religious tradition or denomination.

NEW APPROACH TO TEACHING

The writing workshop received an enthusiastic response from the students, and Fox invited me invited to teach the required course on the Reinvention of Work in the spring, as well as do some student advising. I had recently completed a Ph.D. in English, but I had many years of professional experience as a career counselor, strategic planner, and communications consultant and drew on these experiences to develop the course. I also drew on my experiences as a meditator and creative writer and on my prior experiments with teaching. For several years,



Kenrokuen Gardener, Kanazawa, Japan; photo, Pat Connery

I had been introducing contemplative and creative exercises into my writing and literature courses at UC Berkeley and had witnessed their dramatic impact on students: the exercises sharpened perception, catalyzed intuition, enhanced imagination, expanded memory, and opened doors to self-discovery and transformation.

I wanted the students' career exploration process to tap their profound intuitions, passions, dreams, imaginings, talents, understandings and fundamental values.

The Reinvention of Work course had originally been created and taught by Fox, and he was happy to have me teach it in my own way. Of course, I chose to use his book, *The Reinvention of Work*, as one of the required readings. The book applies the four paths of creation spirituality to the work world and demonstrates how spirit can be brought to the workplace to make work more healthy, whole, just, joyful, compassionate, creative, communal and sacred. It is rooted in a postmodern holistic paradigm that views the cosmos as numinous, interconnected, alive and evolving.

As a result of my commitment to holistic, transformative education and to the creative process, I wanted to develop a contemplative-creative approach to the course material that would help students explore their own work lives in relation to the four paths of creation spirituality. My approach was based on

the premise that if students were to authentically reinvent their work selves and transform their work lives, then their discovery process would have to be rooted in the most profound and expansive dimensions of their being – the soul. I wanted to go well beyond conventional approaches to career exploration that emphasized thinking about and analyzing one's work experience, interests, skills, values and knowledge in relation to the current and future job market. I wanted the students' career exploration process to tap their profound intuitions, passions, dreams, imaginings, talents, understandings and fundamental values. I also wanted them to consider how they are called to respond to the dire needs of the world. I agreed with Frederick Buechner that, for most individuals, their life-work calling is "the place where your deep gladness and the world's deep hunger meet." So I devised a series of simple meditations to enable students to contemplate their experiences of suffering and joy in the work place, to tap their boundless creative potential, and to employ their contemplative-creative intelligence to discover and develop their work vision. In effect, I was leading students on a contemplative-creative journey through the four paths of creation spirituality.

By the end of the course most students had discovered or clarified their work vision. I was as amazed and grateful as they were that the meditations had helped to produce such powerful results. Students ranged in age from early 20s to late 60s. Many were accomplished individuals but had been less than whole-

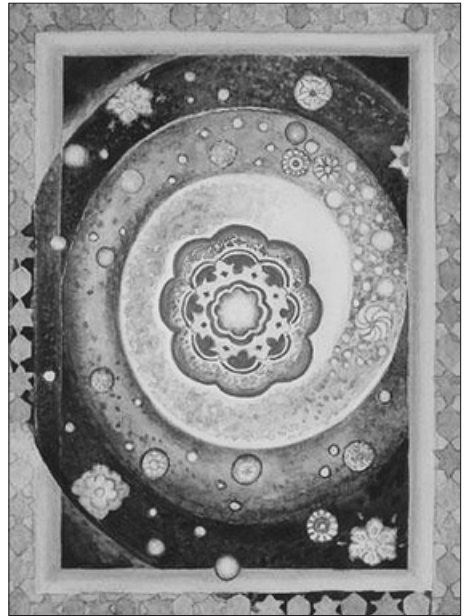
hearted about their careers. Now they were brimming with enthusiasm about their future livelihoods. Some made dramatic shifts: from a career in banking to a vocation in hypnotherapy; from a high-tech career to a calling as a minister; from the legal profession to founding a spiritual retreat center. I too felt I was reinventing myself as a teacher. The dramatic power of the contemplative and creative processes was evident to me. I felt called to continue experimenting with these processes in my other courses.

JOINING THE CORE FACULTY

Matt appreciated my rapport with students, faculty and staff as well as my ability to bridge worlds: the academic and business worlds, the traditional and alternative educational worlds, and the spiritual and secular worlds. He also appreciated my desire to share the Jewish tradition with students of all religious and cultural backgrounds. In spring 1999 he invited me to become one of the handful of core faculty members. I was delighted and immediately said Yes. My contract included both teaching and advising responsibilities in the Master's and doctoral programs. Over the next seven years I would teach courses in sacred poetry, spirituality in modern literature, essay writing, reinventing work, reinventing leadership, creativity, creative writing, Jewish Mysticism, and Jewish mystical poetry and prayer. I also offered spiritual direction and writing coaching.

Around the time I joined the faculty, the Master's program shifted its affili-

ation from New College of California to Naropa University, an ecumenical Buddhist university based in Boulder, Colorado. Matt had chosen to affiliate with these other universities because the affiliation gave the Master of Arts program immediate accreditation. Thus, he had two schools under one roof: Naropa University, Oakland (NUO), which offered a fully accredited Master of Liberal Art's program, and the University of Creation Spirituality (UCS), which offered a Doctor of Ministry program.



Soul of the Universe; original art, Setsuko Yoshida

AMAZING PEOPLE

What made UCS/NUO a uniquely powerful and innovative educational adventure was the amazing people: its visionary leader, its gifted faculty, its devoted and caring staff, and its vital and open students who were thirsty for

spiritual wisdom, inner exploration, creative growth, and authentic transformation of self and society.

Matt is a powerful teacher. I had the privilege of sitting in on many of his classes on Meister Eckhart, Thomas Aquinas, St. John of the Cross, Deep Ecumenism, and Evil. He has an unflagging passion for the material he teaches, almost like a child's enthusiasm and curiosity about the world. That passion is fed by his love of teaching and his firm belief that the various creation spirituality traditions around the world, combined with the insights of contemporary science, especially of cosmology, offer the true paths for the compassionate and creative evolution

Matt is a powerful teacher.

of humankind. Matt would often pepper his brilliant lectures with inspiring stories of individuals he knew who were acting as mystics, artists and prophets in their professions. In some of his classes, he mostly lectured; in others, he invited the students to offer their perspectives on the course texts and to share their life and work experiences. It was interesting to see how student responses sometimes divided. Some students mainly wanted to hear Matt lecture, saying "We paid all this money to hear Matt's ideas and insights, not our fellow classmates." We can talk with them after class." Other students mostly wanted to hear from their classmates, saying, "It's important that everyone's voice is heard, and that each person's personal experience and wisdom are honored." This division

reflected the tension between the traditional authority-lecture model of teaching and the contemporary egalitarian-participatory model.

Matt had a genius for attracting amazing faculty. It is no exaggeration to say that the faculty members were all deeply spiritual, vital, creative and open human beings. Though having similar values, each had a unique personality and religious orientation. During the seven years when I was on the faculty, the "regulars" included Marlene DeNardo, Clare Ronzani, Dorsey Blake, Mel Bricker, Carol Vacciarelo, Jeremy Taylor, Ana Perez-Chisti, Adrianna Diaz, Russill Paul, Bruce Silverman, Luisa Teish, Brian Swimme, Lawrence Edwards, Michael Mansfield, Robert Rice, Apela Colorado, Jose Hobday, Kaleo Ching, Elise Ching, Jill Martin, John Parente, Jackie Hairston, Betty McAfee, Gayle Edmisten Watkin, Molefi Kete Asante, Ana Matt, Ken Butigan, Daniel Buford, Mary Ford-Grabowsky, Genny Lim, Mara Freeman, Shanja Kirstann and Rolf Osterberg. Visiting teachers included M.C. Richards, Buck Ghosthorse, Clarissa Pinkola Estes, Neil Douglass-Klotz, Carolyn Myss, Anita Barrows, Starhawk, Peter Russell, Rupert Sheldrake, Bruce Chilton, Marcus Borg, Alex Grey, Hal Taussig, Judith McKinnon, Jyotsna Sanzgiri, Rolf Osterberg and others. These are all highly intelligent and passionate individuals committed to spiritual exploration, interfaith sharing, wisdom, love, play, creativity, transformation and justice making. They represent the Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Taoist,

Yoruba, Native American, Jewish, Sufi and Wicca traditions and more. When our faculty meetings were well attended, they were like a mini Parliament of World Religions but even better because they sometimes had the intimate feeling of an extended family – intimate enough to have both joyous communions and heated disagreements.

Students learned as much or more from one another as from the teachers.

The administration and staff were also incredibly devoted, caring and talented individuals. Some were former nuns and monks who were attracted to Matt's vision of a more libratory and ecumenical Christianity that is body-affirming, earth-affirming and cosmos-affirming. Many of the administrators were also faculty. They included Marlene DeNardo, Dorsey Blake, Clare Ronzani, Mel Bricker, Carol Vaccariello, David Ford and Christina Gonzales. Marlene deeply understood Matt's educational vision and played a central role in leading the Master's program. Staff included Aileen Donovan, Grace Hogan, Ed Smith, Judith Coates, Debra Martin, Mary Franklin, Andrea Bryck, Julie Knowles and Dennis Edwards. They all made a personal connection with the students and took an interest in their academic and spiritual development.

Because of Matt's Christian roots, orientation and language, he tended to attract many students from Christian backgrounds. However, the students'

current spiritual paths varied widely, as did their work histories. Some had left Christianity altogether for Buddhist, Sufi, Hindu, or Native American paths, while others combined their Christianity with one or more of these other paths. Occasionally I heard students referring to themselves as "lapsed Catholics" or "lapsed Fundamentalists". Because of Matt's emphasis on spirituality, education, healthcare, and the creative arts, the university attracted many ministers, teachers, artists, musicians, therapists, and nurses. There were also a number of students with backgrounds in business, accounting, advertising, and law. Some of the D.Min. students were leaders in their professions, running state agencies, not-for-profit organizations, and educational programs.

The wealth of life and work experience made classroom discussions incredibly exciting and informative. Students learned as much or more from one another as from the teachers. I certainly learned a great deal from my students. It was clear that every student was on a unique yet related spiritual-creative journey and that each wanted to contribute to the world in his or her own way. Most students were inspired by Matt's empowering message that every person is a mystic, an artist, and a prophet. He believes that every person is capable of having a direct experience of divinity (mystic), and is able to express that connection through the creative arts (artist) as well as compassionate action and justice-making (prophet).

Matt was continually challenging students to become mystics, prophets

and creative change agents in their chosen professions. This meant getting in touch with the sacred calling at the heart of each profession and reinventing the profession so that it served that calling. Many of our students in the health professions connected with their sacred vocation as healers of body and soul. Students who were also teachers connected with their sacred vocation to inspire their own students to know, nurture and integrate their bodies, hearts, minds and spirits. D.Min. student Bernard Amadei, a professor of civil engineering at the University of Colorado at Boulders, was inspired to found Engineers Without Borders, which is “an organization dedicated to helping rural areas in developing countries with their engineering needs, including water, sanitation, and energy systems” (www.ewb-usa.org). M.A. and D.Min. student Gina Rose Halpern, an artist, minister and chaplain, was inspired to found The Chaplaincy Institute for Arts and Interfaith Ministries, one of the first organizations to train interfaith ministers, chaplains and spiritual

directors. The Chaplaincy Institute is committed to “re-visioning theological education to serve our pluralistic world” and teaches students to use dream work, spiritual direction, and the creative and healing arts in their interfaith ministries (www.chaplaincyinstitute.org). M.A. student and Maryknoll Sister Ann Braudis created an ecological sanctuary in the Philippines that “articulates a new understanding of what it means to live sustainably on Earth. This understanding is gleaned through reflection on scientific data, Scripture, the Catholic social tradition, and the wisdom that people have developed over the ages” (www.maryknollecological.weebly.com). M.A. student and DJ Jonathan Relucio joined the staff of Pace e Bene, a center for nonviolence education, resources and action. He created Enterdeependance, “a powerful journey ‘from violence to wholeness’ that integrates dance, music and embodied reflection” and helps youth to develop nonviolent approaches to their life challenges (www.paceebene.org). He has been successful in getting individuals out of gangs.



Spiritual Direction; photo, Cetta Kenney

SPECIAL STUDENT SERVICES: SPIRITUAL DIRECTION

UCS/NUO offered student services that are generally not offered at other universities. Several of the faculty and staff were trained as spiritual directors and offered free spiritual direction to any interested students. Spiritual direction is a companioning process that helps individuals to notice, savor and respond to the presence of divinity/spirit/essence/mystery in their lives. The process nurtures spiritual consciousness, action, and growth. I had the pleasure and privilege of serving as an interfaith spiritual director to students with a variety of religious backgrounds. How wonderful to be able to witness and support the profound spiritual challenges and changes that they were experiencing!

I have taught at over a dozen universities, and in none of these schools, or in any other schools I have been affiliated with, have the faculty had such a personal and important role in supporting the student's inner lives – in helping them to be present to the pain, purpose, and progress of their souls. Perhaps only in seminaries do students receive such personal support from their teachers.

THE UNIVERSITY MORPHS YET THE LEGACY LIVES ON

Like any organization, UCS/NUO had its organizational and financial challenges. And as in many visionary organizations, there was the visionary's challenge of stepping back and empowering others to co-create the vision as

well as co-lead and co-evolve the organization. One of the biggest challenges was one faced by nearly all small private educational institutions: how to remain financially sustainable. Without adequate capital, there isn't enough money for staffing, daily operations, and marketing. And without effective marketing and organizational practices, there aren't enough students. And without enough students there isn't enough tuition to pay the bills. And besides, almost no university can run on tuition alone. So universities have to either garner significant endowments or develop other revenue streams allowable under their charters.

It was certainly a tremendous adventure in creative, contemplative, interfaith education – and community.

The financial and organizational challenges proved to be too daunting for UCS/NUO. A decade after opening its doors, Matt passed on his presidential responsibilities to Dr. James Garrison, who renamed the school Wisdom University (WU). For financial reasons, WU soon moved out of the building on Broadway and became a school without walls, while maintaining an office in the Presidio. Naropa University, Oakland, moved to a new, temporary location in Preservation Park and went into a teach out mode, closing its doors in spring 2006. I continued to teach with Wisdom University until I was hired in July 2007 to chair the Liberal Arts department and direct the under-

graduate Psychology program at John F. Kennedy University and was no longer able to create the time to lead weeklong intensives.

Looking back over those seven years at UCS/NUO, I can say without hesitation that they constituted the greatest professional experience of my life, and also one of my greatest personal experiences. It was certainly a tremendous adventure in creative, contemplative, interfaith education – and community. I miss the school very much: its faculty, students, administrators, staff and building as well as its creative, transformational vision, activities and accomplishments.

Matt continues to work his magic around the Bay Area and around the country. I recently saw him at a memorial service for one of our beloved teachers, Sister Jose Hobday, a remarkable woman with Seneca ancestry who became a Franciscan nun. Matt told some won-

derful stories about Jose. She was almost like a mother to him. After the service he told me that he was working with inner city youth who were integrating spirituality into their rap music and videos. He had also recently completed books on reinventing education and on men's spirituality. It was evident that his vision, his passion and his brilliance are still at full strength, and so is his skill at telling inspiring stories. I am grateful to have worked for him and with him. He and the amazing people he drew together have made an interfaith vision more real to me – as well as more compelling and more urgent. Currently, the Friends of Creation Spirituality are fostering the growth of creation spirituality communities around the country and in Canada and Europe. Many former students, staff, administrators and faculty desire to keep building on their experiences of communing, creating and transforming together.



The Heart; original art, Setsuko Yoshida