



Auckland Unitarian Church

Love beyond belief

Keeping up with generational change

Clay Nelson © 29 November 2020

A couple of separate events in the past week have come together in my musings. The first was the forty-second birthday of my youngest last Sunday. The second was the arrival of my new iPhone. The first boggles my mind. In a different way, so does the second.

When Elissa arrived a year after Star Wars' debuted and two years short of being of the Millennial generation, personal computers weren't a common thing yet, but five years later her dad bought an Apple IIe. I thought it the marvel of the age and all the computer I would ever need. She was indifferent. In her memory they have always been around. She thinks of them like I do a toaster, useful for some mundane things.

Turns out my first computer was greatly surpassed by the Macintosh computer six months later and I had to have one. (Seems I find it easy to fall in love with Mackintoshes.) If my daughter had been born only two years later she would have been one of the Millennials born between 1980 and 1994. There had always been computers in their experience and they had a different take on my Mac. Katharine Knight, twenty-four, wrote in a May 19, 2012 Seattle Times op-ed, "We're a generation that has seen so much change so fast. We saw big old clunky Macintosh computers in our first-grade classroom turn into iPhones.... That kind of growth breeds optimism." Since Millennials make up one-third of the world's population, their optimism is a good thing. Stubborn optimism is just what the world needs now when a virus is creating mass chaos.

It turns out our context is everything where generations are concerned. The attitudes of the parents of Boomers were shaped by the Great Depression and World War II. My American Boomer attitudes were shaped by TV, assassinations, Vietnam, civil rights marches, and the Beatles. The Boomers' children, the Millennials, have been shaped by a dizzying pace of change. One of them, [Daniel Burnstein, describes it this way in his book *Fast Future*](#):

"Towers on fire, crumbling and falling as people run and scream. A finger-wagging president parsing the definition of sex on national TV. A student opens fire at a high school in Colorado. CEOs in shackles, hauled off to jail. A dictator's statue smashing to pieces as it hits the ground. Stock charts soaring to the skies — and then back down again. A newly minted president in a jubilant Chicago park and a moment of hope. Logging on and logging in from everywhere. Profound world-historic events mixed up and mashed up with celebrity gossip as news. War reports from

somewhere in the Middle East. Families facing foreclosures, belt tightening, and hard times. These are some of the moments, images, and experiences that have defined the Millennial Generation's formative years. Many of us have experienced them in just this way, as a rapid-fire jumble. Sound bites, words, icons, images, videos, clips ... short, interrupted, and out of context, but somehow coming together like puzzle pieces to create our own context and consciousness. While this diverse blend of visual imagery, fragmentary ideas, sounds, and clicks continues to come at us, we scarcely notice the overall dissolution of authority in society, the collapse of institutions, the increasing level of complexity and the inability of existing systems to manage through it and solve problems. Rapid change is the only constant. And the chief survival skill for Millennials is keeping our balance in this sometimes mad, sometimes surreal, always changing, topsy-turvy world."

And certainly the Millennials have contributed to this rapid fire change. Mark Zuckerberg was a 19-year-old Harvard sophomore when he created Facebook to connect Harvard students.

It turns out that Millennials share their Boomer parents' idealism, but they reject being called revolutionaries ready to overturn the system and start over. They consider themselves an oxymoron that confounds their parents — idealistic pragmatists. They believe in a quiet progression toward significant, scalable, and lasting change. A 2010 Pew Research Center study concluded that the Millennial demographic is "confident, self-expressive, liberal, upbeat and open to change." In opinion polling, Millennials exhibited a striking openness and even consensus on issues that have been at the centre of polarisation in society. They don't think dividing us gets things done and lasting change takes time. Perhaps their commitment to reversing climate change like our Millennial Prime Minister recognises the importance of taking the long view, not the short one offered by our election and business cycles.

The environmental movement has taken on board the spiritual discipline of the Seventh Generation Principle, first articulated sometime between 1150 and 1500 CE in the laws of the Iroquois or Haudenosaunee Confederacy, six tribes in New York whose influence reached a large swathe of north central US and Canada. Part of what made it remarkable is that it is one of the first and longest-lasting participatory democracies in the world. It is credited with being a contributing influence on the American Constitution, due to Benjamin Franklin's great respect for the Haudenosaunee system of government.

The Seventh Generation Principle is the philosophy that the decisions we make today should result in a sustainable world seven generations into the future. Today it is generally referred to in regard to decisions being made about our energy, water, and natural resources, and ensuring those decisions are sustainable for seven generations in the future. But, it can

also be applied to relationships — every decision should result in sustainable relationships seven generations in the future.

The Peacemaker, who was the law-giver, said, “When you sit in council for the welfare of the people, you must not think of yourself or of your family, not even of your generation. He said, make your decisions on behalf of the seven generations coming, so that they may enjoy what you have today.”

One tribal chief explained his understanding: “If you ask me what is the most important thing that I have learned about being a Haudenosaunee, it’s the idea that we are connected to a community, but a community that transcends time.

We’re connected to the first Indians who walked on this earth, the very first ones, however long ago that was. But we’re also connected to those Indians who aren’t even born yet, who are going to walk this earth. And our job in the middle is to bridge that gap. You take the inheritance from the past, you add to it, your ideas and your thinking, and you bundle it up and shoot it to the future. And there is a different kind of responsibility. That is not just about me, my pride and my ego, it’s about all that other stuff. We inherit a duty, we inherit a responsibility. And that’s pretty well drummed into our heads. Don’t just come here expecting to benefit. You come here to work hard so that the future can enjoy that benefit.”

Millennials get this.

My musings took me to what keeping up with generations means for Unitarian Universalism. In 1961, when the Unitarians merged with the Universalists to create something new in religious movements, it was midwifed by Boomers. The music in our hymnal was selected by Boomers, which might explain the inclusion of Kum-ba-yah. (An eye role is warranted here.) Boomers shaped our principles and theology. Boomer Unitarianism was later influenced by Gen X Unitarians who wanted more mystery and spirituality included in our theology and is now being influenced by Millennial Unitarians who recognise science and want to protect the planet and don’t hate anyone and most importantly don’t fear change. In fact, they welcome it in political, economic, technological, and religious spheres.

Unitarianism won’t stop evolving. It is an article of faith. Gen Z, the only generation to wholly live in the digital age where smartphones, tablets, streaming, interactive websites for shopping and apps are just accepted as part of the landscape. Who knows how they will incorporate Emerson, Thoreau, and Theodore Parker in Gen Z Unitarianism?

My hope is that for at least the next seven generations the UU values of freedom, reason, tolerance, standing on the side of love, and building the Beloved Community will remain part of our DNA. If so I won’t fear change. I will join Millennials in welcoming it.