

“Gen X, Y and Z”

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When locusts appear on your land, you need someone to save the day. When the economy veers treacherously toward the abyss. When the planet looks like it's going to get cooked by global warming. When terrorists run unchecked, and the people are afraid. You need a prophet, a savior, a hero. Chances are, this person is going to be young – someone fearless and full of the idealism and promise of youth. I don't know that the prophet Joel was young – but he had a radical vision: that not only the well-established and powerful would be prophets but that the young would, too – your sons and daughters. That not only would old men and women dream dreams, but young people would see visions. Lots of them. In this way, the spirit of the Lord would be poured out onto all flesh.

When you're not catching any fish, and your family is about to starve, you need someone to help you. I don't know that the disciples were young when they were called, but Jesus certainly was. He was not more than thirty when he started his ministry. He calls them to do what they believe is impossible – first to put their nets back into the water when they've been fishing all night and are discouraged. You can see the eye-rolling, hear the sighs – “Master, we have been fishing all night...” And yet when they do it, they are amazed. Perhaps they are amazed by their own powers. And then he calls them to do another impossible thing, something they had never considered – to fish for human beings. Which, on the face of it, makes no sense. Why, if you had just discovered the key to a good living – when you'd just found your lucky Jesus charm and could be rich, rich, rich – why would you put that all aside to do something as vague and undefined as “fishing for people”? How many of you learned this song in Sunday School: “I will make you fishers of men, fishers of men, fishers of men – I will make you fishers of men if you follow me...” I was not one of those future UUs, one of those Sunday school prodigies that questioned the logic of Bible stories as so many of you did. I think that fishing for men means to serve humanity, to give your life to a human ideal – to heal people, to help the poor, to empower the downtrodden. But I wonder – would anyone give up a good living for an ideal? Just what exactly are your ideals? Depending on when you grew up, your answer to this question will be different.

Both of these stories have promise for young adults, for people coming of age, who will be called upon to cast their nets, find their calling, prophesy and see visions for our time. And the generation in which you come of age will impact the choices you make – the choices that you *can* make.

Naming where one generation begins and another one ends is an inexact science. We don't always identify with the generation we're put into by the year of our birth. I was born in 1961, which technically makes me part of the baby boom. But compare graduating from high school in 1979 vs. graduating (as my sister did) in 1969. Worlds of difference. I fully expected to go to college and have a career – my sister did not. She watched her male cohort get drafted and sent to Vietnam, and saw waves of her classmates using protest to express their rebellion.

Not the class of 1979. Young men were still required to sign up for the draft, but no one was being called. We started an era of unequal service in the military – a volunteer army, where a disproportionate number of those serving would do so because they were poor and lacked opportunity to get ahead in society. There were still those who were patriotic and felt called to serve their country. But it was no longer a widely shared experience within a generation. Gone was the shared sacrifice of my father’s World War 2 cohort, or the terror and distaste of my brother’s generation over being drafted for the Vietnam War. Gone, too, the intense moral debate over war. The civil rights era had seen the end to segregation and brought in full voting rights. Not that this was part of daily life in suburban Minnesota. But thanks to television – another important aspect of coming of age as a baby boomer – we felt the shock waves nonetheless. We definitely saw how cool it was to rebel. We admired, and even romanticized the protest movements, but we did not form one of our own. We had seen their limitations, their disappointments. Racism was still alive and well. The Vietnam War ended, but others began. We had become watchful and wary. We wondered: Did it really change anything? We also lacked the sense of abundance and economic security that people coming up 10 years prior enjoyed. Jobs were more scarce, the cost of living higher. Ideals cost more.

Without anyone naming it, we were transitioning into the next generation, which would be called, in the early ‘90s, Generation X. They were significantly smaller in numbers than the boomer generation, as their mothers were putting off having children. This is why the Baby Boom generation is considered the parents of two subsequent generations – Gen X and what some call Gen Y, the Millennial Generation, or the Net Generation. However, the second of these, Gen Y, is almost twice the size as Gen X. They are more numerous even than the Baby Boomers. More on them later.

This generation was called “X” as a kind of anti-label, an assertion of individuality, as in “Don’t label me.” Another reason given is that they grew up feeling “X-cluded” and somewhat alienated from the preceding generation. They lacked important rallying events, like World War 2 or Vietnam, the women’s movement and civil rights. In fact, they saw the various revolutions go sour. Free love gave way to a fear of AIDS. Free teach-ins gave way to soaring tuition costs. Like my cohort, they did not have a war to unify them – either in shared sacrifice or protest. The economy that was already starting to recess when I graduated from college dipped lower – in 1994, Gen Xers earned 20% less in real income than people their age did a generation ago.

Gen-Xers knew more divorce in their families than in any previous generation. Their mothers also worked more, and as so-called latch-key kids they watched themselves – by watching tv. For this reason, Gen X writer Tom Beaudoin writes that popular culture, particularly music and music videos, expressed their values. A Gen Xer whom you know, our very own Rev. Josh, wrote once that he came for the first time to the Unitarian Universalist Church of Ann Arbor in 1994. A college student, he was hurting over the suicide of Kurt Cobain, leader of the Seattle-based band, Nirvana. Cobain had expressed something significant for Generation X. “[His suicide] put a tragic face on the suffering bottled up inside by many X-ers”, writes Tom Beaudoin. “Fans viewed his death as a sort of martyrdom, with Cobain as the quintessential X-er killed by a life lived too quickly under the stress of too many expectations. His doses of prophetic criticism, enraged and heretical, proved too strong for most Americans.” (Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith: The Irreverent Spiritual Quest of Generation X*)

This social criticism is key to understanding Generation X, who are skeptical and independent in their thinking. Irreverence and irony also mark this generation. Think of the popularity of the comedian Jerry Seinfeld, and the way his ironic sensibilities changed what we think is funny. Mary Pipher writes that this is new for our culture. In previous generations there were always a few people who were ironic, but no one really expected irony as a common worldview. Younger people began to see the world at more of a remove and with more irreverence than their elders.

Younger people are criticized for “getting their news from John Stewart”. (And to his credit, John Stewart criticizes this, too.) He and Stephen Colbert are slightly older than generation X – but their humor is quintessentially X: irreverent, ironic, satirical. And yet underneath all the sarcasm is a deep and serious concern for the world. That is the hallmark of people in their 20s and 30s. Humor just may be the “spoonful of sugar that helps the medicine go down” to use a metaphor from my generation.

Generation Xers actually make excellent Unitarian Universalists, when we can get them to come to church. With their natural distrust of institutions, that can be tricky. But if we can get them here, they have much to offer. Critical thinking, questioning, and a natural irreverence that has no patience for the shallow and the status quo. They grew up valuing diversity and having to overcome far fewer personal prejudices. They are more likely to identify with their generation and with people who have common interests and achievements – than they are to identify with being, say, Jewish or African American. They (as do many Unitarian Universalists) may overlook the amount of work that needs to be done to bring the rest of society along with their color-blind perspective.

And they were the first to start to find community on the internet, with online chat groups and blogs. Cyber communities are “perfect for Xers who have grown up with such a tense relationship to formal communities of faith.” (Beaudoin, *Virtual Faith*) The internet breaks down the hierarchies and taboos in conversation in a way that really appeals to this generation. In this way, they lead right into what many call a new generation, though others would say they are too close to split. Generation Y, or as Don Tapscott calls it, the Net Generation, is the first in our history to “grow up digital”. They are “bathed in bits”, fluent in computing and social media in ways that older people just aren’t. “It’s only *technology* when you are born before it was invented,” he quips. (Don Tapscott, *Grown Up Digital: How the Net Generation Is Changing Your World*) To those who have always known it, it becomes like the air they breathe. It is most natural to those who have never had to unlearn an old way of doing something.

They say that we can learn a second language perfectly – that is, with no accent and no grammatical mistakes – if we do so by the age of 12. Otherwise, there will always be a slight difference, that small uncertainty in our speech. I think of social media and the internet like this. Those of us born before 1978 will have a noticeable accent.

Certainly, there are other markers for the Net Generation, some shared defining moments. Living through 9-11, and the wars of Iraq and Afghanistan have had an enormous impact on this generation – though without a draft, perhaps no more than it has on older people. But the digital era began to mark the Net Generation when they were children. It shaped their expectations of relationships – they would always be connected in some way. It shaped their idea of privacy – no longer is something private because it is confined to the inside of your home, or kept

confidential within your family or close friends. Critics of this generation say they have no sense of privacy, or the consequence of their sharing intimate and personal information over You Tube, blogs and Facebook, information which will hurt them in applying for schools and jobs. The privacy they DO enjoy is their ability to go anywhere and talk with anyone they please, out of sight from their parents, who can't keep up with them in cyberspace.

One good thing about all this is that the differences between generations are less contentious than they were a generation or two ago. The "generation gap" I grew up with meant serious and painful moral arguments. Generations fought over the meaning of service and duty to one's country, sexual propriety, the rights of women and people of color. There was little attempt to "understand" one another – they were just *wrong*. They were values arguments. Now, parents and children report getting along much better than before. There are fewer conflicts over values. Even music, usually a good fight-starter, is less of a problem, with children sending play lists to their parents for their i-pods – because they like a lot of the same stuff. (The fact that multiple generations are all ogling the latest droid, i-pod, i-pad, etc. is a kind of coming together. I might argue that consumer lust is somewhat superficial as a spiritual connection, but I will save that sermon for Christmas.)

And as Don Tapcott rightly points out, the greater understanding and competence that the Net Generation has over the boomers and probably even Gen X, gives them an elevated authority. It levels the playing field. If there are arguments, they will be over the omnipresence of cell phones and texting during work. Robert hired some recent high school graduates to work on our house this summer and was mystified by the constant texting – one lost his job with us because he simply couldn't stop.

They are an optimistic generation – always believing something good is just about to happen. Despite the hardships of the 2008 crash and the incredibly difficult time they have in finding jobs, they are undaunted. They are also insistent that the companies they work for be ethical and that their jobs offer them autonomy and creative opportunity. They are criticized sometimes for their sense of entitlement and lack of humility. But apparently it comes in handy. Unemployment for new graduates is around 20%. Graduate schools are harder to get into, and the hiring of teachers – usually an honorable option when all else fails – is way down from lack of funding for schools. And yet they are turning down jobs that don't meet their expectations.

They would rather move back in with their parents than take a job that paid them less than their self-assessed market value, according to Judith Warner in an article from the New York Times Magazine. [Warner] interviewed nine students recommended to [her] by college professors and officials, yielding a picture of emerging adults with a striking ability to keep self-doubt — and deep discouragement — at bay. Many were jobless, others were dissatisfied with their work or graduate-school choices, yet they didn't blame themselves if life failed to meet their expectations. They didn't call into question their choices or competencies." This generation is said to have been coddled and over-praised as children, parented with a relentless emphasis in building self-esteem. However, "it was as if all the cries of "Good job!" they heard as children armed them against the repeated blows of frustration and rejection now coming their way." (Judith Warner, *The New York Times Magazine*, May 28, 2010)

We could use some of that confidence around here. These too are people I would like to see in greater numbers in our church. They would probably like our non-traditional faith with its

emphasis on choice and freedom very much. However, they share the skepticism of Gen X about church. Here's a note I received from Rich Jester, one of our few members who is also a bonafide member of the Net Generation. He says, "Occasionally [my fiancé and I] will talk someone into coming to church with us. Most of our friends do not attend church. Many were forced into religion in middle and high school and now that they're adults and have received some secondary education, they seem to have an allergic reaction to church and religion in general. LOL."

Most Unitarian Universalist churches I know are desperate to have more young people join them. They are fearful of becoming "too gray" – a term I've never liked for its lack of appreciation for our elders. They are afraid we are going to die out as a faith tradition. And they're right. We aren't hemorrhaging like the mainline church is, but we are shrinking in numbers. We do need younger people if we are going to continue. But is that any kind of reason for a young person to come to church? To allay the fears of the old people? That won't work! They need to see that there's something here for them. That this is a place that seeks to understand them and appreciates their gifts. When Rev. Josh entered the Ann Arbor church for the first time, he stayed because someone there knew who Kurt Cobain was and why his death mattered. How much are we paying attention to the hurts and needs and quirks and gifts of the Net Generation?

We need to seriously examine our presence on the internet and in social networks. Do we have a message in cyberspace? Is it compelling enough to get a reluctant person in their 20s or 30s to try something as alien as church? Do we even know where we're lacking and how to remedy it? These are all questions we have to face. Generation Y knows the answers. And they are going to save us.

In a spiritual community, we save each other. This fall, after our ingathering Sunday service, I drove two-and-a-half hours to attend a funeral. It was for a man I knew when I was interning at the UU church in Arlington, VA. One Lindsey Harmon. Lindsey was 81 when I was 31, and we taught a class together for Adult RE. Lindsey saved my life. I had failed the first examination for credentialing for the ministry – I received a score of 3, and you need a one to pass. I could certainly try again, and did, or I wouldn't be here now. But in the moment, I was crushed. I was so embarrassed I didn't want to return to church. When I finally came into my office, there was jam jar with flowers from Lindsey's yard. And there was a note that said, "Barbara, Dear, you're number one with us." We save each other.

Mark Morrison-Reed, a retired UU minister, talks about returning to church after a spectacular failure in his life, and teaching Sunday School. He was saved by preschoolers, who, he said, "liked me at a time when I couldn't like myself." We save one another.

A church is a place where we meet as generations and across the generations, and both are vital to our well-being. Both offer us friendship and meaning. A church is a place where we can explore the big questions, and where we can fail and succeed and it matters to other people. Where we matter to other people. A church is a place of so much beauty it takes my breath away. Do you ever wonder why I look out at you over my hymnal when we're singing? I can't help myself – I feel so much power, so much love from you all. This strengthens the soul no matter what age you are.

What are gifts does this generation have to bring to our Unitarian Universalist table? What do we have to offer them? We do need young people in our church – lots more than there are now. But not to continue the church simply in the way we know it now, but in new ways, ways we can't yet understand. I put out an invitation to everyone in our church in their 20s and 30s who might want to talk with me after this service. I invite you to come up to the first pews and have a conversation.

Let our young men and our young women see visions. Let us listen to them and follow. Let us put our nets in deep and reap the abundance of all the generations. Amen.