

Remarks by William P. Densmore Jr.  
At the service marking the pass of his father,  
William P. Densmore  
At First Unitarian Church, Worcester, Mass.

## THE CARPENTER

I'm Bill Densmore Jr.

Thank-you all for being here. This sanctuary full of talent and spirit is overwhelming, and Mr. Bill – our dad, husband, cousin, colleague, collaborator, confidante . . . friend . . . is surely delighted. I hope he would view it as a gathering to celebrate and share collaborative ways forward.

My dad liked to cite Bertrand Russell, the British philosopher, mathematician and social critic -- who dismissed the value of personal introspection. Dad called it “naval gazing.” He opted to focus instead on the world beyond self. He also would say: “You can't look back.” Today, however, we shall gaze . . . just briefly . . . at his life. And here's the “frame” I've come to so far: My dad was a carpenter . . . a builder . . . literally and virtually.

His own father – Edward Dana Densmore – was a Boston-based architect and engineer. His firm was responsible for many commercial buildings, often quite innovative. He died on Christmas night, 1926, barely 2-1/2 years after my father Bill was born.

So even though his own dad was an abstraction, dad chose, with the help of WPI, to also become a mechanical engineer. And he did so after being graduated from The Putney School . . . and from its culture of nonconforming yet disciplined Renaissance scholarship. It included a mix of great musical artistry and earth-centered fun. Music and the natural world stayed with him.

So what did Bill craft and build?

- In the mid-1930s, at his mother's Yellow House in Princeton, a two-stall garage that still stands. At the Putney School, in about 1939, a bicycle shed he showed me proudly during a weekend reunion in the 1960s. Porch decks, steps and stairs out our house in Williamstown.
- Around 1967 he paid \$1,000 for a wooden roadside motel cabin on old Route 9 in Westborough and had it moved to his mother's Comet Pond property in Hubbardston. Offloading it across a stone wall, the mover shaved off the floor and the toilet rolled out. Together dad and I spent many wondrous weekends making a foundation, shimming in a new floor, adding a sunny deck and rewiring the whole shebang. I loved him . . . that process . . . and those days together.

- Much of his physical carpentry – was elegant and whimsical – tiny improvements that just made a house more comfortable – such as the doggie door opener, the doggie treat dispenser.

Carpentry is a river which runs through our family ... our mother's dad was a Worcester builder and many in our family know the value, integrity and purposefulness of making shelter. I think what may be a little unique about our dad, however, is the way he took his left-brain logic, added to it the right-brain creativity and concocted a new spin on carpentry – the building of ideas and teams into action.

I suspect each of us keeps a personal story about our dad's virtual carpentry. One wrote of the "special fierceness with which Bill investigated challenges and organized strategic decision making for programs of social uplift."

Many of you knew our dad as an advisor, collaborator, editor, companion and friend. Now we can no longer phone or email him to wrestle with a big idea or challenge. There will be no more calls from him flagging the latest article or broadcast so relevant to our work.

Instead we might now work around the loss of that great supporting artery, and grow a myriad of capillaries among and between us . . . and that's fitting, in a way. Dad never sought to be the center of attention . . . but rather to elevate the work, ideas and collaborations of others. He found quiet satisfaction in discovering – (*have you heard this before?*) – "Shared aims, values and beliefs" – community purpose – and playfulness – faith in people.

Carpenters plan their work, and then work their plan. Our dad worked plans for Norton Company, its employees and customers, for 35 years. In return, a Norton pension gave him the opportunity spend almost as long helping others plan in education, health, inclusiveness, end-of-life care, ways of peace and sustainable communities. In the last two years, his journey was guided by the remarkable HomeRun project of ReliantFallon.

As children, we called the front room at Algonquin Road the "playroom." My dad fittingly retrofitted it as his own playroom. Here are some of the labels on the bookshelves and six file cabinets – faith, racism, community, justice, sustainability and affluenza, political strategy, corporations, capitalism and democracy, rules change . . . Worcester, immigration, economic development, sustainability, global warming, education reform, health-care reform, Center for Non Violent Solutions . . . organizational development . . . and . . . Russell Corner.

Watching President Obama's inaugural speech, I **\*\*DO\*\*** regret dad didn't live a couple more days to appreciate it. The Telegram & Gazette's banner headline read: "Limitless Possibilities." Not limited growth, but limited possibilities.

As one commentator said after Obama's speech: "He seemed to be saying that we have left the Me Generation and moved on to the We Generation." At last, Obama spoke of wealth, inequality and climate change. I can imagine my father's rekindling of his sense of possibilities, ready to resume "changing the world," as he would say with a joyous, energetic, friendly smirk.

In the last month of my dad's life, I will recall most vividly words he said to me on two occasions:

He said the first words as I drove him from his last visit with Ken Kronlund, the physician who guided my dad's medical glide slope. As we turned the corner off Plantation Street and onto the expressway for Algonquin Road, dad broke the silence to say softly: "I am not afraid of dying. I am afraid of being a burden." I replied: "Any burden of having you here is trivial compared with the burden of not having you at all," He said nothing more.

The second set of words came hours before he died on Jan. 18. We talked about the work his children and grandchildren are doing, and his wife's enduring talents and devotion. He said, with his head back and eyes closed, "I just feel my life has been so blessed." My dad was the rational man. "Public displays of affection" were something he only began to embrace late in life. He offered his love, and found his God, in his own ways.

I knew Bill Densmore. And I am no Bill Densmore. A public intellectual, he has set standards for service, wisdom, integrity, thoughtfulness, ingenuity, warmth, empathy, collaboration, sharpness, playfulness – and carpentry -- to which we can only aspire.

But now, it's our turn to try.

And to say: Thank-you, again for showing up. The world is changed by those who do.