In 1849, Brigham Young traveled south from Fort Utah to find a location to start a city. Stopping at what is now Center Street and 500 West, Brigham Young designated a public square and called for a chapel and school house to be built. Just as quickly as work began, so, too, did obstacles to that work. Seven years later, in 1856, with only a foundation laid, the project was moved to the square where now sits the charred remains of the Provo Tabernacle.

The first edifice built on this site was an adobe and timber structure facing Center Street and was called the "Old Meetinghouse." When Brigham Young dedicated the building upon its completion, he acknowledged that there already existed a need for a larger edifice. Commissioned by John Taylor, the tabernacle was originally constructed from 1883 to 1898 at a cost of $100,000. The architect, William Harrison Folsom, who had designed the Manti Temple and the Salt Lake Tabernacle, followed a Gothic Revival-style featuring a brick exterior, an octagonal turret at each corner, a steep roof, with interior highlights including frosted-glass windows, spiral staircases, and an exquisite hand-carved rostrum.

The tabernacle was dedicated by George Q. Cannon, who filled in when LDS Church President Wilford Woodruff fell ill. However, the building was put to use even before its dedication. In 1886 and 1887, the LDS Church, facing challenges with federal polygamy raids, held its annual conferences in the tabernacle, the only times the LDS Church has—since the move west—held its Church-wide conference outside of Salt Lake City.

For over a century after its completion, the tabernacle served as the spiritual and cultural hub of Provo City, if not the Utah Valley region. Virtually every President of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints since Lorenzo Snow has spoken there. So, too, have national and local leaders of other faiths. In 1909, U.S. President William Howard Taft spoke at the tabernacle as a guest of Sen. Reed Smoot. Thanks to the leadership of Gerrit de Jong Jr., and Herald R. Clark, the Provo Tabernacle has also been home to performances by some of the world’s greatest musical talent, including the electrifying 1938 concert by Sergei Rachmoninoff, who had just come from a nationally recognized showing at New York's Carnegie Hall.
Of course, perhaps even more important than these dozens and dozens of truly famous moments at the tabernacle, are the thousands and thousands of quieter but even more influential moments at the tabernacle that have positively shaped the lives of so many good citizens of this fair valley of ours. Perhaps a brief recounting of my own personal experiences can stand in for so many of you who could recount your own.

At the age of eight, the tabernacle was the site where I was honored for winning a regional, Cub Scout essay contest on “what freedom means to me.” How could I have known then that the grandeur of that moment in that building, so impressionable for a small, 8 year old boy, would give added energy and direction for what would become a professional, academic life dedicated to writing about such topics.

The tabernacle was the home to my LDS seminary graduation, and regular stake conference meetings. I’ll never forget the meeting where then Supreme Court justice Dallin Oaks was called on to speak extemporaneously. After he finished, Jeffrey R Holland, newly called President of BYU was called on extemporaneously. He opened with lines more prophetic than he could have possibly known at the time, when he said, “it appears I am fated to follow Dallin Oaks in every phase of life.”

The tabernacle has been the place of my sweetest moments of communion with believers not of my particular faith. As Provo Seventh-day Adventist pastor Carlos Garcia and head elder Brad E. Walton said in a statement Friday, “Our congregation has been welcomed to that facility on many occasions… It was not only a beautiful, historic building, but a place where we were all part of a greater community.” What a unifying and uplifting power those moments have been.

Most recently, the tabernacle has served as home for the funeral services for my dear friend Truman Madsen, and for an annual choral concert, involving the angelic voices of my beloved children.

My list could on, and so could yours. In such situations, it is possible to overreact with grief. This was, after all, only a building. Each day, we see around us greater tragedies in the lives and deaths of human beings—our conscious, feeling, brothers and sisters. And yet, we all know, and do confess, that in the loss of the tabernacle we have indeed lost something special and sacred. But, in recognizing that, we must respond in a way befitting of the great edifice we now miss. For, this is a moment that calls for faith in loss, a faith which that old building never seemed to fail to inspire. In that spirit, I close with a poem, which, for me, captures that spirit of faith in loss.

After that hot gospeller has leveled all but the churched sky,
I wrote the tale by tallow of a city's death by fire;
Under a candle's eye, that smoked in tears, I
Wanted to tell, in more than wax, of faiths that were snapped like wire.
All day I walked abroad among the rubbed tales,
Shocked at each wall that stood on the street like a liar;
Loud was the bird-rocked sky, and all the clouds were bales
Torn open by looting, and white, in spite of the fire.
By the smoking sea, where Christ walked, I asked, why
Should a man wax tears, when his wooden world fails?
In town, leaves were paper, but the hills were a flock of faiths;
To a boy who walked all day, each leaf was a green breath
Rebuilding a love I thought was dead as nails,
Blessing the death and the baptism by fire.¹