



**In the New Era of Unitarian Universalism Teenagers Will Kick Our Butts  
(and this will be a good thing)**

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The following is a true story:

I recently preached at a neighboring congregation. I met the worship welcomer and she went through the order of service with me which was helpful. Then she began to explain their congregational worship rules. Be honest friends, we all have them. Implicit worship rules. They are not helpful for our mission, ministry, or faith based growth.

First, there was the rule that I must finish my opening words before the bell was rung. Then there was the rule that I must announce the moment of silence even though it is printed in the order of service.

I hope you get this, "Announce the moment of silence?"

I looked at the good lay member before me, earnest and nervous in her suit, and told her "No. I would not obey either of these last two implicit worship rules." She responded, "But they will complain at the worship committee meeting." I know I have been to that meeting before so I said "Tell them it is my fault. You begged and I refused."

I then told her I would provide a sworn video deposition attesting to the fact that I chose to willfully ignore everything they hold sacred here. At this point she laughed. I then told her it would be good for her members to have less control during worship, to just enjoy the moment and she nodded her head in agreement.

In the New Era of Unitarian Universalism we will focus on what matters, not what we think we can control, like worship, because we are afraid of the vast, churning space we as a people of faith occupy in this new millennia.

In the words of singer songwriter Dar Williams, "Teenagers Kick Our Butts" because somebody has to do it. So teenagers, please come and kick our sorry butts. You are really good at smelling fear. We are afraid of all the change around us and we need to move out of fear into truth-telling in love, wonderment, and positive motion. We are afraid and it has us stuck.

As far as truth telling goes, here is the truth, as a denomination we have dropping membership similar to national trends for mainline Protestant denominations. We have reduced financials as long term members die or as those of us in the Midwest, move south. We have a new age of humans, called "millennials" who don't want to join. They want to participate. They are just not sure about joining. Interestingly, they don't care when we ring the bell either. They do however, like bold truths and honest, soul satisfying relevant action rather than show. What use is show to them? Many are walking in our doors with crushing college and or credit card debt. They are also young enough to still smell our fear.

People, the millennial with his latte left the building because he came to that next worship committee meeting and did not know what alternative reality brought him to a half hour conversation on the timing of bell chimes and how important it is to tell everyone every week when there is a moment silence. That's just not what he came to church for. And I am glad he is here because that is not what I came for either.

He was wondering about the meaning of life since his sister started shooting heroin again and he had to move back into his parent's basement in order to make his way. He wonders if he can afford to tie any knot before 30 and buy a home before 40. And yet the spirit of life calls to him and sometimes he talks to trees and prays out loud and thinks that life just might also be beautiful even though he does not believe in God. But what does this all mean? He was hoping if he came to worship with us he might find out.

[Sung by me]

Teenagers kick our butts  
Tell us what the future will bring  
Teenagers, look at us  
We have not solved everything

We still can grow, and many do  
It's when we stop we can't reach you  
We feel the loss, you feel the blame  
We're scared to lose, don't be the same

We're scared to lose, don't be the same.

I know we are scared to lose. There is a lot of free floating anxiety out there. Those of us in leadership position can see and feel the changes afoot and the old repair toolkit is no longer working like it did. It was a great toolkit for the time. I went to seminary under this toolkit and it was the BOMB! Honestly, there was often an answer to problems. The WWII and Silent Generation set us up well through great stewardship and volunteerism. I am deeply grateful. And then the world moved again. Ah nuts! World!

Consider, when I entered ministry in the last millennium I walked into my minister's study in my newly settled position for the first time and found a rotary phone. If I turned the switch one way the secretary could listen in to my calls. When I needed research materials for my sermon I called one of our members, who was a librarian at the main branch of the public library and he would check out books for me!

There was no computer in my office and no cell phone in my pocket. The internet was not a household word, there were no smart phones, and social media didn't exist. It was 1998.

Wow.

That's only seventeen years ago.

Since then I acquired a cell phone, and there is a computer in my office - in fact there has been a series of them. I do research on the internet, started a blog that failed, and do the majority of my ministerial work via email. Audios of my sermons are on our website and I am open to being videotaped and placed on YouTube.

We can't be the same. I am totally bummed about this. Ask my colleagues, I just spent the last few days whining to them "but what are we supposed to do now?"

Life has moved on and our faith is calling us forward into a changed world, to adapt until we find our way. And the great news, there are new ways out there.

We have models of alternative and contemporary worship, multi-site ministries, and theme based soul satisfying ministries, new crowd funding sources like "faithify," talented clergy, religious educators, and musicians. We have the UUA which moved to a new site that could meet incoming accessibility and technology needs. We have members who care and have cared for Unitarian Universalism. Nationwide we have thousands of visitors entering our "doors" or "portals" every week. We have multi-million dollar endowments. We have assets to take on our journey of wonderment.

So in my best case scenario, in the new Era of Unitarian Universalism we will uplift and carry forwards our principles, polity, history, and covenant. We will take some chances, try new forms of technology like blogs and podcasts, consider new measures of membership such as participation without signing the book, experiment with worship, listen to our younger members (50 and under) who do not have the time nor energy to volunteer (not because they are bad or weak but because life has changed), make mistakes, learn to move, pick ourselves up, try sharing staff positions between congregations (membership, accounting), dust ourselves off, and have some fun as we adapt to this crazy, beautiful mystery we call life.

We will learn to trust accountable and transparent authority (please - it is just time) because our members do not have as much time to volunteer as they used to, and we will offer lay leadership training for our Boards (because being responsible for a church is tough now), we will debate issues only as they are useful and then move on (UU's take on hobby of mime), we will live the dream that congregational mission is more important than any one person,

staff member, or minister, we will understand that as members our job is to serve as hosts for everyone yet to come through our doors. We will offer child care at any congregational meeting or event that is so important that we must all gather. We will try out viable social media outlets until we find the ones that work, and then we will reassess them knowing they might continue to change.

We will also comprehend that this, this is a LOT of change, so we might need consultants and specialists to help us out, and patience and kindness amongst ourselves.

Something has happened. In the new Era of Unitarian Universalism there is not any more room for old bad habits - micromanagement, bullying behavior, untrained lay leaders, bickering over incidentals and neglect of mission. The teenagers have figured this much out. Our bank accounts can tell, the malaise of our congregations tell. Fancy websites and smooth talkers won't fix it - I don't care how purty your minister is on Sunday morning. We need to be real inside, offer real moments of mission and human connection, as well as be beautiful outside.

So let's practice truth telling and wonderment this evening. First truth telling. My congregation did not meet its budget last year and it has become excruciating to recruit Board members - two years ago it took 20 asks to get three candidates. That is wrong on so many levels.

What are some of the challenges your congregation faces? Share them loud and proud. Where have you fallen? Anyone want to claim a shortcoming?

[PAUSE]

Respond based on feedback

[PAUSE]

We need to tell the truth to keep moving. Thank you my friends, for your trust in me and one another.

We still can grow, and many do  
It's when we stop we can't reach you.

Now for wonderment. Next year, we at First Church are trying the monthly Soul Matters congregational/worship themes offered through the UUA (as long. As we have the money). We started moderating our discussion list serv (the only reason this cultural change did not cause a firestorm was because we had recently engaged in some inappropriate high conflict on it). We are even considering targeting specific demographic groups for advertisement, not everyone, but specific demographic groups.

We also have lots of work to do, not because we are slackers, but because we are a lot like you. We are learning. Our mission is foggy, authority uncertain in places. We are still experimenting with social media. We worry too much and adapt slowly.

Turn to neighbor

Tell them him/her/Ghee/gher from the bottom of your heart about your wonder for your congregation. What might your congregation experiment with in the coming year? Do you have any experimental plans in the works?

[Get feedback]

Friends, I know this feels like an ending, but in the words of T. S. Eliot "What we call the beginning is often the end. And to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from." We move into the new Era with gratitude for all the work done before, and great faith in our ability to speak the truth in love and experiment in wonder. Keep sharing, talking, listening, reading, reflecting, experimenting, changing, and please oh please, ask for help when needed. Your participation in this conference is a beginning as is your presence here this evening. Thank you. Together we will make this so.