

The Miami Branch Revivified

A Case Study Proposing an Answer to the Question of Theosophy 2000

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(Theosophy 2000 was a symposium conducted through the pages of *The American Theosophist* during 1993 and 1994 addressing the question of what the nature of the Theosophical Society should be as it prepared to enter the coming new millennium).

This year 1994 marks the 75th anniversary of the founding of the Miami [Florida] Branch of the Theosophical Society. It is an anniversary that almost did not occur because 1993 almost marked the end of the Branch's existence. Yet by the end of the year [1993] the Branch had been completely revivified. Our Branch has remade itself in preparation for Theosophy 2000. To understand what happened, let's take a brief look at the history of the Miami Branch.

Annie Besant [the second International President of the Theosophical Society] issued the charter in February 1919, and while no one remains to recount those early days, we know that the Branch grew and flourished, moving from location to location as its needs dictated. The Branch was incorporated in 1938 [as an independent Florida not-for-profit corporation separate from but affiliated with the Theosophical Society in America through common membership]. In 1962 it occupied permanent quarters in a two-story building on N.E. 62nd Street near the center of Miami, which would house it for the next thirty-one years. Moving to this new location was a high point in the Branch's history, but the location also later sowed the seeds of its decline. No one foresaw that decline in those exciting days when the Branch was acquiring a permanent home.

We are told that the [original two story] building was a bequest to the Branch and, through fund raising, the members added a handsome [one story] addition [that served as a good sized meeting room], with the help of mortgage financing from national headquarters [TSA]. The mortgage loan was duly paid off and by the seventies the Branch owned its property free and clear. [This was the first instance where the Branch actually owned its meeting place, whereas in all the earlier years premises were rented. At one time during several of the years of World War II, the Branch suspended its activities].

Meetings [in the newly acquired premises on N.E. 62nd Street] were held both evenings and weekends, potluck dinners were common, and a steady stream of visitors purchased books, used the library, and attended public programs. Membership at one time exceeded sixty.

But the urban landscape was changing. Demographic change, almost unnoticeable in the fifties, had become explosive by the eighties. The core of Miami, like many other cities, was racked by urban violence. One by one the great department stores closed their doors, moving to suburban shopping centers. The predominant culture and language of Dade county shifted from English to Spanish. The English-speaking constituency began to shrink in size and to move further away from the Branch.

[It should be noted that the Theosophical Society had at that time another Branch in Miami, the Jinarajadasa Branch, located variously on S.W. 8th Street and other nearby locations, which conducted its meetings in Spanish. That Branch continues in Miami as of this writing].

The Last Gasp of the Branch in Miami

During the eighties, evening meetings became impossible as people feared to venture into the area at night. [Some of us will remember the Liberty City riots that broke out in 1980, largely due to police brutality against the mainly African-American and Haitian populations of Liberty City, a Miami neighborhood within two miles of the Branch]. Book sales and library use diminished. Membership fell off. We thought about moving and organized a committee to look into possibilities, but sufficient energy was not there. Then there was the unresolved question of which direction to move.

Some believed the neighborhood would turn and begin to get better, as in central sections of certain other cities. We decided to refurbish the Branch with funds that had accumulated over the years. It was the easy way, but in retrospect we see it was doomed to failure. We bought an adjacent lot for parking, refurnished and redecorated the Branch, and hired a bookstore manager. But people still didn't come, and the neighborhood got worse.

During this time, the Jinarajadasa (Spanish-speaking) Branch of the Theosophical Society continued to grow. But they would not use our Branch facilities for their meetings. Their members were also afraid to come to that neighborhood at night.

The worsening sickness of the Miami Branch continued for nine years, until events forced our hand in the spring of 1993. Our President, who had tried with all she had, decided to move to California. Our first vice-President, who briefly took the presidency, also announced his intention to leave the area, [moving to North Carolina]. The cash balance in our treasury had fallen to less than \$5,000, from a high at one time in the eighties of \$45,000. The remaining officers and directors were discouraged and several wanted to resign. It was almost the end of the Miami Branch.

Somehow we decided to try once more, this time agreeing that we would under no

circumstances reopen the Branch at its present location in the autumn of 1993. [In those years it was a tradition that the Branch closed during the hot Florida summers]. Those officers and directors who had wanted to resign agreed to carry on. Since four of the six active directors lived in Broward County (north of the Miami city center) and since it appeared that the English-speaking population was moving in that direction, we decided to look north for a new location. We also hoped to organize study groups for members who lived in other directions. [As of this writing there are two such English-speaking study centers serving the Miami-Dade County area, in addition to one Spanish-speaking study center and two Spanish-speaking Branches in Miami-Dade County].

We recognized that our present building would be difficult to sell given its location in a deteriorated neighborhood, and we did not know how we would pay rent on a new location and manage the cost of moving.

Almost as soon as the decision to move was made, however, things began to change. Some of us are convinced that we received help from the hierarchy working on the inner planes. Others, more skeptical, think it was just plain hard work or dumb luck. The fact is that within nine months we had moved the Branch, opened a bookstore, bought one building, sold another building, and developed a core of fifteen study groups as well as guest speaker programs, all with a balance in our treasury of less than \$5,000.

In June a friend of the Branch [and a close friend of mine, Jim Mackay] located a small store building in an old shopping center. It was half the size of the present building, only 1,000 square feet. Some of us, accustomed to the ample space in the old building were taken aback at how small the new premises were. But the shopping center is located on U.S. Highway 1, the most heavily traveled arterial road in the metropolitan area, and in Deerfield Beach, a nice suburb adjacent to Boca Raton, the fast growing and most affluent community in the area.

Jim, who located the building, agreed to purchase it in six months from the seller, if the Branch could not. Meanwhile, under the contract he negotiated with the seller, we could rent it for those months [July-December, 1993] while we tried to sell our building. Three of our members agreed to underwrite the monthly rent [\$600 per month] for six months. Two other members agreed to operate a bookstore there five days each week as volunteers. [This new location in a shopping center in Deerfield Beach lent itself much more appropriately to operating a bookstore than did the old free standing location in Miami.]

Why did this friend who contracted to buy the building, though not a member of the T.S., extend himself for the Branch? Why did some members agree to underwrite the rent? Why did others agree to run the bookstore? These things happened.

Jim Mackay had his own agenda. It coincided with the interests and plans of our Branch, and he made us an offer that we could not refuse. Jim lived in Boca Raton, where he had developed real estate, and he knew the Boca Raton commercial real estate market. He also had a strong inner search and his interests led him to explore numerous paths of inquiry. For example, he and I met and became good friends because we studied Gurdjieff's teaching together. Jim had visited the Branch in Miami at my request, and was much impressed with the occult library. It was and probably still is among the best of such libraries in the Miami metropolitan area. But Jim was not a joiner of organizations nor did he want the responsibility of accumulating a personal occult or metaphysical library. So, he was especially interested in having the Branch library located close to where he lived. He also knew the real estate market and he knew that the prospective purchase price of the building he located, at \$60,000, was a good value. He was, therefore, willing to put up \$10,000 as a down payment with the seller, and was in a position to close on the purchase for a remaining \$50,000, in the event that the Branch could not sell its existing building in a time sufficient for the Branch to close on the purchase of this new building. In that event Jim would likely have resold the building and the Branch would have likely disbanded.

In July, 1993, the Theosophical Society in Miami & South Florida officially moved into the new premises at 831 S.E. 9th Street, Deerfield Beach, in the Palm Plaza Shopping Center. Although our corporate name remained "The Theosophical Society in Miami" we restyled the Branch as "The Theosophical Society in Miami & South Florida" to more accurately reflect the regional nature of the organization and its new location in Deerfield Beach, Florida. The three members who had agreed to underwrite the \$600 monthly rental, had each put up \$200 per month for six months, for this purpose. Their expectation was that the old building on 62nd Street in Miami would soon be sold and the Branch would be able to close the transaction to buy this new building, paying back the \$10,000 put up by Jim MacKay and paying the additional \$50,000 that was needed.

A lot of work needed to be done, but there was a new enthusiasm among the members. For example, the people who participated in a Gurdjieff Study group that had been meeting at night in my condominium in Fort Lauderdale, undertook to clean and paint the new premises. This is the sort of manual work often undertaken by people in the Gurdjieff study. They would be one of the study groups at this new location, whereas they had not been willing to meet at night at the old location in Miami.

Then there was a certain amount of equipment that needed to be purchased. Since we were going to be running a bookstore, we had to buy a cash register, and we would need a counter on which to place it. We had sufficient book shelving from the old location. These things fell into place rather quickly through additional donations of time and money by several of the members. We needed carpeting and one of the very new

members whose son owned a retail carpet business supplied this at a very low cost. A used store fixture company near the new location was the source of a very nice counter and several other items of store fixtures.

We wanted authorization from the Theosophical Society in America to use the "Quest Books" name for our bookstore, and this was granted. A letter to this effect was sent us by the Theosophical Publishing House of TSA and is in our files. Being a bookstore that also conducted discussion meetings was of significant practical advantage in our shopping center location as it fitted in quite properly with the local zoning and building codes. Whether a different sort of organization, one that was primarily a lecture hall, would have met the local requirements was problematic. But this matter became moot since we were granted bookstore designation.

More than sixty people turned out for Enrique Renard's talk at our grand opening in September, vastly overflowing the quarters. We began a series of study groups, a different one each night of the week, and several more on weekdays and weekends. [We recognized that when we were to have especially prominent speakers for our regular weekly Sunday afternoon "Speakers Forum", and which we arranged on numerous occasions over the next several years, we would need a larger auditorium. For this purpose we were able to secure the American Legion Hall located at the rear of our shopping center].

As the autumn of 1993 began to turn toward winter, however, nothing had happened to the old quarters. What would happen if we did not sell it by the end of 1993? An undercurrent of anxiety was palpable as the weeks rolled by.

Early that summer we had approached several organizations near the old 62nd Street location to see if they would have any interest in buying our building. We especially approached churches and similar organizations that we thought would appropriately be interested. This included the Roman Catholic Church which operated Notre Dame High School immediately across N.E. 62nd Street from our building. By that time 1993, it had become known as Notre Dame d'Haiti in acknowledgement of the changed neighborhood in which the high school and our building were located. I recall personally showing the building to Father Wensky who headed the high school and another priest who was in charge of the real estate department of the Miami Catholic Archdiocese. They were polite and expressed some interest but were non committal.

In October I made what had become my annual visit to India, as I had by that time become the pupil of an Englishman turned Hindu monk who resided there at an ashram in the Himalayas. I was gone for about three weeks. Upon returning I could feel the gloom among members who, while on the one hand were very excited by all the activity

at our new premises, but on the other hand realized that we had an unstable situation and might even have to close down the whole operation at the end of December since, not having sold the old building, we would not have the money to close the real estate purchase of the new building.

Then an amazing thing happened. Just on chance I decided to call the Archdiocese real estate office to see if they might have any further interest in our building. Since their high school was located directly across the street, I thought they would be the most likely prospective purchaser, even though we had heard nothing further from them since they looked at the property in August. The phone call went something like this:

Sy calling the Archdiocese: "Please connect me to the real estate department."

Sy: "Hello, may I speak to Father (I don't remember his name)?"

Woman: "Well, he's not here but I am his secretary. Can I help you?"

Sy: "I am the President of the Theosophical Society in Miami. He looked at our building a few months ago with the idea of buying it, but we've heard nothing from you since."

Woman: "You mean you didn't get our offer?"

Sy: "What offer?"

Woman: "Just a moment. Please hang on. I'll be right back." (A minute goes by). "Oh, I'm terribly sorry. I just looked in our file and the offer is still here. I was pregnant at the time and had to leave. Someone else took my place, but apparently she never mailed our offer to you. I'll send it right out."

Sy: (Pausing with the shock of surprise and almost falling off his chair): "That will be great."

The offer was a clean purchase offer in the amount of \$75,000 cash. [The Catholic Church almost always pays cash.]

Suddenly, the Roman Catholic Church had offered to buy the building for a fair price and in cash. That transaction was completed on December 22, 1993, and the Deerfield Beach building purchase was then completed on January 4, 1994, also in cash. The Branch was financially secure again with a building fully paid for. We even had some excess cash [of approximately \$15,000], resulting from the two real estate transactions that allowed us to largely liquidate the consignment invoices for books that the Theosophical Publishing house had been so kind to ship us.

As I speculated earlier, some of our members were convinced that we received help from the hierarchy working on the inner planes. Others, more skeptical, think it was just

plain hard work or dumb luck.

The Present and the Future

What are our prospects for the future?

We have added more than twenty new members since the move, and are now back to fifty, and climbing. There is an air of excitement and optimism. Our Branch now boasts many people versed not only in theosophy, but in many disciplines akin to it.

[During the five years of my presidency, the membership reached a high of 125, but then leveled off at about 100. This made the Branch one of just 3 Branches affiliated with the Theosophical Society in America, with membership approaching anywhere near triple digits, the other two being the New York Theosophical Society and the Theosophical Society in Ojai, California. I am told that the Branch membership as of January, 2008 was approximately 75.]

This first winter [1993-1994] at the new location we offered weekly study groups in fifteen different metaphysical disciplines. These include astrology, basic metaphysics, Bhagavad Gita, Fairy Tales, Food and Health, Gurdjieff, Kabbalah, Meditation, the Secret Doctrine, the Seth Material, Star Trek's spiritual aspects, Tarot, and the Voice of the Silence.

Some may question what some of these study groups have to do with theosophy. We take our guidance from the three declared objects of the Theosophical Society, which encourage the study of comparative religion, philosophy, and science, and the investigation of unexplained laws of nature and powers latent in man. We see our role in maintaining and growing the Branch as dedication to the declared objects.

The many programs bring traffic to the bookstore, and although we offer all presentations without charge, it is our theory that the \$2 and \$3 donations people put in the basket and the profit from bookstore sales will sustain the Branch. We hope eventually to expand the already inadequate new quarters.

We have tentative plans to add study groups in several other disciplines as the Branch acquires new members expert in these areas. Two are already planned in healing.

Our Sunday programs of guest speakers on various metaphysical topics continue. These programs serve as a testing and proving ground for the more serious discipline that a study group entails.

We have not forgotten our basic theosophical roots as evidenced by study groups in basic metaphysics and the Secret Doctrine and the Voice of the Silence. But we also recognize the importance of related disciplines and the need to express theosophical

concepts in contemporary modes, such as the study of Star Trek as a series of morality plays. As our Star Trek study group facilitator, a third generation Theosophist, says: "It is the first legend or myth that has been plucked out of the future instead of the past. Like all other legends or myths, it contains jewels of spiritual truth that mankind can absorb at many levels."

In reaching out to the metaphysical community with our wide array of offerings, we are reclaiming for the Theosophical Society the high ground of spiritual inquiry in conformity with the three declared objects, from the crass commercialization that has frequently come to characterize "the New Age" approach to metaphysics.

Conclusion

Thus our response to the questions posed by Theosophy 2000 includes the following:

1. The Branch must have a permanent quarters, including a bookstore. The bookstore not only serves to disseminate theosophical teachings, but is the main engine of sound Branch finances when there are sufficient volunteers to staff it. Branch quarters should be in a commercial area with adequate parking and lighting. Usually that means a shopping center on a major arterial road.

[It should be noted that as of this writing in 2008, some 14 years later, the retail landscape has changed. While the Branch still maintains its bookstore which provides a convenient way for members to order books at a 25% discount, there is little outside consumer traffic. Like other small bookstores, book marketing has largely been taken over by very large "big box" bookstores such as Borders and Barnes & Noble, and by the sales of books on the Internet through firms like Amazon.com, and BN.com. Thus, the bookstore, while useful both from a convenience stand point and from a commercial legitimacy standpoint, is no longer the main engine of sound Branch finances. The shortfall in income from book sales has had to be made up during the past several years by increased contributions from members and visitors.]

2. Regular study groups and classes facilitated by qualified people should be the primary vehicle for gaining an understanding of metaphysical ideas. The greater the number and variety of these groups within the scope of the three declared objects, the more people are drawn to the Branch. Study groups should be facilitated by members. This encourages growth of membership, and insures that the Branch remains a vehicle of theosophical outreach and not merely a hired hall for the use of various people with their private agendas.

3. A weekly forum of programs – both member led and with guest speakers – as has been a tradition in our Branch should be encouraged. This provides a testing ground for the desirability and potential to organize a study group around a particular discipline.

4. Numerous other activities come about naturally as the result of an active Branch with active members. These include a social program, with potluck dinners and the like, which promotes a spirit of camaraderie in conformity with the declared objects of the Theosophical Society.

The verdict is not yet in on whether we have it right but we think we are on to something important in Branch work. We already wish the new building were three times as big. We feel that our approach makes sense in today's America as we approach the year 2000.

[The intervening fourteen years since the writing of this article has proven that the approach to Branch work taken by the Theosophical Society in Miami & South Florida is a sound one. Membership in the Theosophical Society in America and in the International Theosophical Society has declined during these years, and to some extent so has the membership of the Branch, while the overall interest in non-traditional spiritual studies has appeared to have increased. Some have suggested that the reason for membership decline is that there are so many more non-traditional spiritual groups existing today as compared to when the Theosophical Society commenced in 1875 or even as compared to when the Miami Branch commenced operation in 1919. Nevertheless, the Branch remains large and vital and continues as one of the three largest Branches affiliated with the Theosophical Society in America.]

We at the Miami Branch extend an open invitation to our brothers and sisters in the Theosophical Society across America and elsewhere to visit us in southern Florida. We are just a mile from the ocean in a really nice area. When you come here, you will find a bright cheerful place that we hope will feel like home to you, and where you can participate almost any day or night of the week in our variety of theosophical activities. It's easy to get to, easy to park, and inviting to use. Could this be a prototype for Theosophical Branches heading toward the years 2000? Come have a look.

February 1994 marks the 75th anniversary of the Theosophical Society in Miami. We have every reason now to look forward to the next seventy-five years.

The Miami Branch of the Theosophical Society is now located at 831 S.E. 9th Street (in the Palm Plaza Shopping Center, on U.S. Highway 1, two miles east of the I-95 S.W. 10th Street exit), Deerfield Beach, Florida 33441.