

What Are We Doing?
the Rev. Edmund Robinson
Unitarian Universalist Meeting House
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I missed the most important speech of the General Assembly. I was trying to catch up with a dear colleague over breakfast and wasn't paying enough attention to the schedule. I walked into the Charlotte convention center and discovered my old mentor Victor Carpenter in the midst of a group of his cronies, and asked him what brought him to GA, since I knew that he was happily retired in Arlington, MA. He said he had just gotten the Lifetime Achievement Award.

Those of you who attended my installation in January 2009 met Victor. He was the one who gave the charge to the minister. You may remember that he invited Jacqueline up to the pulpit and he pointed out the congregation and he said to me, "them, Edmund, it's about them, it's not about you." Something I try always to keep in mind here, though I realize that this particular report is necessarily personal.

Let me get even more personal to tell you that Victor is not only my mentor, at a crucial time he was my minister. In 2006 I had surgery for a subdural hematoma and Victor stepped in to keep the church together and to minister to me. I would look up from my hospital bed and there would be Victor, grinning and asking me how I was doing.

So you can imagine my disappointment at having missed Victor's 15 minutes of fame, his moment of well-deserved recognition. But through the magic of video, I was able not only to see him get the award, but to hear what he said, and that is what I have now passed on to you¹.

What Victor Carpenter said is that in Unitarian Universalism, the important question is not what you believe, it is what you are doing.

Victor himself has been doing a great deal in his career, and it was mentioned in the award citation. He worked against apartheid in South Africa in the 1960s until it became too dangerous, he has been deeply involved in many of the racial justice struggles within the denomination, and he has been arrested for civil disobedience too many times to count. In fact, one of my first encounters with Victor was as a volunteer lawyer representing people arrested in a demonstration at the JFK federal building in Boston.

But I put Victor's question to you not because of my great affection and admiration for

¹It is available on the Internet at <http://www.uua.org/ga/2011/business/184334.shtml>, about 1 hour and 25 minutes into the video of Plenary IV.

him but because it echoed a theme I found many places at GA.

It was the Fiftieth Anniversary of the consolidation of the Unitarians and the Universalists, and there was much taking stock and asking ourselves, in the words of the hymn, “whence we come and how and whither.”

For many, we are a movement in decline. We had stopped growing in relative numbers and now in many areas we have stopped growing in absolute numbers. The number of Unitarian Universalists today is not all that much greater than it was at the time of consolidation.

We had a thoughtful look at where we are going theologically in two addresses by Galen Guengerich, the minister of All Souls church in New York City. In the first of these, I had a moment of what I call, using a famous phrase of the theological James Luther Adams, the intersection of the Intimate and the Ultimate.

The talk is described in the program book as follows:

#2027 Church of the New Millennium: Formula for Failure.

“Unitarian Universalism is ‘the church of the new millennium,’ according to Harvard religion scholar Diana Eck. A bold statement, but we’ve declined against population growth over the last half-century, and in real terms as well for the past two years. In part one of this two part lecture series, Rev. Galen Guengerich, senior minister at All Souls Unitarian in New York City, will take a clear-eyed look at what has held us back. In part two (program #3005 on Friday), Guengerich will ponder what it would take for Diana Eck’s prediction to become true.”

Guengerich has become a popular speaker on UU theology, following in the footsteps of his predecessor Forrest Church, and as it happened I was at his installation four years ago and heard Diana Eck give the address in which she made that statement. So I settled in for some good heavy analysis of our movement and where it is falling short of its promise,

Galen likes to enhance his talks with slides and videos and music. As he got to introduce Diana Eck's words, I saw the familiar image of that Harvard scholar on the screen. I read one of her early books and knew her slightly – she is Master of one of the houses at Harvard, and I used to see her every May Day at dawn as the folk community and the undergraduates from her house mingled in dance and song celebrating the spring.

So Diana Eck's is a familiar and public face to me. But as I was about to glance away, suddenly Diana Eck's face was replaced by one that is much more familiar, though from a more remote time in my life: there for an instant was the grinning face of the woman to whom I was married for 27 years. It was not a hallucination, though it was a technical glitch: the slide operator had just gotten ahead of him or herself. Galen said a few more words about Diana and then moved into a discussion of a poem of written by my first wife Lee, which had been featured

in April on Garrison Keillor's Writer's Almanac. Here it is:
What I Know by Lee Robinson
What I know for sure is less and less:
that a hot bath won't cure loneliness.

That bacon is the best bad thing to chew
and what you love may kill you.

The odd connection between perfection
and foolishness, like the pelican
diving for his fish.

How silly sex is.
How, having it, we glimpse
our holiness.

What I know is less and less.
What I want is more and more:

you against me—
your ferocious tenderness—

love like a star,
once small and far,

now huge, now near.

It's a beautiful poem, but I was unsettled enough by this unexpected encounter that I didn't take in a lot of what else Galen was saying, but he seemed to be urging us not to get mired in the old struggles over theological belief, a theme echoed in what Carpenter was saying and which also echoed elsewhere.

Throughout much of GA, I hung out with the Huumanist group for reasons which are essentially bureaucratic. I am one of the original founders of UU Religious Naturalists, an organization which never got off the ground because the UUA changed its policy on affiliate organizations. Now the UUA encourages organizations to cluster with similar organizations, and so the Religious Naturalists are clustering with the humanists, and the president of both is

the same person, my friend John Hooper from Westport, CT. As President of both organizations – Humanist and UU Religious Naturalists -- John tends to collapse the distinctions between the two, but I found that the flavor of the two movements was substantially different, and after going to a talk and a business meeting of the humanists, I came away with the feeling that this is a group which defines itself by what it is not.

A typical exchange occurred as I was hanging out at the Humanists booth in the exhibit hall. A woman came up and asked an organizer what she could do about her minister who she suspected of belief in God? I intervened and gave a little pep talk about the values of UU ministers being multilingual theologically to deal with the multivalent congregations which are our strength. Experiences like this led me to an appreciation that some humanists are experiencing a feeling of dislocation as they see what was their religion being watered down or corrupted by other theological flavors. I want to be sensitive to that feeling among the humanists here. But it seemed that this attitude was counter to the message I was getting from elsewhere at GA.

For you see, I don't think Victor's statement that what we are doing is more important than what we believe relegates beliefs to the irrelevant. It just points out that there are many paths to action.

This was made clear by the Ware lecturer Karen Armstrong.

Armstrong is the religion scholar who has made a name for herself with popular books such as *A History of God and the Battle for God*, biographies of Mohammed and the Buddha, a study of the Axial Age, a memoir called *The Spiral Staircase*, and most recently, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*.

I have read many of these books and preached out of several. What Armstrong said in her lecture was pretty much what she said in this last book: the Golden Rule is known in virtually all the world's religions, and it comes down to compassion – the ability to see your neighbor as yourself and refrain from treating her as you would not want to be treated. As I have noted in a previous sermon, Karen received the TED prize a couple of years ago, a prize awarded to people who have shown the vision to make a difference in the world, and given with the expectation that the recipient can use that money to actually make a difference.

What Armstrong has done with her TED prize is to bring together representatives of the major religions of the world to draft a Charter for Compassion, and interfaith statement of religious values. She has also thought through a spiritual path modeled on recovery programs, and described in her latest book, *Twelve Steps to a More Compassionate Life*.

To me this is what Victor meant by saying what are you doing.

Kaaren Anderson, a friend of Naomi Turner who has preached here at the Meeting House, also affirmed this position in her excellent sermon at worship on Sunday morning. She

told two stories of people feeding the hungry, one of them was the story of Abraham from Genesis feeding the stranger who turned out to be God. The other was a long tale about an atheist friend of hers who was in a Chinese restaurant and a street person came in and stole the plate of noodles from under her nose. The management berated the street person outside, bought the diner some fresh noodles, and they took a to-go container with them as they left the restaurant to go to the movies. The diner saw the street person outside the theater and gave her the noodles.

What Kaaren Anderson said was that the two stories showed that people with different belief systems often ended up doing the same things.

Now I don't want to overstate this. And I don't want to pretend that all the loose ends are neatly tied up. I know that in some pockets of our movement the stale humanist/theist debate is still unfortunately alive and well. I know that some atheists are still trying to expose their theist friend's beliefs as illogical or an inauthentic marketing ploy so we're attractive to a "Christian" nation. I know that we still have some theists, who privately and publically pat their atheist friends on the head and condescendingly tell them, they look forward to the day when they finally grow up and become spiritual. But come on, on the whole, the tide has completely changed. These are minor pockets and uncommon moments of slipping back into old bad habits. But it's not by any measure who we are any more. The tide is completely turned, the momentum has so clearly shifted. We have really grown up and are clear that the question of belief is not which belief is right and which belief is wrong but does your belief lead you to the right experience—to the experience of practical compassion and practical connection.

What are we doing as a movement? Well in the middle of GA we all put on yellow shirts that said we were standing on the side of love and went into a local park to demonstrate against a proposed amendment to the North Carolina constitution defining marriage as between a man and a woman. We heard at that rally from Mark Kiyimba, the Ugandan UU minister who spoke to this Meeting House two summers ago and now has to live in the states because it is too dangerous for him in Uganda.

We passed a Statement of Conscience on Ethical Eating. We reduced the size of the UUA Board from 24 to a more manageable 18 with surprisingly little debate. We also passed an action of immediate witness calling for a constitutional amendment to limit the power of corporations to influence elections, a resolution which cited our work here on Cape Cod.

What are we doing? As I think about how Victor's question applies to this congregation, I think that one of the best things we can be doing is helping people cope with issues arising from the later stages of life. Many of you who have retired still maintain a high

level of activity in community service, but I think any of you could be forgiven for taking the attitude that your “doing” years are largely behind you.

What are we doing? In one sense Victor Carpenter’s question echoes the old Christian debate about whether salvation is by faith or by works. But perhaps the best answer is given by the late Forrest Church: we are doing what we can. Remember Forrest Church’s three part-mantra, want what you have, be who you are and do what you can.

If compassion is our touchstone, what we do will be formed by it. What are the opportunities to help others, to alleviate suffering, to help make sense of our lives?

There was a new thing at GA called Gathered Here, a joint nationwide project of the UUA Board and administration. It is a program of appreciative inquiry, that is, it seeks to get at what we are doing well, and make that the centerpiece of our movement going forward. It is somewhat like Mary Henderson’s Journey project in that it is structured so that the participants interview one another, but it asks the question of what grabs our passions, what about this religion draws us in. It is an interesting initiative, and I would be glad to share the material for any of you who might be interested in participating.

Most of what I saw at GA inspired me, but there was one thing to which I had a severe allergic reaction, and you saw it in the clip I showed of Vic Carpenter. All of the videos used at GA had the association’s chalice symbol in the lower right corner.

Now my problem with that starts with the fact that I’ve never liked that design; it obscures the intersecting circles which represent Unitarianism and Universalism, two theologically incompatible denominations which decided to join forces, and have never resolved the theological differences. I have been known to call this new design the birdbath, because that’s what it looks like to me. You will see it on the front of your order of service.

But the design is not my principal objection. My principal objection to using on the video screen is that it makes it into a logo. You see corporate logos on the bottom of most video screen, whether its on the internet or on TV. The intellectual property lawyers love this because it gives the public a product identification, a branding.

But I think the UUA should be beyond branding. At the inception of organized Unitarianism its founding father, William Ellery Channing, did not even want a separate denomination. He saw himself as a liberal Christian. If we are following Karen Armstrong and reaching across religious boundaries to discover our common inspiration, it is counterproductive to have a brand stamped on the video product.

So here I have presented a glimpse of GA 2011; it’s not neat, it’s not tied up in a pretty package, it’s as messy as our movement. A lot of it is on video and you can view it for free at the UUA website. Next year in Phoenix, we will concentrate even more on “doing” as we confront the unjust immigration laws of that state. I invite any of you to consider going with me

on that journey. And I leave you with Victor Carpenter's question: what are you doing?
Amen.