

Today's talk could be built around two metaphors: First is Deepen or Die; and the second is Get out of that Rowboat and into this Canoe.

Just a few months ago the General Assembly of the Unitarian Universalist Association was held here in town. Few of us attended those sessions where the public could attend. During that Saturday, the HUUmansists met here at the First Unitarian Society and just slightly over 100 people registered for that meeting. Not a lot of mutual interest from and for the FUS, still calling this the cathedral of religious humanism. Why do our members concern themselves so little with the UUA and vice versa. Like many cathedrals around the world, our attendance has been steadily dropping off. Eight years ago we created something here called The Humanist Center — sponsored by the Society, the Humanist Institute, and the Humanists of Minnesota — thus straddling religious, educational and secular worlds. Attendance at those few meetings over six years steadily went downhill, and we revived at this past year to even smaller crowds.

Some of the attrition can be attributed to the times. Our society is no doubt over-connected and over-distracted. Moreover, our media have been corporatized, perhaps designedly, to trivialize our attention with infotainment. Instead of being able to ask yesterday, for instance, whether our nine years of response to Al Qaeda's attack was well-planned or in any sense successful, we've been spending her time worrying about whether some Muslims can build a mosque wherever they would like to, and whether a nut-case preacher can burn his Koran.

From 1916 to 1938 John Dietrich was minister of this Society. History regards him as the first and most articulate spokesmen for religious humanism. His audiences kept growing to the point that he ended up speaking in a theater here, an experience paralleling his prior ministry in Spokane, Washington. The Society not only had regular addresses from him but developed a prior Forum which could also be the site of the articulation of religious humanism. (I have to note that we abandoned those Forums two years ago, experimenting with alternative programs. Even this forum starting the Society's new year was initially scheduled for the Heritage room, both assuming and guaranteeing small attendance.)

What happened to Dietrich's dream that religious humanism would flourish — and that it would flourish within his own Unitarian denomination? If we don't study that part of our own history right here in Minneapolis, we will live out my metaphor Deepen or Die. For the next few minutes, I will be urging us to read and reread some important books of our more recent past. Let me read a bit from Dietrich back in 1930.

” when the world goes humanists, we may have lost God but we will have discovered man we never knew ourselves before we never knew what power and wealth we had potentially we never thought of developing it most of us still have not the least idea of such a thing people are still thoughtless, engaged in the daily occupation of quote enjoying themselves” with long hours of boredom, but few hours devoted to that grim exercise thinking. What a terrible distance the race has still to go; but if the world goes humanists, thinking will fill and transform those long hours of boredom than the work of creation will begin; and in the light of vision but with better earths in the thrilling consciousness of a new and mighty power, and the glorious liberty of mind and heart, men and women will lay the foundations of the civilization that is to come then men will make a science of the life and resources of humanity on this planet and will organize it as men organized a great business so that the work of the world will be properly distributed an alternate happily with the play of the world..... They will act as if there were no heaven, and the one chance of happiness they have is while the heart beats. They will all be apostles of the social spirit until a sound standard of conduct rules the world.

This very building in which we meet together today embodies that dream of John Dietrich.

In time of the 1961 merger of Unitarians and Universalists, humanism had found roots and resonance within both denominations. My second metaphor is relevant here. Throughout human history, religions have played the rowboat role, looking backward as well as arguing that the past was always better than the present. The history of each denomination was canoeish, a history of looking ahead, of being different, of being marginal, in many ways, of being elitist (Although I would prefer to call it playing the vanguard role). In preparation for merger, six study commissions were appointed in 1960 and reported to the new denomination in 1963. It was my

good fortune to chair the commission on science and religion (Theology and the Frontiers of Learning). This was a very new experience. We were moving to important but uncharted waters. Most religions saw the sciences as their enemy, whether it was Copernicus arguing with the crude astronomy of the Bible or Darwin explaining the evolutionary emergence of human life as well as the absence of any cosmic purpose in our universe. Stephen Hawking's new book is being angrily rejected by major religious spokespersons even in our day since he argues that the universe emerged without the necessity of any creating god.

Our commission tried to use fresh terms recognizing that these in time would become dated and ambiguous instead of theologies, for instance, we talked about our different "perspectives"—at that time Christian liberal, Deist, mystical, humanist, naturalistic theists, existentialist. We noted that these varied perspectives all led to a very similar "style"—this worldly, ethical, democratic, community-based. Everything centered on the importance for these traditions of the sciences; and that was where we should be focusing in our seminaries and in our churches. We said "the scientific approach to religious doctrine offers a new potentiality for achieving consensus in religious thinking such consensus is needed for the urgently required 'one world' of the future, and may incidentally, give new communities and strengths to the liberal religious movement".

Unfortunately neither the denomination nor the seminaries were ready to implement this call in 1966 Dana Greeley, now president of the new denomination, named a Committee on Goals to engage in long-range planning. Their report was released in 1967. One of my close friends, Paul Carnes, who later became UUA president, was on it, among others. We tried again to create some fresh words, knowing that they would not last forever but that they might well be useful in that immediate time: "for us, therefore, the search for meaning in our personal and social lives, the experience of handling our joys and tragedies, the search for profound and satisfying human relationships, the pondering of our place in the total scheme of things, the awareness of the separation between our potential and our actions—our aspirations and our achievements—all these we believe to be truly religious. Together they suggest to us a common commitment to THE EXPANSION OF THE QUALITY OF LIFE. This roots our theology, are thinking about religion, both in life and in man's self transcendence. We suggest that this formulation might serve as a bridge to span many of the goals of language, practice, and belief which constitute our

diversity....To expand the quality of life involves enlargement of four common capacities: to feel, to relate, to know, and to create.”

Since this was a commission on planning, we recommended that recruitment should be directed toward “those who are already at the periphery of our movement, whose values and sensitivities make them religious liberals in attitude if not yet by affiliation. While membership in our churches and fellowships is open and universal, the liberal church is a participating community and it is most meaningful for those who already share the spirit of this religious experience. Without attempting to convert others, we should intensify our efforts to articulate clearly our particular ‘religiousness’— asking other people if this indeed is not where they belong.

I hope you will look at this report in the library and read the second half. We conducted a national survey of Unitarian Universalists in the US and Canada. At that time it was the largest denominational survey ever made. We separately sampled high-growth churches, ordinary churches, and fellowships. That sample produces 12,000 respondents on questionnaires that probably took an hour to complete.

Prior to that survey, many felt that liberal forms of Unitarian Universalism only began on the western side of the Mississippi River. After our survey, we jokingly said that liberalism actually begins as soon as you cross the Charles River. We found, for instance, that 59% did not regard their local church as “Christian” and that 89% wanted the denomination to continue moving away from any Christian identity. Many personal positions were very similar to a post- Christian humanist orientation. We also found enormous agreement on social values. This confirmed what the earlier commission’s assertion we were perhaps varied perhaps in our perspectives but were very agreed on style —and that styles is critical.

The important thing was to the composition of the movement. Only 10% had been born as UUs. That wasn't quite so typical in New England but it was particularly characteristic of those churches and fellowships that were in high-growth areas. The most important reason for church

attendance was “intellectual stimulation.” Interestingly, most said they came with their values already formed, seeking community. Those values were consistently liberal, and led to membership in many social change organizations.

Now comes the historical puzzles. Here is this new denomination, eager to consolidate and grow. And here was a long-range planning report suggesting several new directions that might accomplish that goal. Conservatives voiced some objections, but the survey had made their minority status quite clear. Why was all that swept aside?

separatism won over integration

pluralism as failed solution

seminary failures

oversupply of under-assimilated clergy

goddess feminism set up Wicca