

Sunday, September 14, 2008

Thought to ponder:

Without children and older people mixing in daily life,
a community has no future and no past, only a continuous present.
- John Gatto, a New York City Teacher of the Year

Opening Words: Reunion, by Barbara Pescan

One of the old ones stood up
into the morning light
and spoke to those who had come
back to the river.

Now we have come again to this place.
My life apart from you
is not as strong.
Yes,
I have danced and
I have told stories
at my own fire and
I have sung well, to all eight directions.

But when I am with you,
my friends,
I know better
who it is in me
that sings.

(from *Morning Watch*, by Barbara Pescan, Skinner House Books, Boston) 57

Sermon: Spanners

© **The Rev. Sylvia A. Stocker**

Many of you have told me you've been wondering about this sermon title. At the Farmer's Market yesterday, someone said to me, "I'll be interested in finding out what 'Spanners' is all about."

To which I replied, "Yeah, me too!"

Of course I knew what the sermon was about. It is about building bridges to span the generations, creating an intentional intergenerational community here at the UU Church of Brunswick.

Do you know that church is one of the few institutions left in our society where the generations have the opportunity to rub elbows, work, dream, and form bonds of community – together? Regardless of our own individual family make-ups – whether we are young or old, close to our families or estranged from them, live alone or with many – at church, the generations are all here, infants to nonagenarians.

That's not the case in our wider culture. Our children attend age-segregated schools and classrooms. Parents work for ever-increasingly long hours, separating them from their children. Our culture creates age-segregated neighborhoods and assisted living for older adults. Children's schedules are so tightly planned that children seldom roam neighborhood with the innocence and abandon of ages past.

Left to the wider culture, I could easily go for weeks at a time without a single meaningful encounter with child. But not at church, where we are here together.

Last spring our church council identified as a priority strengthening intergenerational community here. They said, in effect, let's improve our bridges across the generations so that all of us can more fully celebrate being a part of the same community. I say, let's call ourselves Spanners to mitigate some of the isolation inherent in a culture that so carefully labels the generations.

I am a Boomer, for instance, a member of the generation born between 1946 and 1964. Boomers are a large generation – the focus of marketing and other attention. Being a Boomer is a little like going on an organized tour in a foreign country. Whenever your tour bus arrives somewhere and everyone disembarks, the foreign country you are visiting is flooded with Americans. So it is for Boomers. No matter where we go, there we are – in abundance!

I cannot stop being a Boomer, of course. Like all of us, I am shaped by the history I have lived through. But I can expand my vision beyond that label and lived experience. I can seek connection across the generations. Even if it feels comfortable to be with my own generation, who share some unspoken understandings, historical memories, and cultural trends, I can learn a new kind of comfort by helping to create an intergenerational community.

An intergenerational community provides opportunities to learn how experience has shaped others and to see life in new ways. An intergenerational community allows its people to be spanners – folks who build bridges and walk across them.

We can be spanners here.

I can hear the jokes already. In some parlances, a spanner is a monkey wrench. Probably most of us have heard that expression: "Don't throw a monkey wrench into the works." As in, "Don't mess it up!"

But consider this: Skip Brimlow tells me that in Fire Departments, a spanner is an all-purpose tool. It can be used to loosen or tighten things, to break a window in case of emergency, and a host of other things. No fire fighter wants to be without a spanner. So DO throw a spanner into the works! No congregation should want to be without its spanners!

So why be spanners? Why give up the comfort and safety of my own generation? Why go to all the trouble? For part of the answer I draw on the work of James Gambone, who coordinates the Intentional Intergenerational Ministry Project.

Gambone's work is based on three principles:

1. *"Each generation in our society has a unique and important perspective on current personal, political, economic, religious, and cultural issues. Just as history produces generations, generations produce history."*ⁱ

In other words, the labeling and characterizing our culture attaches to the generations are based on some real traits. Gambone lists some of the characteristics of each generation. Here is only a smattering of the traits he identifies:ⁱⁱ

Civics (1901-1932)

- Have a heritage of sacrifice for the larger good.
- Believe the benefits they created – Social Security, Medicare – are rights to be retained.
- Are indebted to future generations for payment of their benefits.
- Believe every generation will be better off.
- Think a better world is coming to their grandchildren.

Silents (1932-1945)

- Are uncomfortable with their good fortune.
- Are compromisers between the self-assured Civics and the self-righteous Boomers.
- Seek ways to serve others and to use their expertise and wealth.
- Fear society will lose its gifts of compassion, sympathy, and fairness.
- Work to shift the focus from the old to the young.

Boomers (1946-1964)

- Examine their spirituality.
- Retool social institutions from the grass-roots up.
- Do not link identity to institutions.
- Are often harshly judgmental.
- Think women should surge into leadership and are frustrated with younger women's disinterest.
- Demand higher standards of themselves personally.

Gen X-ers (1964-1981)

- Are frustrated by Boomers' insistence on process.
- Are technologically sophisticated.
- Actively participate in community efforts such as recycling.
- Fear they will be the first generation not to improve their situation.
- Are the first generation to experience personally living in a racially, culturally, and linguistically diverse society.

Millennials (1982 forward)

- Will want greater protection for children.
- Will be doers, not feelers; rationalists, not spiritualists.
- Will be strong public servants.
- Will promote collective action and find pathologies based on self-interest on the decline.
- Are sometimes called the new Civic generation.

With their unique perspectives and experiences, the generations can help each other, filling in the weaknesses of one generation with the strengths of another. For example, sometimes members of the Civic Generation – elders born between 1901 and 1931—wonder if future generations will ever share the kinds of convictions that made their generation so great. What if elders were mentors for the Millennials, the so-called new Civic Generation? Wouldn't Millennials bring elders new hope?

2. *(Gambone's 2nd Principle) "The 'generational perspective' has been largely ignored in current church diversity and community-building efforts. Differences and, more importantly, similarities, based on age are as indelibly imprinted in our character as race, gender, culture, or ethnicity."*ⁱⁱⁱ

Unitarian Universalists often lament the lack of diversity in our congregations. We do tend to be homogenous in some ways. But, there is no reason to ignore the diversity of age we *do* have.

Gambone writes: "In a diverse society such as ours, age can provide an exciting and motivating common ground for working across gender, race, and class. We all belong to a generation, and all generations are present in today's churches." (p.19)

By establishing successful ways of spanning the generations right here, we could learn to be inquisitive, even appreciative, of differences. We might step out of our comfort zones, open our hearts and minds to the wisdom and experiences of others, and craft community where all of us learn to truly see and value one another.

3. *(Gambone's 3rd principle) "We live in an aging society that is in a major state of denial about its own aging. This denial contributes to and exacerbates the isolation, separation, and alienation among generations."*^{iv}

This last point is particularly apropos here in Mid Coast Maine, where so many retirees settle. We have a front row seat to society's aging. We witness first-hand the isolation and separation of age-segregated housing developments and retirement communities.

Our culture risks increasing alienation when it consistently draws lines based on age, because the truth is we need one another. Young people embracing the challenges of growing up need the wisdom of the elders to guide them. Elders facing loss and dying need the exuberance of the young to shore up buoyancy and hope. The middle generations balancing the demands of work, schedules, and endless commitments need the support and appreciation of all the generations to help recharge flagging energy. The good news is that churches are positioned to build and span the kinds of bridges I am suggesting.

Let me tell you a story. When my father, a member of the Civic generation, died, one of my colleagues sent me an article she had written about him for her then-local newspaper. Anita Farber-Robertson was one of my father's former ministers. This is what she wrote:^v

The boy was 9 when they first met. The man was 62. Old. "Well, not that old," you might say. And I would agree. But when you are 9, as the boy was, 62 is old. No one would have predicted the special affection the boy would feel for this reserved insurance man. But it happened.

When the boy was in high school with muscled arms and head held high, the man was retired, spine curving deeply, so that his face leaned downward.

But the boy would come to talk and listen. He would love to hear the tales of how it had been and what they had done, the man and his friends in the old days, and he would love to hear the clear and feisty analysis the man would make of the world today.

The man, you see, was engaged and concerned with events in the town, the nation, and the world. He would organize food pantries and petition drives. He would write letters to the editor and to the president. He would gather people in his home to discuss books or the life of the congregation. And the boy loved to watch and listen. That is what he said.

Something else was happening though. You could notice it out of the corner of your eye. The wise old man was listening to the boy. It was true when the boy was 9, and it was true when the boy was 14...

...When the boy was 16 he got the idea of putting on dances for middle school kids. "Because," he said, "there is really nothing for them." He talked to people about it. They

nodded politely, or wisely pointed out the obstacles. They warned him about safety and security. They laughed softly to themselves while admiring his energy. They all did, except the old man.

When the boy talked the old man listened intently, asked thoughtful questions, offered not only encouragement, but help.

He strategized with the boy, identifying the barriers and how to address them. He advocated for him and stood with him when the boy tried to advocate for himself.

The dances happened, a delightful success. And the boy, now a young man, went off to college with a sense of self-esteem and the knowledge that he could contribute and make a difference in the world.”

The impact my father had on Anita’s son – for, indeed, the boy in the story was her son – was obvious in her telling of the story. Less obvious was the impact the exchange undoubtedly had on my father. I am certain my father was blessed by the connection, too. He was blessed by the chance to bump up against that youthful zeal that wants to make the world better and believes anything is possible. He was blessed by the admiration of a growing, questing, creative young person. And he was blessed by the opportunity to learn a great deal about the needs of young people coming along behind him.

Now you may have noticed not all the adults in the story were as agile as my father was at walking across the bridges spanning the generations. And you may suspect, and probably rightly, that not all the young people in my father’s church were as inspired by their elders and as willing to spend time hanging out with them as Anita’s son was. For most of us, creating those kinds of connections requires intention and commitment – just the kind of intention and commitment members of our church council have promised each other and are asking of all of us.

We have a tremendous opportunity here to foster the kind of connection my father and the boy shared – to create the opportunities to hear the stories, to be guided by the wisdom of elders, to be inspired by the creativity of the young. Here, as in my father’s church, the generations are already together in meaningful community. What is required is the intention and commitment to seize the opportunity right in front of us.

Anita continues her story:

All this happened. It happened in a church. A boy and a man improbably bound in a relationship of mutual respect and admiration, two people who had nothing in common and who never would have met across lines of class and culture. I call it authentic community. I call it the work of the Spirit.

The boy is almost 30 now. He lives in California.

I called to tell him that the old man had died. It was a sad call in some ways. More importantly, it was inspiring.

I listened to the man remember what it had been like to be a boy and have an old man who listened, who shared, who embraced him with respect and affection, who believed in him, and acted on that belief. I listened and remembered why it was that I have given my life to the up-building of the church. Where else could such things happen?

Imagine.

Imagine the bridges we are building to span the gulfs between generations ultimately create something new – a community full and engaging, open and curious, diverse and welcoming.

Here is my dream: That someday, as we gaze back over our lives, we will remember this church as a place where we have been made visible – our lives witnessed, valued, and loved. And following along behind us will be the younger ones, who felt the warmth of our love, wisdom, and appreciation in their lives.

We can build this community, taking it out of the realm of dreams and making it a reality. In fact, we have already started.

May we dedicate ourselves anew, today.

ⁱ James V. Gambone, 1998. *All Are Welcome: A Primer for Intergenerational Ministry and Dialogue*. Elder Eye Press. p. 10.

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.* pp. 11-15.

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.* p. 10.

^{iv} *Ibid.* p. 10.

^v This quotation and a later one are from “One Young, One Old, but One in the Spirit,” by Anita Farber-Robertson. *In: The Daily Evening Item* (Lynn, Massachusetts). February 26, 2000.