

Musical reading: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Z0GFRcFm-aY>

DRAFT

**EVERY GENERATION IS THE GREATEST GENERATION**  
**Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Clemson**  
**March 27, 2011**

Good morning again, everyone. It was lovely to return from a trip to Pittsburgh PA last Monday and see leaves and warmer temperatures the closer I got to the Carolinas. I'd gone to Pittsburgh to do a workshop for a district youth conference and do Sunday services at First Unitarian there. It was a great group of 90 or so youth. They were incredibly energizing and deeply thoughtful about the difficult topic of addiction and recovery. I looked around the room where I did the presentation. I saw youth of all colors and hues. There were youth who proudly identified themselves as GLBTQ and others who were self-proclaimed conservative free marketers. Some youth looked sad and others took time to cheer them up. All rushed for the luncheon and everyone complained of no sleep.

What a great group they were. I learned much from their openness to speak with conviction but also with kindness to one another. I saw how compassionate they seemed to be when adults weren't in the rooms or they were in small groups. I noticed how one teen was standing alone after I'd asked the youth to self-organize their groups. Others noticed him and came over to invite him to their group and I saw how grateful he looked.

I mention this story today because I want to talk a bit more this morning about your mission statement, your lifespan religious education program and how we here can be instigators of compassionate justice for our children and youth in the larger world. The youth I met in Pittsburgh share important characteristics with your children and youth here.

Several weeks ago I spoke about Generational Theory and the Millennial Generation. People born from about 1980 to approximately 2004 are in this cohort. Those who subscribe to the theory of generational patterns would say this generation is Civic and consensus-oriented. They tend to work best in groups and prefer not to see themselves as individualistic lone rangers. They are similar to the generation that grew up before World War II that was in my opinion erroneously referred to as The Greatest Generation in the book of the same name.

I would propose a different theory: that every generation is the greatest generation of their time and place. Each generation of people carry

responsibility, challenge, craziness, dreams and passions forward from their ancestors in ways that meet the crises and opportunities of their times.

A few minutes ago, you gave brief summaries of your feelings from the REM song we heard. That song carries many messages but I believe two in particular speak to us all today.

The first message is that of rapid change. Michael Stipes is the lead singer of REM and is well known for cryptic and rapid lyrics. I understand that Peter Cohen last Sunday used Billy Joel's song "We Didn't Start the Fire" and those lyrics are similar. They're fast, a bit baffling, and the singing rushes at the listener like a huge wave. The lyrics are like our own times.

Consider how much information we are all asked to process every moment each day? We are bombarded with updates and the availability of knowledge from all directions. The utter speed of language and information can be overwhelming and now it would appear that we tend to take little quick snippets of information then go on to the next thing. Marketing people love and hate this because they only have a few seconds to make an impression on the average person.

Billy Joel and REM both exemplify this intensity of information flow in their songs we've heard. Joel's song spoke about the past; I would propose that the REM song is about the present and future of change.

The second attribute of the REM song is less obvious unless you saw the official video for it. The video has a young man and his dog in an abandoned house. The boy is about 15 and is picking up old objects like toys, hats, old pictures, and papers lying around. He looks like most other young men in 1989 when this video was shot. His name is Noah Ray and is probably unknown to you. He was self-proclaimed white trash as a youth and grew up in Spartanburg just up the road. He was at high school in Athens, Georgia (the home town of REM) and was asked to be in the video.

Why do I mention this young man who now leads a punk rock band in Athens and is best known for his moment of stardom in the video?

You've probably heard of the Six Degrees of Separation theory. It proposes that there are no more than six individuals separating everyone in the world. This theory is controversial but recent computer models of human interactions and especially social networking suggest that the degrees of separation between all human beings is about 6.6 or 7 links of people.

Some of you know people in Spartanburg or in Athens, Georgia. Those people know other people. One of those people has met or knows Noah Ray. The web of interconnections moves on to everyone.

So what does the song and its themes of nearly apocalyptic change and those six degrees of separation have to do with our mission statement and our children here?

The mission statement we've discussed in recent weeks says in part **"To build and sustain a welcoming, caring, inclusive community for all ages; that nurtures each person's lifelong journey of faith informed by reason."** You collectively went on record back in 2007 with a commitment of ministry to build and sustain a community that will be open-minded and open-hearted for all ages leaving none out.

That is a powerful mission and ministry. Many congregations struggle with children's education because it's a lot of extra work and children need to be convinced of its usefulness after a week of school. Religious education requires a lot of extra volunteer and staff time. Add to this reality that we live in a transitory university community where education is primary employment. It makes it all the more challenging to create intentional and fun programs for all ages when the weekend arrives.

However, on every Sunday morning in Clemson the world goes on its chaotic way beyond our doors without pause or reason.

Consider, though, the world outside our doors. Just in the last month we have seen a terrible earthquake in Japan that has affected people around the world. The revolutions in the Middle East are fraught with uncertainty for the economy, oil dependency, and alliances. What will happen in the next week, month or year?

How do we help those children, youth and adults inside these walls to prepare for such a world where truly the end of the world as we know it happens without warning every moment of the news day? How might we and they face such an ending and new beginning each moment and be fine with it?

Here are two ways I propose to you.

The first is a somewhat touchy word from two generations ago: integration. Most of the congregations I've served over the years have struggled to know what to do with children and youth on Sundays. It used to be that Religious Education and children were kept at one end of a building on Sundays and were seldom if ever seen in the sanctuary. I was thrilled when I got here and saw you'd adopted the ritual of having a child light the chalice and lead the Unison Affirmation. It is great that children are here every Sunday for together time. We also have several intergenerational services each year that children help lead.

All that is a good start and not the blind alley of keeping children and youth segregated from adults during service.

Integration can't stop there, I think. I wonder if youth could be encouraged to be in the first part of the service whilst knowing they don't want to be part of Together Time for the little ones. Even more, I wonder if youth would be willing to get up and light the chalice and lead the Unison Affirmation some weeks.

I also would propose an idea that may make some of you mutter under your breath quietly. Many of you teach and many of you have had children to educate. It's tempting to really want the time out of not teaching children on your off days.

However, integration of generations here means that adults also pair up and help teach children at least once in a while. Your small and valiant Religious Education Team have been marching the thousand mile march in recent years and they really would like help. I believe in walking my talk so I was the helper for the advanced learners a few weeks ago. It was a great experience and I learned so much being with a group of younger people over the course of an hour or so.

REM's song about rapid change, endings and beginnings reminds us that stability is also essential. Imagine if our children and youth here know your faces as friendly and helpful people rather than strangers? Imagine if you each took two hours a year to be a helper in RE or meet with the youth? You and they would begin to know one another as companions and fellow seekers.

This brings me to my second point with the REM song and your mission statement. In this world of rapid unpredictable change, we might consider the sharing of information of knowledge on the web as being the focal point of change.

What I wonder is this: is the flow of information also joined by a flow of emotional connections? If so, how might we learn from our children and youth about the connections we make with deliberate compassionate acts?

While I was at the youth con in Pittsburgh, I notice three youth – two girls and one boy – sitting together on the floor and busy texting while chatting. I stopped and politely asked if they were having fun. They looked at me a bit strangely and said that they were texting with a friend in Japan who had been hurt in the earthquake and they were trying to give her some reassurance and comfort. They said this with deep seriousness. It was a reminder that compassion has no boundaries nor what we all too often think only happens with chronological adulthood.

Six degrees of emotional separation link everyone in the world.

One or two degrees of emotional separation link you with your children and youth here at UUFC. Another two or three separate the emotional ties of women and men around the world.

Think of what your emotional connection with your children, youth, and other adults can meet as those broader connections are made through social networking? Imagine how your smile or encouragement to children and youth might mean their smile, their encouragement, and their connection as Unitarian Universalist ambassadors to the whole wide world?

How might you be prepared to show and share your emotional connections with them so in turn they can share theirs as their Millennial generation comes to its own greatness?

As the opening words said this morning, **“we live, not by things, but by the meaning of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation...”**

You and I carry those passwords for the next greatest generation. Can we help them be the champions of compassionate justice and deep caring with no one left behind?

Can we give them the passwords of our unique religious values and faith so they can use them well and be even better than we have been?

What do you think?

Thank you.