

RELIGION WITHOUT DOCTRINE

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[A talk delivered to the First Unitarian Fellowship on 5 November 1978]

The main reason I'm here today is that Earlene suggested a general topic that would be of interest to this group, and it's one that I have had some experience with in a different context, and that topic is, "ow do you do without doctrine? I've had a lot of experience doing without doctrine in practising psychology, in conceptualizing science, in theorizing, and so forth. So as somebody who has been through some of the hard knocks of getting along without doctrines, I thought that I might share some of the ideas that I've found useful in other areas, and then lay upon you the task of transferring--if you can--some of those ideas to the specific issue of religion and the spiritual life.

So what I'd like to do is simply introduce about three different things, and then open up the day for discussion.

The first thing has to do with the issue of doctrine in general, and for this I have a simple schema. By the way, the whole business of getting along without doctrine, you will probably not be surprised that how you do it and what's involved is itself not easily reduced to doctrine. If it were, I'd give you a ten-minute lecture. So what I'm going to do is introduce certain things, and then we'll hash it out. Now the first is a simple-looking list, and it is simple:

[blackboard]           ?: These are called what?

P. I'm not sure what to call them. We call it a ladder, a Justification Ladder among other things. The reason is that you justify anything on this list by appealing to something higher on the list. Down here at the bottom two, at the level of custom and judgement, is where we live our day to day lives. At each moment you're making judgements about what's here, what you're doing, what it looks like, what you're up to, and so forth. 'Customs' is what we're engaging in all the time when we drive a car, when we sit down for dinner, when we attend a meeting, when we read a book, when we talk to somebody on the telephone--whatever we do, we are participating in one of the customs that people in our society do engage in. So everyday life is here, at the level of judgement and participating in customary activities.

Justification Ladder

Ability - Sensitivity  
principle  
theory  
custom  
judgement

Doctrine appears at this level [of principle and theory]. If somebody challenges a custom--"Why should we do this? I don't think we should do this,"--then you appeal to a theory or principle. If somebody says, "I don't believe we should driving on the road," we say, "But we believe in maximizing safety, and this will do it." So you appeal to principles when a custom is challenged, you appeal to custom when your judgement is challenged. If somebody says, "Why do you call that a cup?", I say, "Well, that's what we do call cups." I back up my judgement by appealing to a custom. If the custom is challenged, I appeal to a theory or a principle. And this is where doctrine is.

The main thing I want to introduce is the top line. People are used to talking about the bottom line, these days--I want to introduce you to the top line. The top line has to do with the ability or sensitivity to raise the kind of questions for which these [principle, theory, custom, judgement] provide answers. And here it might be a good idea to go to other areas for examples. The first one that comes to mind is in the area of art. You have art theory, you have art principles, and you have particulars--particular works of art. And if somebody says, "Why do you



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054 think that's a good work of art?", you can appeal to a theory and show that this  
055 particular thing embodies that theory, or that it embodies certain principles  
056 about balance and harmony, etc. But you may also say, "Well, I know that it  
057 doesn't fit here, and I can't tell you why, but can't you see that it's good  
058 art?" We all know people whose judgement is good in the artistic realm, who have  
059 good taste, whose judgement is good, and who do not operate with theories, who  
060 haven't learned theory and don't even have their own theory. But you trust them  
061 to make the judgements; you figure that in general, their judgement is good.  
062

062 What this corresponds to is understanding the question. If somebody says,  
063 "Is this a good picture?", imagine what it takes even to understand the question,  
064 what it takes by way of understanding, what it takes by way of ability, because  
065 if you don't have the ability to understand the question, none of the answers will  
066 make sense either. So this [ability, sensitivity], why I separate it from all of  
067 these others: here is where you find the issue of what question it is, and under-  
068 standing the whole question, whereas the others can be lumped together in one sense  
069 as simply different levels of providing answers.  
070

070 Once you have that distinction, then you can see why somebody can have good  
071 taste in art, and not be using a theory or a principle, because what it basically  
072 takes is ability or sensitivity. And principles and theories are ways of systema-  
073 tizing, recording, the kind of thing that we're using here [ability], and we may  
074 succeed more or less, but it's unlikely that we ever succeed completely. We usual-  
075 ly can do better than we can account for. And, you might say, it's only because  
076 we had that, or somebody had that to begin with, that anybody was able originally  
077 to come up with a theory or a principle for art. What would it take to be the  
078 first person to create a theory or state a principle? Here's what it takes  
079 [ability].  
080

080 This is as much as I want to say to introduce the idea of what are the possi-  
081 bilities of operating without doctrine. To summarize: what it takes to operate  
082 without doctrine is what it would take to create doctrine, namely, to have the  
083 understanding, ability, sensitivity to understand certain kinds of questions. If  
084 you can do that, then potentially you are the creator of doctrine, and therefore  
085 of new doctrine, within that area. Or you have the potential to operate without  
086 any doctrine by simply operating directly in terms of your understanding or ability.  
087

087 ? . But somebody else will make the doctrine sooner or later. P. Well,  
088 maybe, maybe not. But I wouldn't be discouraged from making a doctrine just by the  
089 idea that somebody else might do the same. ? . I mean that sooner or later  
090 there will be one. P. Yeah. But again, as I say, we've never in any area  
091 that I know of succeeded in completely accounting for our abilities with reference to  
092 descriptions and truths. So there's always that gap. In fact, that gap is what you  
093 appeal to when you find a theory for it, when you say, "We need a better one." Again,  
094 you're appealing at this level [ability]. ? . Sometimes that's a kind of in-  
095 tuition. P. Yeah, and if you don't recognize it as legitimate, you have qualms,  
096 you make up pejorative names. I think 'intuition' is a kind of a pejorative, whether  
097 you call it 'faith' or something else which sounds second-best but isn't.  
098

098 Having said this much about the possibility of operating without doctrine, let  
099 me introduce the counterpoise, the dangers of operating without doctrine. If you  
100 think in terms of social evolution, one of the things that comes to mind is that  
101 the principles, the theories, the doctrines we have are our social means for not  
102 going wrong in just operating on the basis of ability. There's a lot of safeguards  
103 built into our theorizing, our explanations, our generally accepted principles.  
104 Why? Because you can easily go wrong just operating direct from understanding or  
105 ability. You might think of a mystic as somebody who routinely does that. A mystic  
106 is somebody who routinely simply operates from his understanding of himself and the  
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108 world without any appeal to theory, principle, or custom, and that's why oftentimes  
 109 he does strange-looking things. Mystics get into trouble unless they are also  
 110 saints. [laughter] There is that danger that just operating here doesn't guarantee  
 111 that you do it right. It doesn't guarantee that you don't destroy yourself or other  
 112 people, because there is such a thing as wishful thinking, there is such a thing as  
 113 being confused, there is such a thing as not having sensitivity or understanding  
 114 enough. So there are dangers.

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115 As I say, principles and theories are a social safeguard against many of those  
 116 dangers. There's another safeguard that I think is also well known, and it may be  
 117 particularly important to this group, namely, other people. Other people who basic-  
 118 ally have the same sensitivity and understanding are your best safeguard against  
 119 going wrong. Two heads are generally better than one on matters of this sort. So  
 120 that if you have a group of people with essentially the same kind of understanding,  
 121 the same kind of ability, then the group--or one by one, each member--can serve as  
 122 a safeguard for each other member in terms of "Is he going off? Is he doing wishful  
 123 thinking? Is he confused, etc.?"

124

124 ?. It also works the other way, though, doesn't it?--like within political  
 125 movements like Naziism and things like that, Fascism, that you get your two heads  
 126 together and they're influencing a third. P. Groups can be coercive on indi-  
 127 viduals, but if you have individuals who are operating from their ability, it's  
 128 hard for the group to be coercive. If I tell you there's a cup on the table and  
 129 you look and you can see, you don't have to take my word or anybody else's. You  
 130 can see it. So it's going to be hard for the whole of us, even if we jump all over  
 131 you, to convince you there isn't. You may give in, but you won't be fooled. It's  
 132 when you're not operating from your ability that then you can fairly easily be co-  
 133 erced by a group, because you have nothing else to anchor on. ?. But groups  
 134 also use propaganda techniques that appeal in such a way you think you might see  
 135 a cup. P. The more clearly you're operating from ability, the harder it is  
 136 going to be for you to be misled. But I will say that there are no guarantees.  
 137 There are no guarantees that the group is not confusing you; there are no guarantees  
 138 when you think that you're right and not them. There's no guarantee that if you  
 139 think you're right and you're spreading the word that you have, that that's the  
 140 true word. All we can talk about are the safeguards against being wrong, because  
 141 basically it's stemming from here [ability], and you don't have a guarantee that  
 142 your ability, that your understanding, is enough for the occasion. I think what  
 143 happens is, it seems good enough to you, you try it out, and other people's reactions  
 144 give you some clues as to what you can do. And that's different from knowing you're  
 145 right.

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146 That's the second notion that I wanted to introduce, namely, that you can go  
 147 wrong operating from competence, and what some of the kinds of safeguards are. The  
 148 third one is specifically what's the difference between how this might work in art  
 149 or in science or in other areas, as against how it might work in religion or in the  
 150 spiritual life. Because they're different areas, and what holds in one needn't hold  
 151 in others.

152

152 So let me introduce these notions [blackboard]:                   Ultimates  
 153 I would suggest that the spiritual domain is                                   Totalities  
 154 anchored on these kinds of notions. You're in-                                   Boundary Conditions  
 155 to the spiritual domain when you ask ultimate  
 156 questions--"What's the ultimate meaning of life?",  
 157 when you deal with totalities--"What is the en-  
 158 tire world like? What is my whole life like? How should I live my whole life?"  
 159 And 'boundary conditions' is a little harder to explain, but think in terms of, "When  
 160 have I reached the limit?" For example, if I tell you that I know something, you

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162 may ask me how I know and I may be able to give you an answer. Then when I give  
 163 you the answer, that has to be something else that I know, and so you may ask me  
 164 about it, and I may give you an answer. But ultimately, we reach some kind of  
 165 end because I can't give you answers forever. All knowledge has that structure,  
 166 that you can back up some knowledge with other knowledge, and you can back that up  
 167 with some other, but there is never an infinite sequence of backing up. You do  
 168 reach an end point. The fact that you reach an end point is an example of a  
 169 boundary condition with respect to knowledge, that knowledge is not founded on  
 170 an infinite set of foundations, nor is it founded on a secure foundation. A secure  
 171 foundation is just some other fact that one can ask questions about. So knowledge  
 172 starts somewhere, and it doesn't start from further knowledge, ultimately. And it's  
 173 in dealing with such questions as, "Where does our knowledge come from? What is its  
 174 foundation? What kind of confidence can we have in it?"--these kinds of questions,  
 175 I think, are what you're dealing with when you think of a religion.

176

176 I think of a religion as a theory in this domain. A religion is one that pri-  
 177 marily provides answers to these kinds of questions. And because it works that way,  
 178 you can operate in this domain from understanding and ability without a specifically  
 179 religious doctrine, but then you're running the same kind of risks that we pointed  
 180 out over here [the ladder].

181

181 ?. I would like you to explain the totalities again. I didn't quite get the  
 182 meaning of that. P. Think of the difference between asking, "Should I drink  
 183 this cup of coffee?" and saying, "Yeah, because I'm thirsty," versus saying, "Where  
 184 does coffee-drinking fit in my life? Where does my life fit into human life?" When  
 185 you go to a total picture--you see how they connect: when you get the total picture,  
 186 you have an ultimate answer because there's no place else you can look for an answer.  
 187 And the kind of questions that really get to us are of that sort: What should my  
 188 whole life be like? What do I really want? What is the ultimately right way to  
 189 live? What I suggest is that there's only one place to turn to, namely, here [abil-  
 190 ity], if you're not already into a doctrine. If you do this, you have options of  
 191 going to community-correction or of building up new doctrine. Or of going it alone.

192

192 ?. Can you just jump over to principle and leave out the theory, and not --  
 193 P. Yes. These [principle and theory] are relatively interchangeable in that you  
 194 might argue that principle belongs here [immediately above custom] and theory here  
 195 [immediately below ability]. ?. It seems to me that one of your checks or  
 196 tests for the everyday realm could be 'reality-testing'. Does it work? Does it  
 197 fit with the rest of the facts? But what is the reality against which you can test  
 198 the spiritual, religious realm? P. There isn't any. That's why I introduced  
 199 this [boundary condition]. Any particular piece of knowledge can be checked against  
 200 something else. The totality of our knowledge can't be checked against something  
 201 else--and it isn't the same kind of thing. It isn't that it's defective because it  
 202 can't be checked, the way a particular piece can be knowledge. But if you try to  
 203 handle it the same way, then you're into some of the binds that people get into and  
 204 say, "Our knowledge is not really knowledge because we can't check it all".

205 ?. You need to be pragmatic and see if it works. P. Well, no, because the  
 206 whole notion of what qualifies as 'working' will embody your answer to "What ought  
 207 life to be like?" So you've already decided something in order to apply the test of,  
 208 "Does it work?" That exemplifies what I say when I say that ultimately, this [ability  
 209 is what you appeal to. You can't appeal to the principle of "Does it work?" because  
 210 one can challenge that.

211

211 ?. I guess I'm still not very clear on how to differentiate between the concept  
 212 of the totality, and the ultimate. I sort of get it: a totality involves something  
 213 like how does something fit into the whole picture, but I don't know what the jump is  
 214 from there to ultimates. P. I haven't tried to connect them very closely.

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216 I just made the one connection that when you take everything into account, in  
217 answering a question, you will also have an ultimate answer because there's nothing  
218 further to appeal to for an answer. You can generate limited answers by asking  
219 within a limited context--for this purpose, for that purpose, etc., what's the  
220 answer? But then you can say, "All in all, when you take everything into considera-  
221 tion, what's the answer?", then it's an ultimate answer. Again, the connection with  
222 boundary conditions--that's why I did it in terms of knowledge. If you think of the  
223 totality of knowledge, it comes to an end, it's bounded. You don't keep it up for-  
224 ever. But you have to talk about some kind of totality to see that, because any  
225 single piece of knowledge is not that way.

226

226 ? . Given the fact that doctrines underlie every kind of institution we can  
227 think of, including science, where would be the start in which to get people to  
228 think beyond doctrines? P. The classic answer is, "Provide them with a new  
229 doctrine." The other is to provide them with an example, a new set of customs, a  
230 new set of ways of behaving, and then appeal to them to say, "Can't you see that  
231 this makes the same general kind of sense as the doctrine and the behaviors that  
232 go with it that you have?" This is what I try to do with our scientists up here.  
233 I say, "Look, these procedures do not fit your principles, but can't you see that  
234 following them is contributing to our systematic understanding, and if that isn't  
235 what science is all about, what is it?" So you can generate new customs as well  
236 as new doctrines. ? . I guess my question is, you yourself can begin to think

237 of an alternate way of knowing, but then -- P. Not an alternate way of know-  
238 ing, just--again, what are answers to some questions within this domain=

239 ? . What is the understanding of the question, yeah. But in a sense, it relates back  
240 to what the concept of self is, and it seems to me that to be able to get people to  
241 understand what the nature of the question is requires a whole different notion of  
242 what the self is. P. No, what happens is that one of the limitations here is

243 that you can only speak directly to people who can see what you can see. If they  
244 can't, you have to educate them, and maybe they still can't. But you can't just  
245 talk to somebody about something that he can't understand or can't see.

246 ? . Is he depending on principles, theories, and customs that he's familiar with?

247

247 P. Our educational system is not good for focussing here [ability]. Very often,  
248 children learn at any of these levels by rote, and they do not understand, for ex-  
249 ample, the rationales for our customs. Or they learn a theory and they do not under-  
250 stand what theories are all about. So you can be socialized at any level and stop  
251 there, and then indeed an appeal to a higher level is not going to carry much weight  
252 with you. ? . The place I see most people stop is the inability to accept

253 paradoxes. They think one has to be right and the other just doesn't exist.

254 P. It's awfully hard to act on a paradox. [laughter] So if you're going to act,  
255 you pretty well have to choose one or the other, or simply reject it, and the word  
256 'paradox' is in effect a rejection of it. ? . Bxt you can look in another

257 dimension. P. If you can show that it isn't a paradox after all, that's fine.  
258 But if you just take the paradox as a paradox, there's nothing much you can do with  
259 it except call it that. So since these things connect to behavior, we want con-  
260 sistency of some sort in order to have--what?--consistency in behavior in order to  
261 have behaviors not just occur one by one, but have a whole set of behaviors making  
262 some kind of sense. ? . I can't talk too much about mystics. I don't know about

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264 ? . Would you talk about sensitivities and the development of sensitivity--is  
265 that a social practice? P. No. Sensitivity and ability result from experience  
266 and education. You're not born with artistic sensitivity. You're not born with  
267 spiritual understanding. You acquire that through your experience, through whatever  
268 socializing you've been through, and also through what you try to do and how you suc-  
269 ceed, and when you reflect upon it, what your thinking is. It's true that there do  
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271 seem to be inborn limits. Some people, you might say, have more talent of any sort,  
 272 including this sort [sensitivity], so that they learn faster, they learn more when  
 273 exposed to the same kind of conditions. The same with sensitivity. If you've ever  
 274 run an art appreciation class, you can see what a wide range--some of the people  
 275 will pick it up as soon as you mention it, they're almost right there and sometimes  
 276 they're even ahead of you. Other people, at the end will be asking the same ques-  
 277 tions that they were asking at the beginning. [laughter] And by the way, one of  
 278 the questions that people ask that is most destructive to learning is, "How do you  
 279 do it?" Because if you think about it, "How do you do it?" implies that there is  
 280 a way of doing it that reduces to what I already know. Just give me the right set  
 281 of instructions for doing some of the things I can do already, and then I'll have it.  
 282 Well, that's exactly the wrong way to expand your understanding and ability. And  
 283 yet it's inevitable, because there's what you might call a universal human tendency  
 284 to see things as problems which then need to be solved, and problems can only be  
 285 solved if they can be reduced to something you can do that you already know how to  
 286 do.

287

287 ? . But sometimes, when you start doing something, then you get insights just  
 288 by the process of working with it. P. But it's hard to count on it, and if  
 289 you can't count on it, it's hard to bring it into your calculations about what to  
 290 do. ? . No, I say you just have to start doing it. P. You see, there's  
 291 very few things that you're willing to do just on the hope or mere possibility that  
 292 something good for you may come from it. Because you've got all kinds of other  
 293 things that you can do, that you have more certainty about what you're going to  
 294 get out of it. ? . I see some relationship to this between open and closed minds,  
 295 and I was thinking of - - - and so on, and why that develops in people. P. One  
 296 of the boundary conditions in ultimates is that all of us have our limitations, and  
 297 we have the problem of trying to understand them and operate as best we can within  
 298 them. And, you can say, some people have more, some people have less. You can praise  
 299 people for having more of something. You can argue with people for having less of  
 300 something. But ultimately, we all are limited, and so in that sense we all have the  
 301 same problem: How do we operate within our actual limits, instead of wishing that we  
 302 didn't have those. That's one of those ultimate human problems.

303

303 ? . This "How does it work?" thing is really worrying me a little bit, because  
 304 ultimately you would like to reduce to practise some of these new concepts and ideas  
 305 that are being generated. P. Yeah. If you introduce new concepts, then you've  
 306 got principles or theories. If you simply introduce new customs, you don't need  
 307 much, certainly not the kind that would give you a principle or theory. ? . But  
 308 there is a reduction to practice somewhere in there. P. It's not a reduction  
 309 to practice. That's one of those poisonous terms. Suppose you call it a 'realiza-  
 310 tion' or 'embodiment'. We embody our principles in our customs and particular beha-  
 311 viors. You're right, that is one of the acid tests. Somebody can come up with a  
 312 Utopian set of principles, and then we find that nobody can live that way. So one  
 313 of the acid tests is: Can you live that way? That's why this is the kind of idea  
 314 you have in mind [ultimacy, totality, boundary condition]. One of the things you can  
 315 do is look at examples of how other people live, and generate your descriptions and  
 316 your critiques, and from that it may do something for you in terms of sensitizing  
 317 you to what was wrong with them, and give you ideas of how to do the same kind of  
 318 thing but without making their mistakes.

319

319 ? . Or conversely, copy their successes or analyze their successes. P. Yeah.  
 320 After all, we have all kinds of ingredients lying around, embodied in theories, prin-  
 321 ciples, customs, etc., to use in any kind of new construction or in one's own think-  
 322 ing about things. The trouble is that many times, they are so committed that if we  
 323 follow up what looks like a good thing, we find ourselves right back into the old  
 324 theories, because they were built in. . . . . I must confess, if I were in your shoes,

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326 I'd be saying, "How do you do it?" [laughter]

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327 ? . I was just thinking about trying to tie it in to Unitarianism, and the fact  
328 that we have some assumptions that we're all in the same place and having the same  
329 approach, but we don't really, and that's one of the reasons why we may have a num-  
330 ber of conflicts within the group. Of course, those conflicts exist in any religious  
331 group, but ours aren't down so much at the theory level, perhaps, as they are in what  
332 we are actually able to see and perceive and understand each other. P. Let me

333 suggest a general principle here, that you engage in social behavior in terms of what  
334 you share with people, and where there are differences, you can't do something  
335 jointly in terms of those differences. You can have interactions, customs, insti-  
336 tutions that allow for differences, but what you do together hinges on what you  
337 share. So part of the importance of the differences, at any level, is that that  
338 sets limits to what the group as a group can do, what the members of the group can  
339 do with one another. ? . But it could be such a one that we could come in

340 with our different points of view and enjoy sharing those, because there is an ac-  
341 ceptance involved even though we don't all stand at the same places, but it could  
342 be considered as a closer sharing group. P. It's not just sharing of one's

343 viewpoint. Think of a team as a good example of why you have to have sharing. A  
344 team has a place, say a football team since we're still suffering from the shock of  
345 yesterday. [laughter] A football team has a number of different positions, and you  
346 play them differently. There's a place for differences there. However, imagine  
347 what would happen if the tackles and the quarterback disagreed about who was going  
348 to call the signals. You wouldn't have a football game. There has to be sharing  
349 of that sort in order for there to be a social enterprise in which different people  
350 do different things. They've got to have a common understanding of what they are  
351 all doing. ? . And roles. P. Well, what there is to be done, because

352 they can shift roles. You can move people around. You can invent new plays. But  
353 if they don't share the understanding of what it is to play football, you won't see  
354 a football game out there.

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355 ? . That's what happens in some of our organizations. P. Sure. In an organi-  
356 zation you may get splits of that sort, and then the organization becomes non-function-  
357 al. And that's the time to split. ? . Would you talk about the highest common

358 denominator? Do you recall -- P. You talk about it. [laughter] ? . I

359 recall a conversation once where we--the Unitarian group has a tendency to operate  
360 on the things with which people disagree with the least, and the problem of moving  
361 off that to something else, and I don't recall what that 'else' was - - - - - .  
362 [laughter] P. Okay, I think I remember doing it. At one time, Earlene and I

363 were involved in the planning of a symposium in which the topic was, "What Is the  
364 Humane City?" and it's many of these kinds of things. When you ask, "What is the  
365 humane city?" you're kind of talking about the ultimate city, what the whole city  
366 is all about, etc. And it occurred to us that the things that get done, politically,  
367 -n groups, are heavily weighted in terms of the lowest common denominator. For ex-  
368 ample, municipal money will get spent on roads because everybody agrees that you need  
369 to get from one place to another; on sewage because everybody agrees that we ought  
370 not to have open sewers; on hospitals because everybody agrees that if somebody is  
371 sick, they ought to be taken care of. The major money that gets spent, the group's  
372 resources, gets spent in a way that reflects that lowest common denominator of what  
373 everybody agrees on. So it's non-controversial, and so it's easy to go ahead and  
374 do that. At about that point it occurred to us: the very title of this thing reflects  
375 that. Why was the problem, the problem of the 'humane' city, rather than, say, the  
376 'inspiring' city? The 'inspiring' city would call for maximizing something, for  
377 developing something to its fullest, and you won't see that happening because instead,  
378 you get a lowest common denominator way of operating. Being humane, you see, is that.  
379 Being humane is simply enacting at least the least of what you owe to somebody just  
380 because he is a person and you are. You owe him that much, and if that's what you do,

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382

382 you're being humane. If you prevent suffering, you're being humane. Everybody  
383 agrees that we ought to prevent suffering. So about that time, we got clued in  
384 as to the pervasiveness of this lowest common denominator thinking, because the  
385 thing that we had been assuming as the title, the topic of the whole symposium,  
386 was itself a reflection of that. And we did a little bit of thinking of how that  
387 might be--what alternatives there might be. Because certainly it makes sense, it  
388 makes the very kind of sense I've been talking about, and it's a very powerful  
389 sort of phenomenon. It's hard to get away from it.

390

390 The one thing that I do remember that seemed to be an alternative was that  
391 the way you deal with pluralism--different groups in the city, and remember, the  
392 -ifferences in the group are what set the limits to what's common. You go from  
393 what's common to what's shared by this sub-group and that one and that one, and  
394 then within a sub-group, what's shared by these people and those people. If you  
395 wanted to deal with sub-groups and do some maximizing, you would either have to  
396 give them autonomy, or do it in succession. That is, one year you would devote  
397 the resources of the group to maximizing the aspiration of one of the sub-groups,  
398 and then the next year or the next decade or whatever, toward another. And you  
399 could successively, then, do something for everybody without at all times just  
400 operating on the lowest common denominator, so that in the end, everybody would  
401 have got something, so you're still operating for the whole group. But everybody  
402 would have got something that was unique to that group, and that's something that  
403 you will never get if you are always at the lowest common denominator way of ap-  
404 proaching things. And that's as much as I recall.

405

405 ?. You can't work with the groups successively, often, because they won't wait.  
406 P. Yeah. They don't have the faith that their turn will come [laughter], and that  
407 may well be realistic. ?. That really hits at one of the things that I've been  
408 thinking. I've been taking so many notes because I thought I could use some of this  
409 in my talk on civil rights [laughter]--because you're hitting on some of our basic  
410 problems. I see how this applies to organizations and to developing policy, the  
411 political policies or social policies and so on, but I don't know--I guess I do get  
412 to that problem that you said we shouldn't ask.

413

413 P. About this time I'd like to hear from you about how it connects to the issues  
414 of Unitarianism. Because as an Outsider, one of my views of Unitarianism is that it  
415 has this problem of doing without doctrine. Even if there is some doctrine, it  
416 isn't like the doctrine in other religions, and so this ought to be a central issue  
417 to the whole enterprise. And that's about as much as I know, so I'd like to hear  
418 more about specifically in connection with Unitarianism. ?. Not having doctrine  
419 is almost a doctrine.

420 ?. I think we have some basic premises that we work  
421 with, that have to do with respect for the individual and that kind of thing, but  
422 there are boundary conditions, I guess, on how far we'll go in that respect.

422 ?. I think it comes back in some sense to your humane city. I am not sure that I  
423 would like society to organize itself in a way that optimizes the individual wants  
424 or needs, because they are in a sense undefinable, and some people can't even define  
425 it in terms of your hierarchy. You may not, in your ability or sensitivity, even  
426 be able to say what it is you're able to do or sensitive to. So I think it's quite  
427 acceptable to--in our humanity, provide for the common denominator needs, so that  
428 people don't have to worry and expend their efforts meeting those needs, and indeed  
429 they can optimize their own requirements on the higher level. The Unitarian concept,  
430 to me, is the acceptance of the individual desires, wishes, etc., so that we all can  
431 happily co-exist, rather than coming down to a common custom with - - - judgements.

432



433

434

434 ? . If anyone is interested, today we put on the bulletin board what we, this  
435 fellowship group, the covenant, the solemn promise we made each other, which is our  
436 purpose in organizing, which I think might help some of the strangers. It's up there  
437 on the wall.

438

438 P. It strikes me that in the church, there's not a gap between the total group  
439 and the individual. In a political unit, there will be group, sub-groups, sub-sub-  
440 groups, and then down to the individual. One of the option that I mentioned was  
441 autonomy, that you put the resources of the total group behind the sub-group and  
442 say, Use it the way you can. That means that within their limits of understanding  
443 what they're all about, ability to formulate it, etc., they still have the resources  
444 of the total group available for that time. Is there anything comparable within  
445 his group and the individuals in this group? Is there such a thing as putting, at  
446 any given time, the resources of the whole group behind one individual, to help him  
447 maximize? ? . Aren't they doing that in the California fire? A church was  
448 destroyed and money that was given to the church was then given to individual families  
449 to rebuild their homes. ? . You mean they didn't build a church? They really  
450 think that people are the church. ? . Maybe it's the same people who later  
451 will turn around and build the church. P. Well, rebuilding the homes sounds  
452 like humanity again. ? . But were their homes destroyed also in the fire? Oh,  
453 I see. Okay. ? . Maybe they felt that was the first priority.

454

454 P. You could also put it differently, the difference between preventing evils  
455 and maximizing good, and one of our observations was that preventing evils is where  
456 you find most agreement. Maximizing good is where you find most disagreement.  
457 ? . And least action. ? . That seems to fit political campaigns. Everyone agrees  
458 that we shouldn't have inflation, but -- . ? . I'd better have my raise. [laugh-  
459 ter]

460

460 Earlene: Shall we conclude the service, take a coffee break, and those of you  
461 who would like to have a moment to formulate a question, come back for discussion.

462

-----

463

463 ? . I think it's very relevant, and maybe all we have to do is make the transi-  
464 tion, because as I understood the presentation, and I'm not sure I have it all to-  
465 gether, but I think it's right in the context of Unitarianism, in that you don't  
466 start with doctrine or premises, but to put it in my terms, experience is primary--  
467 and that was your first line-up there, in a sense, that experience is primary and  
468 that's where you have your individual coming in with his insights, his intuition if  
469 you will, and so on. But until that is translated into customs, mores, until it is  
470 intelligently and reasonably established, it's just that, and there is no judgement  
471 there. And that is, it seems to me, the function of the Unitarian Church. The thing  
472 that I wanted Pete to go on with, there, was to relate this to tradition, whatever  
473 the Unitarian tradition is, and we like to think of it as being the whole human  
474 tradition, but we can't take it all in, so primarily we're--I think--democratic and  
475 scientific in our Unitarian tradition, with the Christian tradition coming in, the  
476 Judaic tradition coming in, and the Greek, the Renaissance, the whole bit is ours  
477 to explore. But in order to get out of our individual insights, inspiration, sub-  
478 jective, which can be solipsistic in a sense, and even the group can become that, we  
479 have to have this tradition to relate to. And whether we will or not, it's there  
480 operating, and I think it is for the institution to bring it into the present, vital-  
481 ize it, and make it usable. And to me, of course, one of the things that is happening  
482 in Unitarianism today is that we're breaking away from that tradition and becoming  
483 too immediate, too enclosed in our own groups, and finally, too--just personal and  
484 individualistic.

485



485

486

486 P. I kind of recollect there's a quote from Goethe, and it says, "He who cannot  
487 give an account of 3000 years, lives in the darkness of inexperience and can only  
488 live from day to day." ? . That's it, yeah. And that, it seems to me, is  
489 the job of almost any institution, particularly a religious institution, but it's  
490 also the job of the university, for example, to carry the tradition on and make it  
491 live, re-evaluate it and so on. We were having a discussion and someone said,  
492 "Traditionalism." No, it's not traditionalism, it's bringing the tradition into the  
493 the present, adding to it, but it becomes something new almost. I was reading a lot  
494 of sociology of knowledge into your talk. P. Not sociology of knowledge, just  
495 plain sociology. [laughter]

496

496 Let me add some to my comments. This first one, this ladder, originally was  
497 introduced as a theory of social change, in interacting with a bunch of Marxist  
498 sociologists who claimed that societies were so self-perpetuating that the only  
499 way to get change was revolution. My reaction was: No, that's obviously wrong,  
500 and yet if you had to say it, what is the vehicle for evolutionary social change  
500 rather than revolution? The original version of this is that it's a stability lad-  
002 der, in that the lower down you go, the faster it changes. But then as a justifi-  
003 cation ladder, recommended changes are always going to be changes of custom, changes  
004 in how we do things. And you can justify recommending a given custom, a change  
005 there, by appealing to theories and principles which don't change fast, which for  
006 our society probably haven't changed since the Constitution was written--at least  
007 some of them. And the appeal takes the form of, "In those days, given that prin-  
008 ciple--which we still have, don't we?--" [laughter] "--it made sense to embody that  
009 principle in this particular custom, like non-regulation of trade. Given the  
010 changing times, that same principle, in order to be embodied in our lives, has to  
011 be done in a different form, like this vast array of consumer laws." So it's the  
012 principles and theories that give you the continuity that represents your tradi-  
013 tion. The historical changes are changes primarily in custom, and only slowly--  
014 except when you have revolution--in principles and theories. And then back of it  
015 all is your sense of the American way of life, of the Christian life, of the  
016 spiritual life.

017

017 ? . I think principles and theories can change without revolution. They do  
018 gradually -- P. No, I said they don't change suddenly. ? . No, but new  
019 ones get introduced. P. That's right. ? . - - - new economic theories,  
020 Keynesianism -- P. Yeah. The point is that they generally change slower than  
021 customs, and so you can retain continuity by appealing to those things that haven't  
022 changed, in introducing the things that you do want to change. That way, you're just  
023 not recreating the world every day. ? . To put that in the context of reli-  
024 gion, a man that I admire a great deal, and he gets it from that part of our tradi-  
025 tion when religion, I think, was at its most vital, and that was in the prophetic  
026 period in the Old Testament, the seventh, eighth, ninth century prophets--and his  
027 definition of religion, on the basis of his feeling for the office of religion at  
028 that time and as it would occasionally appear in the human enterprise, was that  
029 the office of religion was to nurture a culture in such a way that you could have  
030 the greatest progress and at the same time, maintain enough order so that the society  
031 idn't fall apart. So religion then, you see, had that dual function of being out  
032 -here in front and exploring the possibilities that were there in that civilization,  
033 and at the same time being so conscious of what had gone on before that the whole  
034 thing was held together, and so you had the Jewish community of Israel that endured  
035 down through the centuries with its good and its bad points, but the thing was that  
036 you've always had there, and particularly at that time--well, as that element has  
037 entered into Western culture over and over again, it has been a dynamic from Marx  
038 on. You don't really understand Marx unless you understand his Jewish heritage.  
039 But he left that completely. So religion can be so dynamic that it's a shame to  
040 see it not operating at this time, in our critical period when it could be doing  
041



042

042

042 so much to maintaining what is valuable of the past and at the same time being out  
043 there in front saying, "This is what has to be done for individuals, for groups, for  
044 the whole society." But this put it into a different perspective. I appreciated it  
045 very much. I liked it.

046

046 ? . I see your tradition as fitting into the totalities, here, to providing a  
047 much larger totality in which an individual can fit herself or himself. ? . That's  
048 right. Actually, it's what 'God' has meant when the term has been really vital, when  
049 it hasn't been just something around a cluster of doctrines. ? . Although I  
050 had--the comment I was going to make, though, was that what you're doing is giving  
051 us another theory to use. P. No. Let me address that, because had I been  
052 giving a lecture, that's one of the points that I would have addressed, because it  
053 always happens: people tell me that I've got a theory, and I keep hitting them over  
054 the head saying, "No, look!"

055

055 What I've introduced is a set of distinctions, that's all. I haven't said,  
056 "This is the way the world is." I haven't said, "These are true." I've simply said,  
057 "Look: here is a set of distinctions." Now distinctions can't be believed. They  
058 can't be true. They can't be false. They can be used or not used. Now the value  
059 of a distinction is that it adds to your possibilities of acting. As soon as you  
060 introduce a distinction, say, between competence and truth, you have a way then of  
061 distinguishing something as truth, and treating it differently from if you called  
062 it 'competence'. So every one of these distinctions, and any distinction in general,  
063 adds to your possibilities of behavior, and it gives you access to certain things  
064 that you wouldn't have access to if you didn't make those distinctions. So unlike  
065 a theory that is a body of statements that tells you what is true, and in that sense  
066 limits you to these truths and not some others, these are simply things that give you  
067 access to possibilities, and in terms of which you can frame whatever truths you be-  
068 lieve are true, but those are not here.

069

069 ? . You've brought in a new term, 'truth'. I did not consider theories as in-  
070 volving truths. I consider theory as a structure that you impose upon either the  
071 universe or some limited part of it, and that it's no more true than another theory,  
072 but it might work. That's sort of a pragmatic approach, I guess. P. The  
073 notion of imposing, if you push that to the limit, you're going to face the embarrass-  
074 ing question of what is it you're imposing this thing on. You don't have independent  
075 access to the world, as well as to your theory, in order to be able to say, "This  
076 theory is something I'm imposing on this thing," because when it comes to saying  
077 what it is you're imposing it on, lo and behold, what you've got is your very same  
078 theory. So it creates certain impossibilities, or at least difficulties, if you  
079 talk in that form of imposing ideas on the world. Because you have no access to  
080 the world other than through the ideas that you are--what?--imposing? What I prefer  
081 to say is that you operate with whatever ideas you have, and not some other set, and  
082 there's no implication that any set is sacred or essential or indispensable, etc.,  
083 but that any given set of distinctions has whatever utility you can give them.  
084 That's why I said initially, "Here's a set of distinctions that I found useful in  
085 dealing with the problem of non-doctrines over here, and if I found it useful there,  
086 it strikes me that you may well find it useful here."

087

087 ? . Just to possibly give me a handle, maybe some others, what framework are  
088 you operating in? Or to put it another way, in terms of value theory, knowledge  
089 theory, epistemology, and so on: what school or tradition -- P. I reject them  
090 all. [laughter] ? . Well, would you consider yourself close to any philosophy,  
091 any philosophy? And yet you say were talking sociology. P. You see, this is  
092 a sociological argument, in effect, that says, "Look, evolutionary change is pos-  
093 sible, contrary to your Marxian theory." But that was something created for a pur-  
094 pose, and that itself is not a theory of social change; it's simply a set of dis-  
095



096

096

096 tinctions which, if one calls attention to them properly, the other person may see  
 097 what you see, namely, that social change indeed is possible without revolution. But  
 098 it's not an argument to that effect, for example. It's a way of helping somebody to  
 099 see something. ? Well, then, it seems to me that you could consider yourself

100 rather close to the instrumentalists, the experientialist school in American philo-  
 101 sophy. Why couldn't you? P. That's simply one of the things that I do, and  
 102 other people do, but that's not all. People also ask questions about "What is it all  
 103 about?", and I resonate to those just as I resonate to the talk of getting somebody to  
 104 see. But the pragmatists wouldn't resonate to those. They would say that's nonsense,  
 105 to ask what is it all about. I would say: No, it's not nonsense, it's just a very  
 106 peculiar question which, if you don't recognize its peculiarity, you're going to be  
 107 out in left field. ? I don't find that in the best of the American philo-

108 sosophical tradition. P. Traditions, maybe, but particular theories--you will  
 109 find particular theories that couldn't possibly formulate questions about what's it  
 110 all about. And specifically, an instrumental theory like Dewey or James--not James  
 111 so much as Dewey--in which the prime focus is on an instrumental schema, there is  
 112 no way to incorporate the totality of the world into an instrumental schema. You  
 113 simply can't formulate questions of that sort within an instrumental schema. So a  
 114 philosophy of that sort--you say, they can raise certain kinds of questions, but  
 115 we're also interested in other kinds, and for those kinds, you've got to get beyond  
 116 that. So whereas I'm strong on instrumental, partly because I'm a clinician and I  
 117 have to worry about how to help people change, I'm also not just a clinician, and I  
 118 do think about questions like that, and those are not instrumental, as far as I can  
 119 see.

120

120 ? Well, they don't deny your asking the question. They simply deny or suggest  
 121 that you'll never know the ultimate answer. P. That itself is an answer, and

122 as an answer, I have to ask, "What kind of answer is it? Is it the kind that could  
 123 be justified? Is it the kind that you'd better not think of as true or false but  
 124 simply expressing the stand that somebody takes? Or what?" And I presume that it  
 125 expresses a stand, because if I take it to be straightforwardly a general statement,  
 126 then it has a poison quality of this sort: Suppose I told you all, "Look, here is  
 127 the way the world is, namely, nobody knows how the world is." ? That's what  
 128 I thought the answer was. [laughter] P. Somebody who says, "We'll never know

129 the answer to that" is - - - - in that position. ? That's like Hindu defini-  
 130 tions of the many-many which is defined by what it isn't. The ultimate is defined  
 131 by what it isn't, which means that you go round and round it all the time.

132

132 P. If you treat it as knowledge with a foundation, you'll be frustrated because either  
 133 you go round and round, or you have no foundation, or you have an arbitrary one, which  
 134 is the usual--in our Western tradition, you find arbitrary foundations: postulates,  
 135 first principles, axioms, revelations, whatever, that gives you the starting point  
 136 for all the rest, and if you get critical about those starting points, then you  
 137 get discouraged and say, "My God, if this is arbitrary, then everything else that's  
 138 built on this foundation is also arbitrary," and then you do everything you can to  
 139 make it as secure as possible, and your conscience is never clear because it is  
 140 arbitrary. So if there's going to be a resolution on that, it won't be by finding  
 141 a magic foundation. It will be by recognizing the boundary conditions on knowledge,  
 142 that it does indeed start somewhere, but that doesn't mean it has to start with a  
 143 foundation. If you look at the whole system of knowledge and how it works, you'll  
 144 see it doesn't need a foundation, couldn't possibly have a foundation, and it's not  
 145 second-best for not having one. Then you lose certain of the questions we have about  
 146 the foundations of our knowledge, not by having an answer, and not by just saying  
 147 there is no answer, but by saying something else instead that prevents this issue  
 148 from being destructive and decisive.

149

149 ? There's a difference between saying that you can't have an ultimate answer,

150



151

151

151 and saying that you can't have any answers. You can have a lot of answers without  
 152 having the ultimate one. P. Well, how would one tell that that was so? Could  
 153 -ne just go out and make observations, and from that conclude that you can't have  
 154 an ultimate answer? Or do you have to be operating within some conceptual system  
 155 that tells you that even without examining all kinds of particular answers, that  
 156 there isn't an ultimate one? And if so, what is that system? ?. I'm satisfied  
 157 with that. I've lived with it for a long time, and it seems to me that for quite a  
 158 while, Unitarianism has lived with that notion. It seems to me that you can examine  
 159 an awful lot, from one stance, and you can question or say, "Okay, what I am on  
 160 now is questionable," so you move over into another perspective and you can look at  
 161 it, and out of that you don't get an ultimate answer, but you understand an awful  
 162 lot of yourself, of your society, of your history, of the universe. But you never  
 163 have the whole thing neatly tied in a package and you call it whatever you want to  
 164 call it.

165

165 ?. Historically, that sort of thing has always given way to the need for another  
 166 ultimate. I don't think this is a problem. You don't have to decide that there's  
 167 no answer, or decide that this is as far as it can go. Because over and over and  
 168 over again, these things have broken down with further --. P. Let me intro-  
 169 duce another principle. This is a procedural principle, and it's a pragmatic one  
 170 that says, "Let's not accept any principle that makes our enterprise impossible."  
 171 When it comes to something like, "You'll never have an ultimate answer," from that  
 172 I would conclude, then we don't need one. Then we're not missing anything vital for  
 173 not having it. Then I would look for, "How come?" and try to develop my understanding  
 174 that way. ?. 'Ultimate' is misleading. It should be more like 'highly tran-  
 175 sitional', because it doesn't seem like once you have it, that's it. It seems like  
 176 it should lead to other things. So 'ultimate' seems like there's a definite end,  
 177 you're putting a lot of conditions on it. I just really believe that 'ultimate'  
 178 seems like a - - - - term.

178 P. It is, if you take it on the model of ordinary  
 179 knowledge, ordinary answers. Think of it as a place-holder, though. You remember,  
 180 I said in talking about this boundary condition, that if you pursue knowledge through  
 181 its evidence and foundations, you will come to an end. I didn't say you come to an  
 182 end at any given place. I said you will come to an end. The fact that you come to  
 183 an end is a boundary condition. Now when you reach that point, you will have what is  
 184 ultimate for you, then. That will for you be the ultimate answer. This is not to  
 185 say that for somebody else, when he pursues that same question, he'll come to the  
 186 same ultimate answer. All you can say is, he will come to an ultimate answer. And  
 187 a year from now when you ask the same questions, you may have a different ultimate  
 188 answer, but there will always be one.

189

189 You need this notion that you're going to reach an end, and that what you have  
 190 at the end is different from the kind of thing that you start with, because what you  
 191 have at the end is something which you can't, and don't need then, any further ques-  
 192 tion and answer for. And so indeed, ultimate answers can change from one time to  
 193 another, but there are ultimate answers. What they are not is guaranteed to be the  
 194 right answers. ?. Why do you have to have it? I don't see having to have it

195 in order to-- - - - - saying "We don't know." ?. Like next Tuesday when you  
 196 all go to vote, you're making an ultimate decision on a candidate. That's your  
 197 ultimate answer to - - - - - .

197 ?. I think we have a lot of ultimate  
 198 answers in little things every day. If you're talking about grand philosophical  
 199 things, it's kind of a different matter. P. 'Ultimate' contrasts with 'limited',  
 200 and I think of a passage--I think from the Mikado--in which the princess is being  
 201 advised by her counsellor and she says, "What do you think I ought to do?" And he  
 202 says, "As your father's oldest friend, I would advise X. As the peer of the realm,  
 203 I'd advise Y. As your personal counsellor, I would say to do Z. As somebody who's  
 204 lived here for a long time, I'd say to do X." And at the very end, she says, "Yeah,  
 205 but what do you think?" There's an example of ultimate versus limited. You can  
 206



207  
207  
207 say, "Well, as a voter I'll do this, as a citizen I'll do that, as an academician  
208 I'll do this, as a Democrat I'll do that," but ultimately, I can only do one thing.  
209 When I put it all together and act as me, what do I do?

210  
210 ? . Are you putting those conditions, then, under the boundary conditions? Is  
211 that what the whole first set would be? P. No, it's just that this, 'ultimate'  
212 or 'totality', contrasts with 'limited' and 'restricted' and 'partial'. If I'm only  
213 interested in a particular purpose -- ? . I'm trying to get the limited in  
214 your structure. Where do the limits of decisions fit into your structure?  
215 P. They don't appear there, because limited decisions are not the arena of the  
216 spiritual life. That's the arena of practical life. If I have a particular purpose  
217 in mind, I say, "What should I do for that purpose?" But if I extend and go beyond  
218 particular purposes, then I have the flat question, "What shall I do?"--and there I  
219 reach the boundary condition. If I say, "What should I do to get ahead? What should  
220 I do to make it sell? What should I do to feel comfortable? What should I do to be  
221 respectable?", you can answer those questions in a practical way. But when it comes  
222 to, "Yeah, but what will I do?", those practical answers are never good enough be-  
223 cause they are all incomplete. And that's the ultimate; that's the totality. As I  
224 say, that presents a very different kind of problem than practical problems, and  
225 hat's why if one doesn't recognize their peculiarity, it's easy to talk oneself into  
226 blind alleys, into hopelessness, into fictions, into all kinds of things.

227  
227 Earlene: I know from experience how these discussions can go on, but unfortunately  
228 we only have the room until twelve . . . . .  
229



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