

The Historicity of the Urantia Book

By Meredith Sprunger, PhD

The following story is the product of years of investigation and many hours of discussion with those associated with the origin of the Urantia Papers. It includes a personal knowledge and friendship with key people in the Urantia movement over the past thirty-eight years.

During this period I served pastorates in the United Church of Christ and joined the faculty of Indiana Institute of Technology, acting as head of the Department of Psychology, chair of the Division of Liberal Arts, and President. I have been especially careful to maintain academic objectivity and exercise critical evaluation of both The Urantia Book and the Urantia movement. The essential elements of the following narration have been cross-validated many times by numerous people who had first-hand experience in the events associated with the origin of The Urantia Book.

The Chicago Story

Dr. William S. Sadler (1875-1969), physician, surgeon, psychiatrist, professor, and author of forty-two books, was a man of unusual abilities. He was a popular lecturer on Chautauqua platforms and promoted modern medicine and mental health issues through talks, magazine articles, and books. As a result of this effective advocacy, he and his wife, Dr. Lena Sadler, were frequently asked by friends and acquaintances to host an informal group where medical and social issues could be discussed. Accordingly, the Sadlers started a Sunday afternoon tea in the mid 1920's, which became known as "The Forum," where such topics were examined and sometimes debated. In time the Forum came to be composed of professional people: doctors, lawyers, dentists, ministers, and teachers, along with individuals from all walks of life -- housewives, secretaries, farmers, and common laborers.

One Sunday a Forum member asked Dr. Sadler what he thought about a psychic medium who was drawing large crowds in one of the local theaters. Dr. Sadler replied that he had investigated many such psychics and found they were either dishonest frauds or sincere but self-deceived people whose subconscious mind activity led them to believe they were getting knowledge from the spirit world. "Then," he added, "there is one that I haven't figured out yet." They, of course, wanted to know about this person, later called "the contact personality," and Dr. Sadler shared some of the information gathered since 1911. For a number of years he and a small group of associates, called "the contact commission," had the opportunity of testing and verifying the content of unusual forms of distant communication. They were trained and familiarized with the technique of communication and information imparted by the alleged extra-planetary personalities, later known as "the revelators." Through such a sharing of information, the agenda of the Forum was virtually taken over by the revelators.

Around this time, a personality who claimed to be a student visitor to the planet challenged the contact commission saying, "If you people realized what a high spiritual source you were associated with, you would stop making these puerile investigations to detect fraud and ask some significant questions about the nature of reality and the universe." Dr. Sadler took this message to the Forum and suggested that they take up the challenge by writing questions which could be taken to the revelators. They agreed to do so, and the many questions submitted were organized by Dr. Sadler. The first question presented was, "Is there a God; and, if so, what is he like?" In response they received five papers which the revelators requested be read to the Forum and kept in Dr. Sadler's office safe.

Soon after the first Urantia Papers were presented, the revelators requested that they form a closed group. Each member of the Forum was asked to sign a pledge which read: "We acknowledge our pledge of secrecy, renewing our promise not to discuss the Urantia revelations or their subject matter with anyone save active Forum members, and to take no notes of such matter as it is read or discussed at the Forum meetings, or make copies or notes of what we have personally read." Membership tickets were issued and the charter membership numbered thirty. From time to time new members were received into the Forum after being interviewed by its officers and signing the pledge of secrecy. During the Forum's existence its membership rose to a total of 486. Members of the Forum were permitted to come to 533 Diversey Parkway and read the papers, but they were never taken from the building.

The original papers were handwritten. Handwriting experts agreed that it was not the writing of the human individual whose superconscious mind was used in some way in the materialization of the papers. They were requested to have these original papers typed and carefully checked by the members of the contact commission. Whenever the original papers were typed and checked, the originals in the locked safe disappeared.

Occasionally, after papers were read and placed in the office safe, they disappeared. When the contact commission inquired about this disappearance, very little explanation was given beyond the fact that it was their decision to withdraw the paper. Other papers were altered after being read to the Forum. For instance, one of the papers stated that the apostle Nathaniel had "a good sense of humor for a Jew." The members of the Forum chuckled at this comment. The next time they obtained this paper from the safe, they discovered the phrase "for a Jew" was deleted. The assumption was that they were required to read these papers to the Forum so that these higher beings could observe human reaction to the material presented. In this manner the papers composing The Urantia Book were received in the mid 1930's.

In 1939 members of the Forum were asked for volunteers who would be willing to meet on Wednesday evenings to seriously and systematically study the Urantia Papers. Seventy persons expressed their desire to join this class, and they became known as "The Seventy." The seventy were trained through papers and by directives from the revelators and by Forum leaders up to the time of the publication of The Urantia Book. Special emphasis was placed on the evolutionary nature of the acceptance of new truth and the

danger of using mass media and revolutionary methods in presenting the message of the Urantia Papers to our contemporary culture.

When permission to publish the Urantia Papers was given, the revelators stated that they regarded The Urantia Book as a feature of the progressive evolution of human society. The book belongs, they said, to the era immediately following the ideological struggle in which they saw our planet involved. Early publication was granted so that leaders and teachers might be trained and translations of the book could be published in other languages. Various instructions were given for the publication of the book including the procurement of an international copyright.

In preparation for the publication of The Urantia Book, the Urantia Foundation was established by a Declaration of Trust under the laws of the State of Illinois on January 11, 1950. The Foundation is managed by a five member Board of Trustees who are appointed for life terms. The trustees' duties and responsibilities are defined in the Declaration of Trust. Among the most important of these are the publication of The Urantia Book and preserving its text inviolate in perpetuity.

When the Foundation made an appeal to the Forum members for funds to cover the first printing of 10,000 copies, the response was immediate. The cost of the first edition was around \$75,000. The book is printed at the Crawfordsville, Indiana plant of R. R. Donnelly and Sons Company, and was published by the Urantia Foundation on October 12, 1955.

A French translation of The Urantia Book was published in 1962. Finnish and Spanish translations were published in the spring of 1993. Work continues on the Dutch and Russian translations, with translations into Korean, German, Swedish, Hungarian, and Italian on the horizon.

Study Groups and Societies

Members of the Forum recognized that some sort of fraternal organization was sure to grow out of the teachings of The Urantia Book. Accordingly they organized the Urantia Brotherhood on January 2, 1955, and the Urantia Brotherhood Corporation, which acts as the legal and fiscal agent of the Brotherhood, on October 21, 1955, under the laws of the State of Illinois. In December, 1959, the Internal Revenue Service of the United States ruled that the Urantia Foundation, the Urantia Brotherhood, and the Urantia Brotherhood Corporation were tax-exempt, not-for-profit organizations.

The organizational building blocks of the Urantia Brotherhood are local Societies which emerge from mature study groups, and they function with great autonomy. In 1989, as the result of a dispute over democratic control of the Brotherhood, the Brotherhood severed organic connection with the Urantia Foundation and changed its name to the Fifth Epochal Fellowship, now better known as The Fellowship for students and readers of The Urantia Book, with offices at 529 Wrightwood, Chicago, IL 60614. The Urantia Foundation, with offices at 533 Diversey Parkway, Chicago, IL 60614, is sponsoring a

new fraternal organization entitled The International Urantia Association. These fraternal organizations are primarily interested in the spiritual stimulation and growth of people of all faiths and religions.

Future Development

Both the Urantia Foundation and The Fellowship have refrained from using mass media, believing that person to person contact and slow evolutionary growth is the most effective long term policy for introducing people to The Urantia Book. It is rather amazing that in a time when reporters are examining all kinds of cults and new religious movements, The Urantia Book has received little general publicity. The academic world is just beginning to discover its existence. In 1983, Dr. Jacques Rheaume at the University of Ottawa wrote a doctoral thesis on the topic "An Analysis of a Revealed Text: The Urantia Book" (Analyse d'un Texte Revele: The Urantia Book). In 1985, there was an American Academy of Religion Consultation on the theme "The Urantia Book in Religious Studies."

The Urantia Book is one of the most promising sources of creative thought in philosophy, religion, and culture in our contemporary world. It has extremely broad ramifications. The authors' overarching grasp of the dynamics of civilization and culture shed wisdom in almost every area of human endeavor. Although we are confident the church will one day view The Urantia Book as an authentic and enlarged source of spiritual truth, it will only gain such recognition through critical evaluation by laypersons, ministers, and theologians.