

Making a Resolution for the Next Generation

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Tri-County Unitarian Universalists

Summerfield, FL

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Aileen Sampson, a member of the Bowie, MD congregation wrote a poem a number of years ago. It was titled, "Where Are You Going, Son?"

"Where are you going, Son? Where have you been? Why are you here now? Where were you when...?"

"Where were you when the candy disappeared? Where were you when I put that dollar right here? Where were you when the cat got out? Where will you be when my patience runs out?"

"Tell me not, Son. I really don't care. You live in my heart, though you stay in my hair.

"Where are you going, Son? Where have you been? Where are you now? Where were you when...?"

Relationships between generations are not always easy. Did I really choose to live with this mean, surly teenager? What happened to that sweet, smiling toddler they used to be? Did my parent really turn their back on me because I didn't marry someone of the "right" religion, race, gender? Did my parent verbally, emotionally, sexually or physically abuse me or neglect me? Could they still, in some way, have loved me, even while they were harming me? Have I harmed my children in some ways even as I think I love them?

Twentieth century French writer, poet and aviator Antoine de St.-Exupery said, "We live, not by things, but by the meanings of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords from generation to generation." Ah, but sometimes meanings change and need to do so. We look back with pride to our Unitarian and Universalist abolitionist forebears. But even as they worked against the institution of slavery many of them did not see black people as equal to themselves. We can admire eighteenth century Universalist physician Benjamin Rush for the work he did. "He opposed slavery, advocated free public schools, and sought improved education for women and a more enlightened penal system....He promoted public health by advocating (a) clean environment and stressing the importance of personal and military hygiene. His study of mental disorder made him one of the founders of American psychiatry," [Benjamin Rush - Wikipedia](#). But he was an ardent believer in bloodletting as a cure, and even in his own time, some accused him of killing more patients than he saved. Neither we, our forebears, nor our descendants are, were or will be perfect. But that does not excuse us from seeking to do our best.

There are wide varieties of ways to consider generations. There is family; grandparents, parents, children. There are scholarly generations. What we thought we knew one hundred years ago may not be what we think we know today. There are literary generations. What one generation read as a moral tale may be read with cautions today about the way race or gender are presented. There are spiritual generations. Unitarian Universalists have gone from Christians to humanists to a non-creedal mix. There are ecological generations. French philosopher, author, and journalist Albert Camus said, "Each generation doubtless feels called upon to reform the world. Mine knows that it will not reform it, but its task is perhaps even greater. It consists in preventing the world from destroying itself." When he said

those words, I think he was probably thinking about keeping ourselves from blowing ourselves up with a nuclear bomb. When we hear them today, we may more likely think of doing something to slow climate change.

In this wide variety of ways of thinking of generations, what has been passed on to you? And what are you passing on? I didn't realize as a child that 19th century Unitarians were influencing my thinking, but they were. I read Beatrix Potter and Louisa May Alcott and Charles Dickens long before I ever heard of Unitarian Universalists.

And so, let us consider today what we want to resolve to leave for future generations.

First think of the children, youth or young adults in your life. They may be your grandchildren to whom you travel whenever there is a particular need or with whom you live. Maybe there is a young woman who wants to go into medicine that you are mentoring as part of the Women's Doctors Club. Maybe there is a young person you are teaching to read or tutoring in English as a second language. Maybe you have a nephew with whom you have formed a close relationship. Maybe you are going to one of the schools and offering some children homework help. Maybe you are part of a program offering scholarships to particular students. Choose one young person or more to consider. What do you want to leave to them as your legacy? It may be simply and profoundly that they know someone cared.

Second think of this congregation. A couple people are still here who were here at its founding but not many. A generation of people before us left us this community. You will be known as a unique generation in the history of TriUU, the generation that helped the institution survive through a global pandemic. Not all congregations will have survived these years. All congregations will be changed by them. The greater use of technology and Zoom is just the most obvious change. In the latest regional newsletter there was a piece by Rev. Erica Baron of the UUA New England Regional Staff on volunteerism.

She says in part, "One effect of the pandemic has been a reckoning with how we spend our time. You've probably heard of the 'Great Resignation' or 'Big Quit.' Large numbers of people have been leaving the workforce due to caretaking responsibilities that their jobs cannot — or will not — accommodate. Or because they realize they don't want to do work that feels meaningless, pays inadequately, or treats employees as things, not people. Or as a rejection of the narrative that our value comes from our productivity.

"The 'quit' is happening in volunteerism, too — perhaps more so since leaving a volunteer position tends to have gentler consequences....

"We know both from research and experience that people are more likely to commit to projects or tasks than to committees, and that people are more likely to give their time if the work feels personally meaningful. People with a call to serve crave more of a direct ministry experience, and less of a prolonged process of decision making and permission granting. Can we accommodate more flexibility in our structures? What might emerge for us with fewer monthly meetings on the calendar?

"Making a shift away from standing committees and toward more direct opportunities to serve may mean only a few key staff or volunteers help track the ministry works taken on by members and ensure there is good communication between governance and programs. What would it look like to have a

smaller group of us focus on and equipping our people for direct ministry? How do we ensure clear communication and faithful decision making?"

We did not purposefully follow this advice at TriUU but it is what we are in the midst of figuring out. Your Transition Team has been interviewing teams asking, What specific tasks and roles provide the most joy for team members?, What tasks or roles do people dread the most?, What can we do to make leadership or volunteering more attractive?, and At least in the short term, how might we streamline our activities to promote those areas that are most likely to bring more energized volunteers into our work? What we have found out is that we have many volunteers, 69 of our 105 members are actively engaged in one and often more volunteer roles. But you like to have a defined task. You will test water or line up chalice keepers or do the order of service or drive a person from the Dallas community to a doctor's appointment or do the PowerPoint for a service. What we are missing are the leaders and organizers. As Baron wrote, "Making a shift away from standing committees and toward more direct opportunities to serve may mean only a few key staff or volunteers help track the ministry works taken on by members and ensure there is good communication between governance and programs." What does that look like?" That is exactly the question we are now trying to answer. The time, talent and treasure we give to figuring out the best ways for TriUU to not just survive but thrive is our legacy to future generations who will be served by this congregation.

Finally, think of the wider global community. Certainly, climate change is the elephant in the room, but we may also think of war, of oppression, of human rights. In the back of our hymnal are these words from 19th century Unitarian minister Edward Everett Hale, "I am only one, but still I am one. I cannot do everything, but still I can do something. And because I cannot do everything, I will not refuse to do the something that I can do." Maybe you will send some money to help war refugees. Maybe you will work for a women's right to choose when and if she will give birth. Maybe you will lobby Congress to pass a carbon tax. Maybe you will run for office. We all have different interests, talents, and abilities, but we each have something we can leave as our legacy for this our beautiful blue, green planet earth and its inhabitants.

On this Mother's Day I encourage you to make a resolution. What will you leave as your legacy for the next generations?

For our closing meditation hear these words from Wendell Berry. "If we will have the wisdom to survive, to stand like slow-growing trees on a ruined place, renewing, enriching it, If we will make our seasons welcome here, asking not too much of earth or heaven, Then a long time after we are dead the lives our lives prepared will live here. Their houses strongly placed upon the valley sides, Fields and gardens rich in the windows. The river will run clear as we will never know it. And over it, birdsong like a canopy. On the levels of the hills will be green meadows, stock bells in noon shade. On the steeps where greed and ignorance cut down the old forest, An old forest will stand, it rich leaf-fall drifting on its roots. The veins of forgotten springs will have opened. Families will be singing in the fields. In their voices they will hear a music risen out of the ground. They will take nothing from the ground they will not return, whatever the grief at parting. Memory, native to this valley, will spread over it like a grove, and memory will grow into legend, legend into song, song to sacrament. The abundance of this place, the songs of its people and its birds, will be health and wisdom and indwelling light. This is no paradisaal dream. Its hardship is its possibility." Amen.

