

Draft

VALENTINE'S DAY FOR THE VALENTINE GENERATION
Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson
February 13, 2011

Good morning again, everyone, and this is one final reminder that Valentines Day is tomorrow. I say this because nearly every year I venture to get a card or flowers at a high quality grocery store usually at the last minute. I am never surprised to see other men wandering around with bewildered looks and carrying an unwieldy assortment of cards, candy and flowers.

Perhaps it is true that Valentine's Day is mostly for lovers. That's certainly the usual theme of Valentine's Day. I propose to us this morning that there's another theme beyond romance and love in its traditional sense and it speaks to the values of a new generation all around us called the Millennial Generation and sometimes called the Valentine Generation.

Why might this be so?

I was talking with my late sister two years ago and she mentioned that the people who were born since about 1980 are a very "huggy" generation. I asked her more about what she meant and she said that when she used to pick up her older daughter from kindergarten about 1995, she noticed that Jillian would always hug some of her friends before leaving. She said that she's seen an evolution of such behavior when her youngest daughter, Jady, was in kindergarten several years ago. She told me that when she'd go to pick up her at school, all the little boys and girls would come out, give each other hugs regardless of gender and then come to their parents. My sister was quite astonished by this and asked other parents if people in their 40's and 50's had ever done such good-bye's. No one could remember anything like it. I would note here that my sister lived in a very conservative part of New Mexico where people tend to be very low income, vote and worship in conservative ways, and are very resistant to change.

The second example is the survey that I read a few minutes ago. Many within the Christian community are deeply concerned about the results. Elsewhere in the Barna Group survey, it is noted that **'young people are very candid...who said something essential was broken in Christianity...in the modern church.'**

Another survey affirms that this generation appears to be especially accepting and open-minded. A Christian seminary website from North Carolina had this somewhat caustic review by a theology professor: **"In a spate of recent surveys, the millennial generation is being charted for what it really is: materialistic, liberal, socially isolated, and perhaps more captured by individualism. According to a Pew Research Center poll, 61% of incoming**

freshmen embraced same-sex marriage, 78.4% believe abortion should be legal, and one out of every five have no religious affiliation or are atheist or agnostic." The reviewer was quite depressed about the liberalism and open-mindedness of this generation of people born between about 1980 and 2000.

Here's yet a third example from a recent national survey on dating habits among people in their teens through 30's **"Prejudice is waning and singles are more open to dates of different races and religions. A relatively small percentage of men (20%) and women (29%) consider it "very important" or a "must have" to find someone who shares their own ethnic background, while even fewer men (17%) and women (28%) are specifically looking for partners who share their religious backgrounds."**

These surveys affirm a rapid change in American society. Youth and young adults have a generally far higher acceptance of minorities, sexual orientations and cultural differences than the generations before them including those born between 1945 and 1960. Of course there are still terrible exceptions such as racial and sexual slurs, killings and beatings of gays, and we cannot forget the violence committed by mostly angry young men that go on shooting rampages.

This generation is characterized as being special and strongly protected by their parents. They tend to be team oriented and willing to commit to volunteer activities to help others. Of course there's the confusion that all generations feel in our teens and 20's. This Millennial Generation has a special courage and group compassion. These traits are especially important and I will return to them later.

This is not limited to America. Here's a snippet from a column yesterday by Thomas Friedman in Egypt: **[this revolution] was started by youth and enabled by Facebook and Twitter. It was completely non-violent and only resorted to stone-throwing when faced with attacks by regime thugs. It drew on every segment of the Egyptian population. There was a huge flag in Tahrir Square today with a Muslim crescent moon and a Christian cross inside it. And most of all, it had no outside help."** Its leaders highly educated and in their 20's and 30's. They used technology as ways to circumvent the laws that prevented dialogue, connection, community and shared dreams. They are Millennials and they are all over the world.

So what do the characteristics of the Millennial generation have to do with us at Clemson, South Carolina?

I asked a number of younger adults both here at this church and elsewhere what they thought characterized their generation. One person wrote that they saw **"Open-minded-ness." Anecdotally, I find our generation tending toward a more open mind than that of my parents, which was more open than that of my parent's parents. With the increased connectivity of knowledge and culture (airplane travel, news reports instantly available, researching**

anything you can imagine online) I find myself drawing an opinion from more perspectives at my age than my parent's generation would.”

Another person wrote: **“With computers and communications, we will combine great knowledge of technology, agriculture, charisma, love, laughter, and unity to create a civilized and sustainable world.”**

Two other Millennial Generation folk sent me a link to an article on the front page of the Clemson University website. Its title is **“The Millennials: Two Clemson Seniors Help Document a Rising Generation”** The article goes on to speak of the multi-disciplinary skills and intuitive outreach of these women men. One comment particularly struck me **“We hope the film will help them see that they are not alone and inspire them to face their fears and step up to the task of solving big global problems.”** Their solution was to network and share. The article goes on to say **“they are part of a generation that has grown up inside the shrinking global community. With this perspective, the idea to include peers in Europe and Canada seemed a necessity in telling the Millennials’ story. “We wanted to bring in Europe and Canada to show the connections to other countries — to show that we’re all in this together, and together we can overcome our struggles and reshape our future,”**

While these comments aren’t a large sample, they and other characteristics mark this generation as a Civic generation. In a book called **“Generations: The History of America’s Future, 1584 to 2069”** there’s a thorough examination of the cycles of generations that run through American history. The types tend to run from Idealistic to Adaptive to Civic. The Civic generation is one that rolls up its collective sleeves to change the world in groups rather than as individuals.

This is especially significant because in “Generations” is another historical cycle that the authors discuss at great length. Approximately every 80-85 years there is a major crisis that directly impacts the larger society. Examples include the American Revolution in 1776-80, The Civil War in 1860, the Depression and World War II in the 1930’s to mid-1940’s. If the cycle continues its pattern, the next major social and perhaps global crisis will be most likely about 2015 to 2025. This crisis would happen just at the height of influence and commitment of the Millennial Civic generation.

This crisis might take many forms. It might be a dramatic shift in the speed of global climate change. It might be the end of Social Security, medical benefits, or a crash of the world economy. It could be a fear-based collapse of democracy into fundamentalism and fascism. It could be an oil crisis or wars or disease.

If this crisis part of the social cycle happens on schedule, it will be our sons and daughters, youth and young adults of today who will face this great crisis. We will look to them to save all of us from disaster. They, and we, need one another.

This is what I mean by the Valentine Generation. Such a generation will find itself being called to be compassionate, loving, hopeful, determined, creative, and above all else communal in its actions.

How do we help that happen? Here are some ways I'd suggest we give the Valentine Generation a Valentine's card of our commitment to them.

First, we continue to make an ongoing commitment to our Religious Education program and staff, our youth groups and advisors, and the opportunity for adult education programs for all ages. University communities tend to be transient for young families. How might we expand our offerings to all ages?

Second, perhaps it is time for us of the baby-boom generation to take a step back from our self-appreciation and our worship of individualism. We might seek to learn the merits of how groups of Millennial Generation people can so easily support each other, give comfort, manage conflict, and with less insistence on the personal. Have we UU's become so focused on the rights of the individual that we've neglected to attend to the care of the community?

Third, we likely need to avoid the temptation to see generational attitudes and dreams as being chronological. In fact, there are many people in this room and in our community who share the values of Millennial Generation people. We might consider how we are similar rather than how we are different. An 80 year old and a 20 year old might have more in common as Unitarian Universalists than we imagine.

Many of you here have taught at all levels of education. Others of you are just beginning that vocation of teaching. You have much more experience than I do and much wisdom. What do you think the special mission of this generation now coming into full adulthood might be? Is it a man in Egypt who works with Google and Twitter to guide a revolution? Is it Sarah Belknap of Clemson University who is the originator of The Millennials documentary? Might it be one of you?

I wonder what lessons the Millennial Generation might be able to teach us if we listen to them deeply and with respect.

I would expect that many of us in our lifetimes have sent and received Valentine's cards from a special person or persons. It is more challenging to send compassionate and caring Valentine messages to a whole community because you love them all without exception.

The Millennial Generation is a Valentine generation that will be asked to save the world from our foolishness. It is a generation of women and men of many ages who are now learning how to speak loudly and clearly of that love and compassion. They are the spiritual descendents of that Valentine of Rome who was killed because he chose to heal the poor and ignore the rules. They are today in Egypt, Israel, China, Uganda and here in America. They are everywhere.

The Valentine Generation has many messages to all of us but I'd like to think this one is representative of their deepest hopes even in tragedy. On Valentine's Day in 2008, a man killed five students at Northern Illinois University. Ryanne Mace, a 19 year old student, had posted a note on her Facebook page on the Internet just before Valentines Day and her tragic death. It included these words:

“Happy Valentine’s Day everybody...saying you love someone is not enough, it’s how you treat them that shows your true feelings.”

How will we appreciate the children, the youth, the young adults in our midst and who will come through our doors in the years to come?

You have already done so much in your own professional lives and in the work you have done to build this liberal religious community. You ought to be proud of all you have done. You have built a container that can hold much love.

How will we treat one another with compassion and commitment to our greater community carrying our own irresistible little revolution to the world beyond our doors?

How will we become the church we dream to become?

Happy Valentines Day Everybody, and leaving no one out.

May it become so.