

## Generations X and Y; Ministry to Young Adults

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### Part I

One of the best things about Sunday morning for me is the experience of all ages coming together; for many of us, this is the one place where we have that kind of community. Congregations consist of multiple generations, woven together to create a rich tapestry of experience and interaction. A while back I heard of generations identified as historical cohorts, with characteristics defined by demographics, popular culture, world events; and it helped me make sense of sometimes puzzling differences in points of view, or even chasms between perspectives; some of you remember the term Generation Gap... This can be a contributing factor to less participation by the young adult generation, and to be truly all we can be, we want involvement of everyone. Of course there are developmental patterns for each stage of life, but there are additional identifying characteristics for historical generational cohorts, and this can help us find our way to mutual respect for a multiplicity of world views.

On the Internet I found a quick list of American / Canadian generations; listen and see if you can place yourself. Of course these are generalized characteristics (and I only have time to mention a brief description), and this is not to negate your respected status as unique individuals, all of you!

The Lost Generation, born 1883 to 1900, which is the generation defined by World War I—is it possible that anyone here is in that group? Please rise or raise your hand...

The GI Generation, born 1901 to 1924; defined by World War II and a civic outlook on society (Those from the GI Generation, please rise or raise your hand...).

The Silent Generation, born 1925 to 1942, “defined as adaptive” (please rise etc...).

The Baby Boomers, born 1943 to 1960, characterized as idealists (Boomers! Rise up!...)

Generation X, originated as a pejorative term, the X meaning no identity, alienation. Born 1960 to 1981... This generation is characterized as reactive, streetwise. Gen X’ers, show yourselves...

Following Generation X we have Generation Y, or the Millennial Generation, or the Internet Generation, born 1982 to 2001... Please rise... And we have already sung out some of these, and all of the Cyber generation, except a few of the newest who remain in the sanctuary— let’s see the babies...

Our focus today is on young adults, which the Unitarian Universalist Association defines as ages 18 to 35; quite a spread of life stages. That would give us as the older ones, the last half of Generation X, and the

younger ones belong to the first half of Generation Y. Let's get to know this part of ourselves a little better. Those in the 18 to 35 year old category, please rise or raise your hand (unless you're a shy person, and you're excused, but we know who you are... thanks.) Some famous Gen X'ers in this age group are: Billie Joe Armstrong (musician), Nas (a rapper), and Tyra Banks (Model and TV personality). According to Wikipedia (which was the brainchild of a Gen X'er), factors distinguishing Gen X from previous generations include experiencing a higher rate of divorce in their families of origin, growing up in a rapidly deindustrializing Western World, experiencing the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of the USA as the world's lone superpower, and experiencing much less job security. They have been perceived as overwhelmed by the social problems they inherited: racial strife, homelessness, AIDS, fractured families, and federal deficits.

Generation Y has not had as much press; they are emerging now. Perhaps even more so than the previous generation, they are faced with fears of destruction of the world through nuclear or environmental threats, and with the latter, it seems we may be heading headlong to the point of no return, with loss of species tipping a critical balance for the planet. The music of this generation is often characterized by either apathy, or rage and outrage, from a sense of overwhelm about the state of the world. And yet, these young people are charged with energy, hope, and vision, and are eager to take the lead in turning the world around. You will notice that most of the music for our service today was written by young adults, some of whom are participating in this service. Please keep the challenges of the younger generation in mind as you listen to the music coming up.

Valley UU member Mark Zeller, aka Riot, has an illustration for us of liberal young adult attitude toward current politics. You will find the lyrics in the insert of your order of service... Please welcome him as he performs, “Riot Act”...

Wow, that was powerful!

These are my own observations, as a Unitarian Universalist leader of many years, of the liberals amongst the young adults. Many young adults are skeptical about organized religion, but seek alternative paths to expressing and developing spirituality. They weave a trust in scientific knowledge and approach with an understanding of the need for ethics and morality to underlie scientific investigation, and also with a sense of wonder at the mysteries of the universe. They often go beyond the idea of *tolerance* of diversity, to *celebration* of it. They are less bound by the culture of individualistic freedom, and more conscience of the need to think and work collaboratively and creatively in community. They seek connectivity (witness the internet, cell phones, text messaging... They are willing to leave their families and communities of origin in order to be with like-minded people of all generations. They are less concerned with their own prosperity, and more concerned with nurturance of society and of the planet. They want their kids to grow up in a community that stands for justice, diversity, and interdependence, respect for all humans and for the delicate environmental balances that sustain us, a community that no longer seeks

war as political solution. I think these are folks we want to invite into our congregations in great numbers, to enrich and strengthen the tapestry of our beloved community.

## Part II

Rejection of the status quo of religion is not a new invention. Here is an excerpt from Amos Chapter 5 from the Old Testament:

I hate, I despise your festivals,  
And I take no delight in your solemn assemblies.  
Even though you offer me your burnt offerings,  
I will not accept them.  
Take away from me the noise of your songs;  
I will not listen to the melody of your harps.  
But let justice roll down like waters,  
And righteousness like an ever-flowing stream.

In other words, forget the empty rituals, let's see some action based on principles! Now Amos here is quoting a disgruntled God, but the sentiment sounds just like the young adults I've been speaking to. What does Unitarian Universalism, and this congregation have to offer young adults today?

CUUYAN, the Continental Unitarian Universalist Young Adult Network, has a slogan:

Spiritually Alive, Radically Inclusive, Justice-Centered!

That is what liberal young adults today need like they need air to breathe and water to hydrate. I think it's a good description of this congregation, too.

To take them one by one,

First, we are spiritually alive. Mind you, I grew up in a Unitarian Congregation in the 60's that ignored spirit altogether, but most of us are over it. Here, now, we know how to liberate spiritual experience from a single creed, from narrow-minded thinking, from empty ritual. We experience spirit especially well in music of all kinds, in spiritual practices drawn from many traditions, in deep sharing of the spirit during communal prayer. We foster mindful theological exploration based on ancient traditions and on dawning scientific understanding, each individual encouraged to seek what resonates for their own path, and to seek others here to accompany them on that spiritual journey. Is this congregation spiritually alive? (let me hear you cheer!)

Radically inclusive: radical can be a scary word for some, but a magnet for others (in all generations!). Unitarian universalism is historically a movement which has chosen a radical path almost despite its comfortable moderate tendencies because of its recognition of the need to be inclusive (that is the whole basis of Universalism!). For some of us, being radically inclusive has always been the only choice, for some, it is a big stretch that

we nevertheless want to make. Our opening of the service states we welcome people of all religious and ethnic backgrounds, all theological perspectives, all sexual and affectional orientations, if you share our guiding principles. The Unitarian Universalist Association is active in raising a public voice to uplift honoring the human rights of Gay/Lesbian/Bisexual/Transgendered/Questioning people, and is especially active politically in promoting equal rights in marriage. We strive with all our hearts to do be truly free from oppressive attitudes and actions, and therefore are an oasis of radical inclusivity in this somewhat conservative desert. This congregation is a place for people to experience that across the generations, each enriched by the other's experience and wisdom. Let's hear it for radical inclusivity!...

The third quality is justice-centered. Unitarian Universalism is a faith that wants to create a world *where justice rolls down like water*, where respect for all and equity in human relations is the standard for all interactions, where poverty is eliminated and all people are empowered in decision-making in their lives, where oppression of *any* group is a thing of the past. We are a faith and a congregation that seeks peace with justice in the world, that is beginning to understand that violence can no longer be utilized as a solution to conflict; that other radical, non-violent approaches need to be developed and relied upon. We are actively striving to save the planet from destruction by nuclear war, and by environmental exploitation. Riot says to the President, "I keep thinking and I keep strivin', tryin' to find a way to keep this nation alive and learn a bit from history—strip away the mystery..." Our Green Sanctuary efforts are exploring ways to educate and act so that we learn and help others to learn to be more mindful in our daily

lives and in our public choices, mindful of the sacredness and of the delicate biological balance of the natural world. Is this place justice-centered?!...

The thing that is most important to me about a Unitarian Universalist congregation, is that we are a beloved community. We come together, *celebrating* our differences; differences of opinion, of thinking, of theology, of cultural background, of economic status; we want everyone's experience and revelation on the table for the enrichment of the whole. We seek like-minded and/or like-hearted best buddies within this community, but we treasure having companions within it of great variety.

To finish today, I invite you to share what is uniquely Unitarian Universalist that brings you here, and not somewhere else. Please be brief so that any who would like to can share (we have about 10 minutes). You may come to the standing mike, or raise your hand for a mike to come to you. I will recognize each speaker. Who would like to begin?