

Abby Guthmann
Unity Youth Service Homily on Adults (Besides Parents)
August 10, 2008

“I went through the exact same thing you did when I was growing up.” I’m sure you’ve all heard it, even the adults in the room have been told this by a parent or grandparent or any kind of person at some point in your youth. But does anyone ever know exactly what someone else is going through? Could any one really say that they understand exactly how someone feels?

Although I was not alive during other generations and cannot say how big the generation gaps were back then, I can safely say that today we live in a world where the stereotype is that the young disdain the old and the old are disgusted with the young. Different age groups stay away from each other, each assuming that no one else has a clue. I am here to say, this stereotype is not true.

Perhaps an adult who has had one of the biggest impacts on me is my COA mentor, Martha. She has been a family friend for a very long time, but I could never really say we were good friends. However, when the time came for me to pick a mentor for coming of age, I chose her. Although the actual program was a lot of fun, I have to say my favorite part will always be my meetings with Martha. We would get together at some restaurant and just talk about our lives. We’d attempt to squeeze in talks about that Sunday’s church service or our personal beliefs on the universe, yet it always led on to other subjects and back again.

We clicked almost immediately and never ran out of things to discuss. I didn’t always agree with her though, and she wasn’t shy about disagreeing with me either. She always argued for what she believed, and even though sometimes I got a little ticked off, our tiny arguments always somehow brought us closer together. I realize today why that is.

I respected the fact she trusted me enough to tell me how she really felt, and that she respected me enough not to hide from me who she was or how she thought. She never spoke with a patronizing air, as if she was talking to a child. This is hard to do even if you are arguing with an adult, and I was glad that she gave me that courtesy. Even today we still try to get together to discuss our lives, and I know that I have a relationship with Martha that is closer than what I share with many people my own age. That is proof in itself that age is no physical boundary between people. Simply a psychological wall that can easily be broken if one is willing to take the first step.

With that said, I believe the most rewarding experience for any adult in this church is to become a COA mentor. Speaking with the youth of today could give one fresh angle on how the world is today, and I know that if the youth of this church were to open their ears, they would also find valuable perspective from those who’ve worked in the kitchen longer, so to speak.

And of course I’m not saying that the only way to connect with other ages is to mentor or to be mentored (if that is in fact a word.) there are many ways to connect with the youth of today. When my twin and I first moved into our neighborhood at the age of two, there was a widowed old woman who lived right next door to us named Mrs. Godbout, who over the years would treat us as her grandchildren (even though her real grandkids actually lived in the same neighborhood.) I’ll never forget how even when we were very young, she always treated us kindly. Not like children, not even like adults, but as human beings. Even our silliest ideas seemed genius to her, and when we questioned her or were misinformed about something, she would calmly correct us with a warm smile.

She always looked us right in the eyes when she talked to us, and her door was always open, her food always ready to be eaten. She never forgot to give us presents for our birthday or Christmas, seemed never to tire of us or ask us to leave. She was like our third grandmother, and we miss her to this day. I know that even though she's gone, what she has given us will remain in our hearts forever. In fact, I hope to be a Mrs. Godbout to another kid someday, and I'll do it with pride knowing I'll make a difference in that kid's life, as she had to mine.

I have been touched many times by adults in my life, and I'd love to say I've done great work in adult's lives as well! (Though I can't know for sure.) Adults who aren't our parents have a very special power in their hands. They can be our mentors, and still our friends. They can give us advice because they have made mistakes and continue to do so. They can be humans, and free to show their vices as well as virtues. But the most important thing an adult outside of a youth's family can do is to treat us as humans as well. Allow us to be flawed, and still give advice. Take our advice knowing that with our experiences differing from your own, perhaps we may be able to shed light on a situation in a way you haven't thought of before. Know, that though we may not be seasoned with as much wisdom from experience, we are not children, and we are quickly finding our ways in the adult world. Share with us. Laugh with us. Cry with us. Or maybe just smile at us as you pass through in the hallway. You'll never truly know how much a sincere smile can mean to someone until you've received one. Trust me, I know.

So youth of this congregation, open your hearts and mind to the elders of our community. They have had long and rich lives, and who knows what kind of information you may pick up that will help you on your way. And adults, think back to the time when you were younger. Try to remember what it felt like to go through the change from child to leader. And to everyone, I'd like you all to remember. The people of this church may not be perfect, but we are so much more. We are human beings, and only we have the power to knock down our walls and build ourselves bridges.

Katie DeCramer
Unity Youth Service Homily
August 10, 2008

I have been going to Unity church my entire life. At first I had no choice-my parents put me in a car seat, carried me to the church basement and deposited me in the nursery room. Fifteen years later, I was driving myself to church every Sunday afternoon for Tower Club. So why do I keep coming back? If it were not for my family's involvement in the church, I wouldn't have had an example from which to model my behavior. I participated in the Children's musicals while my mom was singing in the choir. My dad was the chair of the board while my sister was working in the nursery. My mom traveled to Bolivia with Mano a Mano just a couple years after my dad went on the pilgrimage to Transylvania. It was natural for me to stay involved with the church because I had a strong foundation here. If you want your children to stay involved, in the church or in another activity that you think is important to their development, show them through your actions that staying connected is important.

I participated in my first children's musical when I was nine years old. It was called "The Book of Tandaria" and I took my role as a librarian very seriously. I remember going to Target with my mom, trying on outfits that made me look as much like a librarian as possible. (We settled on a pale blue cardigan set.) I was to have the stage to myself for a whole scene, singing a song that started out with the words "Ever since I was a little girl I wanted to be a librarian..." The very last note I was supposed to hit was an A. But somehow, on opening night, I did not sing an A. It was probably more like an F sharp. My ears immediately registered the mistake and my face quickly wrinkled up in irritation. But I could see the faces of the people in the pew right in front of me, and they were smiling, despite the wrong note. And I walked off stage feeling satisfied, and yes, loved. That is how I have felt growing up at Unity-part of an accepting and caring community. I'm grateful to my parents for understanding how valuable it is to be part of a community like this and helping to make it happen for me.

As parents, there are also some really important things you can do to help your kids at home. Growing up, my parents made sure that we ate meals together around our kitchen table as a family. We would have dinner together about five times a week. We talked about what we did that day or what we were looking forward to in the week to come. We weren't allowed to leave the table after we finished eating. In order to be excused from the table, all four of us needed to be done eating and the conversation in a lull. My parents might remember a different story, but I remember making a habit out of wolfing down my food and coming up with a very clever excuse to leave the table. The answer was always "No Katie, not yet. Just sit here a little longer with us". So I pouted at the table, and leapt up when they finally excused me.

As I grew older, it was hard to balance these nightly dinners with my increasingly busy schedule. When I arrived home from basketball games around 10 o'clock, I would dig around in the refrigerator for leftovers from that night's dinner. As I sat at the kitchen table, alone, eating micro-waved food, I always felt a little empty. After so many meals with my family at that table, I didn't seem right to dine alone. I know that while I'm at college, one of the things I will miss most about home is sitting together with my family around our table, talking about our lives. But you don't have to take my word for it – there's lots of research that shows that one of the best things parents can do for their kids is sit down for family meals together on a regular basis.

I understand that as a parent, it can be hard to let go of your children. But you know what they say-a watched pot never boils. Letting go is often what makes a child understand the

value of your relationship even more. It can be a way for you and your child to find out just how ready he or she is to be out connecting with others, engaging in the wider world.

I went on the ultimate adventure when I was sixteen. Twenty other American students and I were going to spend a semester in Chile, as exchange students living with host families and studying in local schools. My parents said goodbye to me at the airport and sent me on a plane to Miami, where I was to meet up with the twenty other students all headed to Chile. I know it was not easy for my parents to let me go. For six months, they wouldn't be there to give me a hug when I had a bad day, to praise my accomplishments, or watch me grow. They had to trust that I would be okay on my own, living with the strong foundation with which they had raised me.

Sometimes, parents need to trust that they have raised their children with strong values and a sense of themselves. Then they can begin to slowly give their child increasing responsibility. As parents, you'll know better than I if your child is ready for this kind of adventure. But if not a semester abroad, there are lots of other great ways for youth to experience living with a different kind of family or visiting another culture, and I recommend seeking them out.

I came back from Chile as a more confident, self-aware individual. Six months away from my family gave me time to reflect upon our relationship. In the days and months to follow, I began to understand and build our relationship to a deeper level. By leaving home and experiencing life with a different family, I was able to place my family within the context of another. This brought me a greater understanding of both families and the cultures that shaped them.

A week ago, I was at a cabin on Big Bear Lake in northern Wisconsin. We took the pontoon with a finicky motor to the north side of the lake, where the lily pads were thick and in bloom. High up in a pine tree was a bald eagle's nest. Two fledgling eagles, both about a year old, were perched on the branch. The mother eagle was perched on a neighboring tree. We had watched minutes before as she had soared high above the water and then suddenly swooped down to the surface, using her talons to snag a fish. She brought the fish back to the tree. As she ripped it apart and quickly ate it, her young ones were calling for her. They seemed to say, "But Mo-om, we're hungry! Can't we have some of that fish?" But she didn't fly over to the nest to give them the fish or even just to comfort them. Our friend and bird expert Rebecca Flood explained to us that slowly, the mother eagle was weaning the adolescent eagles off of food that she caught. Next year, they would need to find new territory of their own and would have to feed themselves. They would not be allowed back to the nest. They needed to start lives of their own.

It appeared to me that the mother eagle was ignoring her youth that were crying out. But maybe she wasn't-maybe she was struggling with the same battle with which many parent's struggle: the tug of war between providing for your children and finally, when the time comes, letting go and cheering them on as they make their own place in the world.

Nick Allen
Unity Youth Service Homily
August 10, 2008

“Remember, you are the future!”

Some form of this statement is almost always the customary closing for adults who wish to inspire youth. I don't think there is anything wrong with wishing younger generations the best of luck in shaping our world, or of reminding us of the weighty responsibilities that will entail, but I've noticed that there is a curious vacancy in this charge: If the future is ours, that's great, but what are we to do in the meantime, keep out of the kitchen? That is, can we youth also be here, now?

The reason I bring this up is not to poke holes in a platitude, but because I think it reveals a more significant problem. While youth are entrusted with “the future,” asking us to also participate in the present is overlooked. And while this is the peppy message presented in front of us, at our backs are waves of alarmism: a barrage of articles, books, *cartoons*, reminding us of how we choose to be “*actively cut off [from the world's realities]*,” as Professor Mark Bauerlein so kindly put it in *The Dumbest Generation*. The combined effect sounds a little intimidating from my perspective; it's something like, “*You're going to be in charge one day? Hah! Good luck!*” Well, at least it's an affirmation, right?

I'm worried about this message, but not only because of what it signals to my generation; I worry because it keeps us, adults and youth, from each other. Talking about youth in terms of the future and adults in terms of the present means we don't feel a need to work together in the same time and space; it seems that I'm just supposed to just know how to cook someday. Also, the stereotypes of an apathetic, disengaged younger generation and a stuffy, head-scratching older generation begin to be self-fulfilling prophecies. Why? Because it pulls the generational divide a little farther apart. It dilutes all possibly meaningful conversation into a few mainstay topics, among them:

“How's school going?”

<<“*Fine.*”

“My, you've gotten tall!”

<<“*Have I?*”

and an age-related topic, such as

“So, thinking about college yet?”

<< “*Uh, yeah, I mean, a little bit.*”

Not that Parish Hall chitchat is bad for us, in fact it's a great start, but when that becomes our conversational substance, we clearly have a problem.

I want something more, and I bet you do, too. And I think church is possibly the best place to begin. First of all, unlike most other institutions, churches are built to be intergenerational. Moreover, Unitarian Universalists see dismantling barriers not just as important, but as soul food, the sustenance of our faith. It's written in our ends statement that we will be a place where “people of all ages feel welcome and connected,” and as you know, in our tradition, an ends statement is pretty much as close to scripture as we get. In short, we have our basic ingredients, now all we need is one wicked intergenerational recipe.

Now, remember those two generational pitfalls I mentioned earlier? Briefly, number one, that we choose to see youth as down-the-road beings, not ready for the primetime; and number two, that the attention towards us is overwhelmingly negative, focused on our apathy, idiocy, and decadence. I can only imagine what an intergenerational community might do to turn these perceptions on their heads. Having youth directly engaged in the work of the church: covenanting, worship planning, and anti-racist reparation allows us to have a stake in the structures and direction of our congregation. If we as youth and adults were to fight together for community justice in the Twin Cities, rebuild together with the people New Orleans, and even

work together on church committees, that would certainly challenge youth stereotypes in very visible ways, and not only that, it would quickly dismiss the reasons for their existence. Imagine if our community members, young and old, were envoys of justice, together? How radical that would be, in both the ancient sense of radical, meaning rooted, and in the modern sense, meaning transformative!

However, I want to make it clear that I'm not calling for the demolition of age-specific church work. The challenges of being young and the discernment of growing up can sometimes only be revealed in all-youth spaces, like Tower Club. Similarly, I bet I wouldn't find myself particularly at home in a "Raising Your Teens" group. Age lends itself to specific tasks, and we can only grow intergenerationally if we also can grow intragenerationally.

Now, admit to yourselves, and some of you may already have, that the idea of an intergenerational community may sound pretty great from the pulpit, but what about in practice? To that end, I want to give an extremely practical reason for this vision. We are a small faith, and new adult members predominantly arrive after departing from other traditions. Because of this, when we talk of growth, we talk of recruitment: welcoming those who may be interested in what we offer. But lost in that conversation are the young people who are raised under our principles. The problematic part of having an open door is that people may leave, and – I hope you find this statistic as shocking as I do – as many as 90% of our high school graduates pick up and head out after high school. Given that, the reasons for our religious marginality become jarringly obvious; simply, we can't hold our youth. So here is what I must emphasize: if we wish our faith to be sustainable in its growth, we must become a new kind of community.

For me, this is my home. Like many of my friends, I approach adulthood not merely guided by Unitarian Universalism, but because of Unitarian Universalism. And because this is my home, my place of spiritual maturation, my kitchen, I need you here, cooking alongside me. I may burn myself, we may accidentally burn one another, but the table will be abundant when we are through. The future is not mine. The future, should we choose it, is ours.

Thank you and blessed be.