

GENERATION GASP?
A sermon by Rev. Elizabeth L. Greene
Boise Unitarian Universalist Fellowship
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Two of the most hackneyed old jokes about Unitarian Universalists turn out, as often happens, to have a grain of truth. There's the one about what fanatical UUs do when they want to persecute someone: they burn question marks on their lawns. And we all know that if we die and in the afterlife find one sign pointing toward heaven and another pointing to a discussion of heaven—we will always pick the second one.

It seems that our admirable junior high religious education class is carrying out the tradition. Their advisors Val Duffy and Steve Thomas came up with a bunch of questions based on various religious beliefs and assumptions. The kids answered the questions, then thought it would be very interesting to have some adults do the same, receiving 84 forms back. The discussions they have had are apparently something to behold. I was only there once, for about a half hour, and heard discussion as thoughtful and as respectful as any I hear in adult religious education classes. The kids are also creative and very funny.

They will probably do more with the information at some point—perhaps in conjunction with the Coming of Age program next year—but for now, I am assigned to share my responses, comparisons and contrasts, conclusions, etc. with all of you.

Well. Being one of those liberal arts types with very little experience in statistical analysis, I didn't at first realize how complex even something this relatively simple can be, how very difficult it is to draw conclusions with which I feel comfortable. Over and over, it was so clear to me that I needed more discussion, that I needed to ask questions about what people meant, why they answered in a certain way. And I can only deal with a few of the areas that fascinated me, given Sunday-morning limits. All in all, there seems considerable danger this morning of my embodying Mark Twain's adage about the three kinds of lies: lies, damn lies, and statistics.

(Important disclaimer: this has undoubtedly not been a "statistically valid" process, but we are treating it as though it is, because it raises thought-provoking issues for all of us.)

Let me get some of the easier stuff out of the way first.

This project confirms that we adult UUs have a hard time simply giving answers. While all the young people just made their choices from the three provided, we adults showed a pronounced inclination to explain, wiggle, qualify or comment. About whether there is reincarnation (#11), one adult agreed, qualifying the reply by, "If this means carbon-based forms of life turn into other carbon-base life forms." Another replied "not sure" to the question about physical healing through prayer (#9), demanding, "Define prayer." Someone left a blank at "Jesus died for my sins," adding "He may have thought he did," and another said "I don't know what Jesus thought as he died." A man (I'm pretty sure I recognize the handwriting), agreed about the inherent worth and dignity of every person (#1), but commented rather poignantly, "Much energy is required to believe this."

It is officially confirmed. At least some of the time, we are not at ease with unembroidered, bald-faced expressions of our thought. We adults, anyway, want to reflect upon nuance and meaning. To have those discussions about heaven.

Staying on the easier path, there are two questions with very similar answer patterns, for both kids and adults. On numbers 13—stating that evil spirits can cause people to get sick—and # 4, about suffering being a part of human existence, the patterns between the generations are quite similar. (Maybe the evil spirits are part of the suffering?)

The final “easy” comment is that belief in the inherent worth and dignity of every person (our first principle) ranks high in both groups: it ties for the most “agrees” among the kids, and has the second most “agrees” among adults. Even this, though, runs the serious risk of being one of those worse-than-damn lies, if we look only at the agrees. The agrees alone do present a clear picture of the adults’ ideas: not one of the adults disagreed, and only 1% said they weren’t sure or didn’t know. But the students’ pattern is a good deal more complex: 81% agreed; 6% flat-out disagreed, and 13% were not sure.

I do not know what this means. Are our kids more cynical than we are? Realistic, reflecting the comment that it takes a lot of energy to believe in human worth and dignity? Any chance the adults are “just saying” it? It would be a rank unfairness to draw conclusions without having some major conversation with all concerned.

Given time constraints, I offer a couple of extremely tentative possible generalizations, and raise a few more questions about what it all means.

In our children, there *seems* to be a trend toward pessimism, toward the negative. (Or is it toward realism...?) Way more students than adults agreed that humans are by nature evil (#3)—19% to 5%. The question about human suffering, upon which we tended to have similar reply patterns, still shows the kids with 4% more agrees than the adults. On the question of whether good will always triumph over evil (#23), the junior highers seem skeptical, with only a quarter of them agreeing, while a third of the adults agree.

But if there is a tendency toward negativity, there are positive signs, too. A lot more young people believe in reincarnation (#11) than do their elders—maybe that’s the antidote to evil human nature and all that suffering...? A similar number of adults and students agree that they believe in miracles (#17, but the students appear more open minded—only 6% disagreed, while 22% of adults disagreed.

What are we we teaching, at church and in our homes? What values of ours are we reflecting? Healthy skepticism? A realistic outlook? Negativity? Open minds?

Since I don’t know the answers to those questions, I will go on to pose the ones that really boggle me, about which I am left scratching my head and badly needing to know more. Nine adults of 84 (11%) and 3 students out of 16 (19%) agree that heaven and hell are real places (#18). Twenty-four adults (29%) say that there is eternal life after death. Seven adult individuals answered “agree” to the statement, “Jesus died for my sins.” (None of the kids agreed.) I would very much like to know more about what these answers signify. What do these Unitarian Universalists mean when they agree with what is often thought in our circles to be outworn creeds?

There are three items that cry out for more explanation, replies with very big discrepancies between the two groups. Adults came to total consensus about believing that there should be justice, equity and compassion in human relations (#8)—an ever-so-

rare 100%. Only two-thirds of the students agreed that there should be justice, equity and compassion in human relations, and 6% actually disagreed. ??? There was near consensus among adults about having an obligation to those less fortunate than we are (#22)—94%—but only half of the junior high group feels a similar obligation, and a fifth of them do not feel such a responsibility. ??? If I were not acquainted with this wonderful group of young people—looking only at the statistics—I might conclude that they are a bunch of self-centered wretches. But I am acquainted with them. I wouldn't be caught dead coming to that conclusion, and would take on anyone who says it's true. I would have to talk to the answerers.

Finally, a favorite of mine, number 24, "Possessions can't make me happy." Three quarters of the adults agree that contentment does not come from what we own, but only a fifth of the kids agree. In fact, over two-thirds of them disagree, thank you very much. ??? Are we to conclude that they, in addition to being self-centered wretches, have no soul and are merely interested in the material, in possessions? No. It's not true.

So, what does it all mean, the whole package, process and product? (My grandson Daniel, considering it, said, "It's kinda weird—Unitarians we're talking here.")

That opinion notwithstanding, the first thing it means is that we are doing a good job of rearing our children as UUs, apparent wretchedness and all. Our junior high school students—that "problem" age that scares the pants off of a lot of adults—are funny, questioning, thoughtful and respectful people. They are the ones who wanted to know what the adults thought. They and their advisors have spent hours upon hours discussing each of the issues—these big, philosophical/religious issues. They are the ones who expressed strong opinions and were also not afraid to say "I don't know" and "I am not sure," in large numbers. I honor and salute them.

The other thing it means is a reminder about the heart of Unitarian Universalism. We are theologically and philosophically diverse, and we need to practice radical respect for each other's viewpoint. That means finding out just exactly what someone means before we comment, certainly before we pass judgment.

In this place where we hope to feel safe to express our deepest thoughts, doubts, questions and hopes, we do not always feel that safety. The reason may be that we think we know what is "politically correct" among us and fear the disapproval of the majority. Or, we may have heard casual, contemptuous remarks about a category to which we secretly belong, so we will not speak up—no one wants to be on the receiving end of a UU's cutting "wit."

For example. Have we not heard in UU circles, at one time or another, dismissive, making-fun-of comments about evangelical, fundamental Christians? (I am not talking about expressing disagreement, even passionate disagreement, I am talking about casual, holier-than-thou remarks. [Or maybe less-holy-than-thou.]) We all have heard them, probably made them. In that kind of a climate, do you suppose the eight people who agree with the statement that Jesus is their savior would own up to it? I doubt it. Think what richness we miss, not hearing just what a UU who makes that statement means.

Or let us take a kind of mirror image, three statements that could be considered important parts of the Humanist UU canon: inherent worth and dignity of every person; justice, equity and compassion in human relations; and our obligation to those less fortunate than we are. Our children questioned those principles in far greater numbers than did we adults. Knowing how much consensus there is among the adults, would the

students, in the course of a general church discussion, cope to doubts about these principles? Actually, I suspect these kids would, because they know they are loved and respected; they have the courage of their convictions; and they have learned in Sunday School from an early age to discuss respectfully. But one of us with doubts, or a relative stranger in our midst, might fear harsh judgment and remain silent.

(A parenthetical acknowledgment.) There may be those among you this morning who do not have a clue of what I am talking about, when I talk of less-than-accepting behavior. I say “Yay” to you, and ask you to be missionaries. This is for the rest of us.)

What I would like to see in all UU congregations—well, in the whole world, for that matter—is for people to feel and act as I see our junior high people acting. I would like everyone to feel sure that their views will be treated respectfully, even in difference. I would like to see open-mindedness and generosity brought to all discussion, even controversial discussion.

A congregation needs to be a haven for member, friend, visitor, old, young, of whatever thoughts and ways of thinking. A congregation may challenge us sometimes, but the challenge has to be offered in respect at the least, in love as often as possible. Here, we bring our best selves, reaching out to each other in our shared, holy humanity.

May we continue bringing these best selves to the questioning and discussing. May we live together in the spirit of our junior high school religious education class: lively, willing to live in the questions, firm in the opinions we do have, respectful, funny, trusting that we will be received with grace.

May it be so.