

Sermon - The Gift of Generations
UU Congregation of Durham
February 21, 2021
Rev. Carly Gaylor

When I began my internship at this congregation in 2009, I was told by the worship committee that I could experiment and change any element of the service except for one: the children and youth must be part of joys and concerns.

I was blown away.

First, most congregations are not that flexible with their Sunday Services. What a gift to be given that trust and openness to change instead of “that’s not the way we do things here.”

But I was struck even more so by the one inflexible element, one I wouldn’t have changed even if I could: that the children and youth were so essential to the congregation that they must be part of that all-important ritual of sharing our highs and lows, our lives with one another.

Here in this congregation, it was a given.

But I had never been in another UU congregation where the kids participated in joys and sorrows more than a couple of multigenerational services a year, if at all. For most congregations, I would have had to advocate for their inclusion.

What a blessing to be given only one untouchable worship element, and then to have it be such a beautiful testament to the inclusive, loving, and multigenerational spirit of this congregation.

It is that very spirit that shone so brightly in last week’s service as we heard from many voices, young and not so young alike. Wasn’t it wonderful to see so many of our young people, to hear their poems and stories and see their artwork? Wasn’t it beautiful to be together, albeit not in person, to celebrate love and this community? Where else do you find this kind of multigenerational community these days? Not many places in my experience. What a gift.

It was also in this community that Mary, who had lost both her husband and only son, and Lynda and Mike and their children, who did not have grandparents nearby, found one another. I heard the story at her memorial service, and may have the details slightly muddled, but here is how it went to be best of my memory: it was after a meeting that someone who knew both Lynda and Mary suggested that perhaps they adopt one another. Mary only needed a split second to say yes. A quick conversation through the window of Lynda’s car in the parking lot ensued, where they agreed that it would be lovely. It was a while until Lynda called, and Mary, who was a very organized person,

wondered if perhaps this commitment that she took very seriously, wouldn't happen after all.

But Lynda called and a beautiful relationship ensued. More than church friends, they became family, filling in missing roles in one another's lives with deep and abiding love. I know Mary, who many of you remember, was incredibly grateful for the many friends she made at UUCD, and especially for the gift of becoming a grandmother to two incredible kids. I'm not sure that connection would have happened in just any congregation or setting.

* * * * *

When I was a teenager, my grandfather had growing health challenges. He lived in his own home until he died but he came to see us most weekends. He was fiercely independent and stubborn and did not want to be a burden. Hence the weekend only visits. Except the weekends usually started on Thursdays and ended on Tuesdays; he would go home Tuesday afternoon and return on Thursday again. So you might say they were long weekends. And blessedly so.

I loved having him around. He was one more person in our busy household, and I think we all benefitted from his presence. The house felt fuller and more alive when he was there; he was one more loving adult to nurture the four of us kids. And he always reminded us to have fun - work hard, play hard could have been his motto. I'm sure he would have loved to help me sneak out to parties if I had been so inclined, but I was more of a do-my-homework, go to soccer practice, and then read a book kind of teenager.

Pop had great stories, like the time someone put a cow in his high school basement (he claimed not him), or how he got his driver's license - he went by the drive test examiner's home, and in finding him away, chatted with his teenage son, his elder by a year or two. He got his license that same day after a ride with the son. Or his story of meeting my grandmother on the beach right out this window and staying out til 2 am when they were just 14 and 15. I treasure the stories he told along with the handmade table he made as a teenager, still here in the kitchen and the desk he made me in his later years that was my platform for many hours of homework and now houses my sewing machine.

Like multigenerational communities, multigenerational households are increasingly less common in our society. There are many places in the world where it is still the norm to have multiple generations of one family housed under the same roof, though the influence and export of Western values worldwide means it is increasingly less common elsewhere now, too.

There are more and more co-housing programs internationally and closer to home that match students and seniors as unlikely but seemingly very beneficial housemates. One such program exists at McMaster University, started by Soumeya Abed, who had

experienced a similar program as a student in France.¹ University students benefit from less expensive living costs, a stable and quiet home, companionship, and, in many cases, better grades. Seniors benefit from help with simple household tasks and social connection. And, it turns out, better health, with loneliness found to be a greater health hazard than smoking. And it goes both ways, with as many as 70 percent of university students reporting that they battle loneliness during the school year. From a mutually beneficial housing arrangement many friendships have flourished.

* * * * *

As I said, my grandfather was adamant that he not be a burden. I hear the same refrain from my mother. Care for elders, just like care for children, can be difficult, and sometimes impossible in our own homes with limited help and resources. But care is not burden; our elders are no more a burden than are our children. And no less beloved. The conversations had, the stories shared, the games played, the companionship and love given and received, are gifts beyond one moment in time.

All of my grandparents died long before I met Mary. She bore an uncanny resemblance to my grandmother, beloved wife of the same grandfather who lived with us. It was before I had officially started in my role as your minister that I got the call from Eric Nidd that Mary was dying. I was in the Netherlands at the time. I had talked to Mary just a couple weeks before, with a gut sense that I should, on the way to the airport for our honeymoon.

Curtis and I discussed it and made a decision: he continued on to Switzerland to visit family and I flew home a few days early. I made it to her bedside in time to say goodbye and, thankfully, in time for her to know I was there. I felt like I was saying goodbye to a third grandmother that day. There have been times when I missed that window with someone I cared about, and I was grateful that I didn't with Mary.

It is so easy to forget to pick up the phone,
To be too busy to write a card,
Too tired to plan a visit.
Yet I have far more regret for connections missed than tasks undone.
I suspect it will always be so.
And so I urge you even as I remind myself,
Pick up the phone,
Send that card,
Play that game,
Listen to that story,
Hold that hand.
We are all here but a short time,
and we are the stewards of making meaningful the time we have:

¹ Available online at <https://www.cbc.ca/news/health/student-senior-university-mcmaster-housing-co-generational-1.4811115>

Cherish the children,
Cherish the elders,
Cherish all of your loved ones,
Now and always.

Blessed be.

Amen.