



Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens

The Reverend Alison Wilbur Eskildsen, Parish Minister
The Reverend Don Randall, Community Minister

“Generations”

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At the Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Athens, GA

Centering Thoughts:

Hear this, O elders, give ear, all inhabitants of the land! Has such a thing happened in your days, or in the days of your ancestors? Tell your children of it and let your children tell their children and their children another generation. Joel 1:2-3

Through this flesh, which is us, we are you and you are us. Alex Haley

We all grow up with the weight of history on us. Our ancestors dwell in the attics of our brains as they do in the spiraling chains of knowledge hidden in every cell of our bodies. Shirley Abbott

Families, to a large extent, prescribe what we do, think, and say. We may like to think of ourselves as mavericks in our family stories, but most of the time we are simply being copycats. Emily Marlin

Opening Reading:

To begin, I share a reading by the Unitarian Universalist Reverend Marta I. Valentín, “Gratitude to My Ancestors,” from *A Long Time Blooming*. [<https://www.pinterest.co.uk/pin/A-F61AAQALEBRzDVaMA3Hnk/>]

Reflection

This past summer when my oldest grandson was 2 ½, he proved to me how much kids mimic parents. Besides scolding me when I didn’t follow his rules, something I’m sure his parents have said, we played several pretend games, including ‘restaurant’. We took turns being waiter and waited upon. He knew how to order a meal and he understood the waiter’s job, too. Once when I ordered spaghetti, he told me they were all out.

Once during our play, he carried a foot-long stick in his hand and twirled it around. I thought this was dangerous for his younger brother sitting nearby, so I asked him to stop twirling it. I added, “You might accidentally poke your brother’s eye with it.” Some of you laugh—I gather you’ve said this yourself.

As soon as the words burst from my mouth, I knew I had channeled my mother. Just as I imitate my parent, my grandson imitates his parent, who imitates me and Paul—his parents. It's an inevitable hand-me-down we're often unaware we're handing down.

A recent Progressive Insurance ad campaign played on the idea that we become our parents. In one, (*show slide*) a man is dressed like his mother, with 'mom' jeans, tucked in shirt, and eyeglasses complete with chain strap. In another scene he wears an apron while holding a tray of deviled eggs. The campaign coined a new word for this phenomena—Parentamorphosis. A Kafkaesque nightmare.

Last week I attended Second Lookers, the monthly social gathering on second Tuesdays for self-identified elders in the Fellowship. The name implies they're taking a second look at life while in a second phase of life. In some cases, it could be a third or fourth phase, but who's counting.

Knowing the topic for this service, I asked the group whether they mimicked their parents in some way. Most nodded heads. Hester Meyers said every time she looks in the mirror she sees her mother. Barb Leissner, our Sunday service cover artist, said her own talent was a gift from a parent, and that her son also inherited this gift. I know a family whose fear of heights has appeared in successive generations. I imagine you've noticed how some adult children's voices sound just like their parents or siblings. And many families include children who've followed a parent's profession, particularly doctors, politicians, and teachers. Several ministerial colleagues are PK's—preacher's kids.

Whether we want to or not, our genetics and our experiences in our families of origin, meaning whoever we spent our formative years with, in large part make us who we are. If our parents were divorced, if we were abused as a child, or if a parent was an addict of some kind, we are more likely to repeat those patterns. It's not our fate, but the odds of our repeating them increase, especially if we're unaware of our susceptibility. Although not easy, we can interrupt these patterns.

Thankfully, it's not just the more challenging aspects of our parents' influence or genetics that we inherit. We also receive the best they have to offer. My organizational skills come from my mother, perhaps my love of reading, too. Paul and I made it a habit to read to our kids every night, and now our older son and his wife read to their kids. My younger son, now 31 years old, fondly remembers and still suggests we read "The Night Before Christmas" every Christmas Eve.

When significant holidays like Christmas arrive, they're often accompanied by relatives of varying generations in our homes, or we in theirs. And often that subverts cheerful holiday spirits. No matter how wonderful our relatives might be, we can be challenged by different religious or political views. Further complicating holidays, if we've formed our own adult families, these may bring racial, cultural, and language differences into the mix. Even different ways of celebrating the holidays add to potential conflict.

If that's not enough challenge, we can add the fact that we place high emotional value on the holidays. We want the perfect, nostalgic, Hallmark greeting card image of families happily riding an old-time sleigh or baking cookies together. We want the lion and lamb to lie peacefully side by side. But our lion and lamb families don't always obey, creating discordant holiday harmony.

Before you think I'm Scrooge whining about all the difficulties of keeping holidays merry when generations gather, here's some advice. Keep visits short. Stay calm. Avoid topics you know will be divisive. Reduce stress—go for a walk, for example. Remember your holiday doesn't need to match the Hallmark card. Finally, accept that families aren't perfect. It's okay not to like our families. After all, we don't choose our blood relations.

But we can choose new families. If holidays make you blue because family is absent, whether by distance, broken relationship, death, or issues already named, look elsewhere for people to share your holiday with. Two Fellowship members, retired Vivian Sellers and young adult Molly Williams, became new family because Molly's biological family lives far away in Maine. Vivian feels like she's gained a new daughter. While Linn Kent was alive, Barb Schell became like a daughter to Linn. Family can mean anyone we choose. Blood alone can't limit our families, as legal adoptees and some foster families know.

This Fellowship offers unique opportunities for generations to mix, and for relationships like Vivian and Molly's to develop. In fact, recent research shows how important cross-generational relationships are. In Marc Freedman's recently published book, *How to Live Forever*, he argues that elders will find fulfillment and happiness, and will live longer, by connecting with younger generations and 'forging a legacy of love that lives beyond us'.

For motivation, Freedman offers some sobering generational statistics. He reports that in 2016 there were 110 million adults over 50 years old, while only 74 million people under age 18. It's not surprising, given this data, why there are more gray hairs in this sanctuary than those without. Freedman indicates the older population is primarily white, while the younger group is much more racially diverse, compounding the age difference. Among the young, half come from low-income families and 80% of them are not at a proficient reading level by the end of 3rd grade. Additionally, 42% of people born into low income families likely will stay there. Topping off these statistics, while more people of color are going to college, not enough of them finish, creating an educational divide as well. Freedman writes:

...we [elders] move forward as if our future weren't at stake. Those in power cut programs that feed, care for, and educate children; degrade the planet these young people will inherit; and saddle future generations with record debt. How can we find the will to realign priorities in a nation where children don't vote and older people do? Where are we going to find the resources, both human and financial, to cover the cost of an aging America and invest more in young people at the same time? If we don't, will we knowingly continue to sacrifice our children? (*How to Live Forever*, page 5-6)

I believe our children are at risk. And as the statistics suggest, if ignored, the divide will increase conflict among us. Freedman's solution is for the generations to come together, such as grandparent to grandchild, or by what Freedman calls 'fictive kin', and I call chosen families. The younger generation needs elders and elders need them. Youngsters get extra special attention in a time when their parents may be too stressed and stretched. Older adults gain new perspective, meaning and purpose. And together, the groups bridge a potentially problematic divide.

Here at the Fellowship, we can create new families. If you're in the above-50 age group, you can get to know kids by teaching or participating in all-ages activities. Elders can also reach out in

the larger community as we're doing in partnership with Alps Road Elementary School. Several folks in the Fellowship already mentor kids and volunteer at school events. There's room for more volunteers.

Many people of color in this country and around the world value the wisdom of elders more than white American culture generally does. And many value the presence of youngsters more, too. White culture tends to dismiss children as a noisy annoyance and elders as non-productive liabilities. But as America's demographics change to include more people of color, white attitudes will become less dominant. Whatever our identity today, our children's children and their children will be more diverse. It behooves us to facilitate these changes by encouraging cross-generational engagement now.

Elders and young have much to share with each other. Let's take the path prompted by the demographics of our times, as Freedman says, not 'one characterized by scarcity, conflict, and loneliness, but by abundance, interdependence, and connection'. In bridging this generation gap, we will all be the better for it.

May it be so.

Questions for Reflection or Discussion:

1. Who in your family are you most alike in appearance, interests, behavior, or temperament?
Share or reflect on your similarities and differences.
2. What particular habits do you pass on (or try to break) that may have come from your family?
3. Who do you consider members of your family – those related by blood or valued relationship?