

Talkin' 'bout Our Generations by Rev. M. Lara Hoke January 23, 2011
a reflection at the Unitarian Universalist Congregation in Andover

Last summer, I went to a workshop at the Unitarian Universalist General Assembly that I have been thinking about ever since. The workshop I speak of was titled “Future Generations of UUs: What Will They Value?” The workshop was led by a panel of young adult presenters¹ from the Millennial Generation, those born between 1982 and 2001. Now, there are other names for this generation; sometimes they are called the “Echo Boomers” because they are the children of the Baby Boomers, another large generation. Sometimes they are called “Generation Y” because they follow Generation X. I will use the name Millennials because it names them in a way that does not make them derivative of some earlier generation. In any case, my reflection today is influenced by this presentation as well as an article that they referenced, a Harvard Business Review article called “The Next 20 Years” by Neil Howe and William Strauss, who are also the authors of the book *Generations: The History of America's Future, 1584 to 2069*.²

Now, before I get into this topic and start making broad characterizations about the generations, I need to give a few disclaimers. One is that I am talking about American generations; these characterizations do not work for people from other places. A second disclaimer is that, by and large, these generational characterizations are talking about the dominant culture – which has been Euro-American and middle class. Some of the generalizations will go across lines of race and class, but others undoubtedly less so. Third, some folks fall outside of the generalizations – either because they are born on the cusp of two different generations, or just because they were out-of-step with their generation for various reasons. Finally, the start and stop dates for each group are fuzzy, and sometimes two siblings will be from different generations according to the numbers. Sometimes, you have to fudge the dates a little.

With those disclaimers, let me jump right in with the generational overviews. The oldest living generation of Americans is the GI Generation, sometimes called “The Greatest Generation”. These are Americans born between 1901 and 1924. They were young adults when World War II came around. And by and large, they rose to the occasion. They were civic-minded volunteers who did what their country seemed to need them to do. It’s no mistake that John F. Kennedy (the first of many US Presidents to come from this generation) famously said, “Ask not what your country can do for you; ask what you can do for your country” almost exactly 50 years ago. This generation values hard work and sacrifice for the common good. Mostly, this generation smells like a rose. Those still living from this generation are national treasures to many of us.

The GI Generation was a tough act to follow, so you almost have to pity the next cohort... It is the Silent Generation that comes next. The Silent Generation are those Americans born between 1925 and 1942. As Neil Howe and William Strauss put it, this generation “grew up as the seen-but-not-heard Little Rascals.... Its members came of age just too late to be war heroes and just

¹ The workshop presenters were Chris Wulff, Julia Angley, and Andrew Mertz. The workshop was held on June 24, 2010 at the UU General Assembly in Minneapolis, MN. The video of the GA workshop can be watched at <http://vimeo.com/15584923>.

² The article is “The Next 20 Years: How Customer and Workforce Attitudes Will Evolve”, by Neil Howe and William Strauss, *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2007, pp. 41-52.

too early to be youthful free spirits.”³ They started out as adults following the rules of the older generations, but as they got older – sort of unusually – they started looking to the younger generation for cues. As Howe and Strauss put it, in the 60s the Silent Generation began “following Bob Dylan’s lead (‘I was so much older then, I’m younger than that now’). They became America’s leading civil-rights activists, rock and rollers, antiwar leaders, feminists, public-interest lawyers, and mentors for young firebrands.”⁴ The sexual revolution hit them after many of them had settled into married life, and perhaps in part because of that this generation was very prone to divorce.

The Baby Boomers are a huge generation of Americans born after World War II, between 1943 and 1960. The Baby Boomers were so huge that they practically invented “Youth Culture”. The rock ‘n’ roll from their era is *the* rock ‘n’ roll, *the* “classic rock” – the title of this sermon inspired by one of *their* anthems, “My Generation” by the Who, in fact. And they were the generation that came of age during the sexual revolution and psychedelic experimentations. They were highly individualistic and questioned authority. As Howe and Strauss put it, they were focused on “inner life, self-perfection, and deeper meaning.”⁵ They wanted to change the world, but not using the usual institutions. By the time they were middle aged, they largely gave up those youthful ways and became, many of them, career-oriented Yuppies. As parents, they tended and tend to be very close to their children – remarkably, even as their children enter adolescence – and they have sometimes been criticized for hovering over their children a little too much. Now, as they age and some of them are entering elderhood, aging becomes cooler than it used to be – they can rock the denim into elderhood! Sometimes it’s good to be part of a big cohort!

Generation X is next. That’s my generation. We are Americans born between 1961 and 1981. We are a small generation, sometimes called the “Baby Bust”. The Generation X name, by the way, comes from the Roman numeral – the number 10 that looks like an “X” in Roman numerals. This is because my generation is the 10th generation of Americans to be born since the American Revolution. But “X” also has the negative connotation of being generic or nihilistic. In our teens and 20s, we were widely derided as slackers. We didn’t have the idealistic, youthful zeal that the Baby Boomer generation had before us. We are the so-called “latch key” generation, often left to fend for ourselves during the “Me Decade” 70s and the hyper-materialistic 80s. As Howe and Strauss put it, Generation X “grew up in an era of failing schools and marriages, when the collective welfare of children sank to the bottom of the nation’s priorities.”⁶ Kind of makes you want to hug a Generation Xer, doesn’t it? We came of age sexually in the age of AIDS, when having HIV was a death sentence. We have tended to be a generation known for feelings of alienation and discontent. Now that we are entering middle age, however, we have become a fairly entrepreneurial generation, making the most of technology... we’re still young enough to learn new tricks, I suppose. We are more pragmatic as a generation than idealistic.

³ Howe and Strauss, *ibid*, p. 43.

⁴ *Ibid*.

⁵ *Ibid*.

⁶ *Ibid*, p. 45.

Then, we come to the Millennials. The Millennial Generation was born between 1982 and 2001. This large generation has been raised in an era when, as Howe and Strauss put it, “popular culture began recasting babies as special and stigmatizing hands-off parental styles”⁷. As was pointed out in the GA workshop I attended, this generation has been very validated by the adults in their lives in an era when every kid gets a trophy because participation and engagement is “more important than winning”. They have been raised to be very collaborative, working with peers. As a whole, Howe and Strauss tell us that this generation has “seen steady decreases in high risk behaviors”⁸. This generation tends to be civic-minded. Of course, this was the first generation (for those who are economically privileged) to grow up with computers all around and mobile electronic devices at their command. I will have more to say about them shortly.

Finally, and briefly, the youngest living generation of Americans – the kids downstairs in RE now – is called the Homeland Generation, presumably because they were born around or after the tragic events of 9/11. It is too soon to say much about this generation, still being born.

I want to point out one more thing, before I shift into thinking about making Unitarian Universalism and this congregation more relevant for the Millennial Generation. Howe and Strauss write that “It matters very much to the makeup of a generation whether it comes of age during or after a period of national crisis, or during or after a period of cultural renewal or awakening. [Howe and Strauss] like to label these four major kinds of generations with the shorthand of archetypes: prophet, nomad, hero, and artist. The generations of each archetype share not only a similar... location in history, but also similar attitudes toward family, culture and values, risk, and civic engagement.”⁹

And perhaps most importantly, as Howe and Strauss sum up, “Archetypes create opposing archetypes. In other words, your generation isn’t like the generation that shaped you. It’s like *the generation that shaped* the generation that shaped you.”¹⁰ In other words, a generation is shaped by the generation that raised their parents. We Generation Xers are more like our Lost Generation grandparents than we are like our Silent Generation parents. Generation X, like the Lost Generation, are the archetype that the authors call “nomads”. And most to the point today, the Millennial Generation is more like their GI Generation grandparents than they are like the Baby Boomers who have been raising them. The Millennials, like the GI Generation, are the archetype that the authors call “heroes”.

Psychologists think about family systems and the role that each of us plays in our family. Everyone has a role that they’re born into, in a sense. And birth order, for instance, has a profound impact on shaping us. Similarly, whatever innate qualities one might have, each of us is born into our generation. And like it or not, that shapes certain things about us. If we think of our country as a family, then in a sense, each generation is part of the national system, as opposed to a family system. Each generation plays a role in the alchemy of the United States. And each archetype is needed, all four. We need prophets and heroes and artists and even nomads. The only living prophet generation are the Baby Boomers. We need their idealism and

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰ *Ibid*, p. 47.

vision. The Lost Generation is mostly gone, leaving Generation X to play the part of the nomad, bringing pragmatism and realism. The Silent Generation are the artists, and if the patterns hold true, the Homeland Generation will be artists too. We always need artists to help us reflect more on the world around us and to see things in a whole different way. And as the GI Generation is growing ever older, the role of hero is being passed to the Millennial Generation.

What is true for the country is true for our congregations; a thriving congregation will include all the archetypes, all the generations. So, how can UUism be more relevant and appealing for this Millennial Generation – this heroic and collaborative group – this generation that has all the potential to be the next Greatest Generation?

Let's start by thinking about how we present ourselves as a congregation. Here I rely on insights from the GA workshop; insights from the Millennial presenters of that workshop, Chris Wulff, Julia Angley and Andrew Mertz. And their presentation was so collaborative, by the way, that I credit them as a group – they tended to chime in together to make their points! One point they made was that Millennials are generally unmoved by advertising. So having a congregation wordsmith a collective, agreed-upon statement about who they are isn't as compelling for Millennials as having ten different people say, individually, what they like about a congregation. Millennials like to see individual reviews, which seems more authentic than a group decree.

The Millennials, at least the ones who grew up as UUs, grew up with the “Con” experience – the youth conferences, called “cons” for short. And these cons are very much about deep connection to peers – knowing others and being known... intense sharing of personal experiences and thoughts. And as these Millennials grow up and sit at the “adult table”, so to speak, here in the seats or pews of adult UU worship, it comes as a bit of a shock and let down that it's such a passive experience. Aside from the joys and concerns, there's usually not much chance to share personal experiences. It doesn't always meet their needs.

It's not that they have no use for the passive parts of the experience – like listening to a sermon, for instance. It's just that from their perspective, you should be able to listen to the sermon as a podcast at a time of your choosing. Or maybe you can go to look at the text of the sermon online when it suits you. As the panelists pointed out, this generation – growing up with mobile digital devices – is not used to being bound by time and space in the same way that we old folks have been accustomed to do. So for instance, as the panel pointed out, they don't necessarily think of banking as something you do at the bank building during those pesky banking hours – that's “banking like a pilgrim” as the commercial says¹¹ – instead, banking is something you can do anytime you like from your mobile device. And so, it's not necessarily that they don't like the passive worship elements... it's just that they don't see why they should have to, for instance, come to 6 Locke Street at 10:30 a.m. on Sunday to get them. As a panelist said, in this age of Hulu and video on demand, there's a sense that if you miss Sunday worship, “you should be able to ‘make it up’ later” electronically. Why worship like a pilgrim?

There is an understandable expectation of 24/7 access to passive information; there is an expectation that passive information should be posted online. So we shouldn't put a note in the newsletter saying there will be a great event – call so and so at this phone number to find out

¹¹ This is the Citibank commercial featuring Jerry Stiller.

more... because Millennials won't call to find out more. And as the panelists also reminded me, the Millennials are not as excited about e-mail as the older generations are. Older generations love to coordinate through e-mail – lots of congregational committee business is done through the magic of e-mail and “reply all”. But the Millennials do not like this way of doing business. They prefer text to email. Text is quicker, and more engaging. If you do send an e-mail to a Millennial, you might want to text them, saying “Check your e-mail”! E-mail, for them, seems like something you do for business; it's more of a chore. Unlike older generations, they tend not to socialize through e-mail. E-mail just isn't fun for them.

The panelists also helped me to understand the importance of being producers rather than consumers. Millennials are used to being a part of things, thanks to the Internet. For instance, 97% of Millennials add content to the World Wide Web. They don't just go to Youtube to *watch* a video; they also expect to *comment* on the video and be part of a dialogue. They might expect to use their mobile device to make and upload a video of their own in response to a video that they've watched. They are part of the content, contributing to it, not merely passively absorbing it as you do with TV. And when *they* watch TV? They are often also on an electronic device, perhaps commenting on the show on Facebook or Twitter. One of the panelists pointed out that Twitter shut down during the season finale of *Glee* because so many Millennials were Tweeting about it, getting their own opinions out there, being part of the spectacle. In fact, for Millennials, TV is sort of a backdrop, as a panelist put it, not a place to direct all of one's attention.

This generation is civic-minded, and they are already volunteering at high levels. For them, according to the panelists, the biggest perceived oppression is economic inequality, and this was true even before the current financial crisis. Some project that the economic crisis and the impact on this country will be the transformative crisis to which the Millennials, projected to be the next Greatest Generation, will rise. The global climate crisis might be theirs to tackle, too.

Given their concern for economic equality, they do not like the trend of expecting services for a fee in congregational life, according to the panelists. To the extent that Boomers and Xers expect a fee-for-service set up in their congregation, or sort of a mentality that if you pledge a lot, you should get a lot in return, Millennials will see this as entitlement and be put off. And as more congregations have the conversation about whether there should be a minimum pledge amount for membership, many Millennials will be appalled. Millennials are into taking care of each other, and expect that from their congregations.

One last point about Millennials. As the panelists pointed out, they grew up with constant change and have embraced fluidity. This sensibility has carried over into their identities. They often have multiple identities, asserting “This is who I am, but this is who I am too”. There's a sensibility of transience. Older generations might perceive this negatively, as being flakey or being of weak convictions. But it really should be viewed as a unique strength. In a sense, they are in line with classical Unitarian thought such as Ralph Waldo Emerson's famous statement “A foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds”.

So what shall we do, in the future, to meet the needs of this important generation? One thing I find hopeful from Howe and Strauss's article is that “... Millennials ... favor friendly rituals and community building over personal spirituality.”¹² The Boomers and Xers have sometimes liked

¹² Howe and Strauss, *Ibid*, p. 50.

to “do” their spirituality in isolation, with private spiritual practices, and this has made it harder to attract those generations to a congregation. But Millennials associate community building with true religion, and that’s hopeful for congregations. The fact that they are drawn to “friendly ritual” could favor UU congregations, too, if we can find ways to make our singing bowl sounding and chalice lighting and pebble dropping ever more compelling. The fact that Millennials are moved by economic justice is very much in line with UU values too, and perhaps that could be an area of increasing focus.

But what more can we do? Should you be able to participate in a congregational meeting from home, or wherever you are, with streaming video? Should you be able to watch the sermon and service through streaming video? Should we upload it to the website? Should we encourage folks who are present on Sunday, while turning the ringer to silent, to leave their mobile devices on, tweeting and writing Facebook status updates about the sermon or the hymn or anthem? Should we figure out ways for people to add content to each worship element so that it is more engaging? Is talk back helpful? Should Sunday morning be a time to come together and share individually for an hour, interspersed with ritual, perhaps inspired in part by whatever we saw and heard in the sermon video of the week? Should the website become almost like a password-accessed (for members only) Facebook/Twitter/Youtube all in one?¹³ Can the spiritual and the digital merge? These are the questions. May we have the wisdom to find the way. As we said in the words we shared responsively, May our “love, like a carefully loaded ship, cross... the gulf between the generations”¹⁴. Blessed be, and amen.

¹³ Since preaching this, I learned that Garrison Keillor has coined the term “YouTwitFace” (tongue-in-cheek, of course).

¹⁴ Antoine De St.-Exupery, reading 649 (“From Generation to Generation”) in *Singing the Living Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1993).