

When I'm Sixty-Four: A Message for All Ages

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It has been noted that, in general, I do not have a lot of apparent anxiety. I am not, for example, prone to fretting about the question, injected directly into the adolescent psyche of MY generation, which is “Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?”

Perhaps my lack of apparent anxiety about this is that a quorum of this congregation voted unanimously on May 31 of 2009 to call me as your associate minister. I am now 63 ½. “Will you still need me, will you still feed me, when I'm 64?” Odds seem to be in my favor.

As a latecomer to my own family, I have watched nearly four generations, in an unbroken stream, reacting and adapting to the changes in the culture that we more or less share. Generation gaps open and close as experience brings new insights and often humility. As I look back over my lifetime and the history that precedes it, I can observe that nothing has changed, and everything has changed.

The nothing that has changed is the part that has occupied my life work. It is the human search and struggle around meaning and love and fear of the unknown, the longing for connection and community and meaningful relationships, the passion for justice, the desire for beauty and intellectual stimulation and harmony and joy. It is the questioning and seeking for the answers to how things work and how to make the world a better place. These and all of the parts of human beings that form the center of our individual stories and the story of human life have been what get me up in the morning and keep me awake at night.

Lately I've become aware of two intersecting fields of knowledge that *are* shaping and changing the course and understanding of human life. One is the popularized research on the brain that changes itself, and the other is the impact of digital technology. And according to this morning's readings, these seem to be intimately related. The classic impact of aging on the brain, memory changes etc. are with me daily and, so too, is the impact of digital technology.

For example: From time to time when the subject of long distance grandchildren comes up, some of you hip grandparents have talked about Skypeing. This is one of those science fiction technology things that allow people to have a long dis-

tance conversation while seeing each other on a computer screen. Spurred by an interest in my developing grandson, I suggested to my daughter that we might try it.

“Why not,” she said.

“What do we do?” I ask.

She checks with her husband.

“Go to the Skype website and set up an account. We'll do it, too”, she says, “and then on Sunday afternoon we can skype.”

During the next week in a spare moment, I approach the family MacIntosh and following the prompts on the screen, set up the account. Or so I think. What I actually did, I found out, was to install the software—several times in fact—but each time stopped short of actually setting up an account.

So, Sunday afternoon arrives with great fanfare, and we call on our cell phone to let them know that we are all ready. But when the program asks for our username and password, I realize that I had only installed the software and not, in fact, provided the necessary account information for us to actually start or receive a call.

So ... a time for analysis and confusion.

“What's wrong? Are you sure you didn't pick a username and password?”

At first I am absolutely sure. Insulted, even.

“You think I might forget that I did such a thing? Really!”

Then I say, belying my own confidence, “Try ...”—and I give what I might have given as a username and password choice if I had given one—knowing with complete certainty that I had *not* ever shared them with Skype. Demonstrating its inability to read my mind, the Skype program responded with something only slightly less patronizing than “Wrong, you digital moron.”

I am beginning to experience something in my body akin to an anxiety reaction. Okay, no problem. Just set up the username and password and we can get started. Except now the prospect of doing so is taking on epic proportions. We don't seem to be able to return to the place in the program that would allow us to do that. My husband is rerunning the irritating query, says “forgot password?”

“No,” I say, “we did not forget the password. We never *had* a password.”

Mounting anxiety on our end of the line and the beginning of perceived mild impatience on the other.

My palms are beginning to sweat. My heart rate is increasing. I need to leave the room. I return to say, on the phone, "Let us figure this out, and we will call you back." I am sensing a reaction on my part that is way out of proportion to the situation at hand. We hang up. We try some more. We call back. In the meantime they have gone to another computer, trace the steps that we've followed and can tell us what we need to do to set up our account. I set my emotional reaction aside and we have our first Skype encounter.

When we sign off several minutes later, I am still feeling agitated and unsettled. What, I asked myself, is that about? Problem solved. Or is it?

I remembered that earlier that same weekend while in my car, I had heard a brief reference on WPR to the terms "digital native and digital immigrant," terms described in this morning's reading by Marc Prensky, that essentially points out that there is a new language and culture that has come about as a result of the revolution in digital technology that comes naturally to those who have been immersed in it for their whole lives and must be learned by others. As one who uses a computer everyday for e-mail and composing and doing research for sermons and for generating letters and reports, I have felt reasonably grounded in digital technology. I had not actually thought of myself as an "immigrant."

But on that day I connected suddenly with my experience of taking my college Spanish to Mexico. I was fluent enough to ask and receive directions, order a meal in a restaurant, purchase items in the market. But what if my husband and I had become separated or injured in Mexico City and needed medical attention? I could well imagine my confidence as a Spanish speaker leaving me as my vulnerability increased.

There it was: the vulnerability that we all feel in the face of the unknown, in the face of the knowing and capable other, the vulnerability of being invested in a result that our level of competence will not support.

The feeling of vulnerability is a deeply human response that to date, has not developed itself out of the human brain, nor is it likely to show up prominently in the literature about the resistance some folks have to entering the digital age.

The digital native/immigrant analogy would work better for me if we weren't here first. It feels

more like an invasion or a take-over. Last week I had lunch with a colleague who is roughly a decade younger than I. "Do you have a Blackberry?" She asked.

"No," I said, "but I am definitely feeling the pressure pushing me in that direction."

And then, using a phrase that, three years ago would have sounded to me like a symptom of brain damage, I said, "I at least need to be able to sync my calendar."

"Oh. I know," she said. "I had decided not to convert, and one of my children pointed out that if I did not adapt to this technology, I wouldn't be ready for the next level. I plan to work for another 15 to 20 years. When I see what has happened in the past ten years, there's no telling what we will need to know to survive in the next 20."

Mentally I begin to calculate whether I might stretch my current "immigrant" status out for the five to seven years to my own retirement, when I can then retreat to the woods of northern Minnesota and read all of the books I have accumulated but have been too busy to read and write an "Immigrant's Memoir" on my cranky little Toshiba laptop.

I thought of my own mother who had mastered her environment in ways that made her a model of competence and resourcefulness who I discovered when she was 70 was unwilling to master the drive-up window of the bank and more shockingly, refused to pump her own gas.

The digital age may be new and overcoming us at the speed of Microsoft, but the experience of vulnerability and inadequacy in the face of the skill and knowledge deficits of all kinds and at all ages remains a constant that is embedded in the human condition.

We are all shaped by the cumulative impact of the conclusions we form about who we are and what we can do based on the reactions others have to how we learn.

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experience that left us fleeing for the safety of the familiar.

As children these experiences sometimes occurred as a result of being asked to do or learn something that we were cognitively incapable of doing. The poor handwriting of many men has been attributed to the fact that cursive writing was introduced to boys before they had the necessary fine motor skills

In the years that I prepared to become a teacher, we were taught developmental psychology, which includes the work of the French psychologist Jean Piaget who observed and documented stages of cognitive development in children. From his work it became possible to predict age ranges during which children might realistically be expected to develop certain motor functions and abilities, to generalize from concrete experience to abstract reasoning. Most parents of my generation and before, and maybe even today, often push their children to do things they simply can't do. Bewildered by their own inadequacy and vulnerability at one point, children often reject the chance to try again when they are developmentally ready.

I was delighted when my six-year-old granddaughter framed her own food preferences in terms of the maturity of her taste buds. Being able to say at six, "I don't think my taste buds are mature enough to enjoy curried chicken," is a much more helpful understanding of why something doesn't taste good than to say "I don't like curried chicken". The former keeps open the possibility of another try.

Technology has refined the understanding of human development with brain research that is uncovering such possibilities as the fact the poor judgment of many teenagers is due to the immaturity of their brains and that expecting that they will be careful motorists is beyond the developmental capacity of some teenagers. I'm not sure exactly how this might play out in family life, but it might move disgruntled parents to a more nuanced approach in responding to their adolescent's poor judgment than "How can you be so stupid?"

Such a small percent of what makes us feel vulnerable or incompetent is really about stupidity. But it is hard, when faced with all we need to know and remember to live in what has become an increasingly complex society, not to feel that we are at any moment about to encounter something that we need to know but don't. In this morning's reading we heard about aging folks' reactions to losing the plasticity of their brains.

"We seek out like-minded individuals to associate with, and research shows we tend to ignore or forget, or attempt to discredit, information that does not match our beliefs or perceptions of the world, because it is very distressing and difficult to think and perceive in unfamiliar ways." Certainly this is related to plasticity, but I see it as a response to feeling vulnerable at any age.

However, if Marc Prensky and others are right, what we have experienced as shifting ground is not an optical illusion but the experience of being planted squarely on the tectonic plates of cultural revolution. As if the well documented cultural, generational, political, economic, social, and class gaps and dichotomies were not complicated enough, we are now a nation of "digital natives and digital immigrants." The brains of the upcoming generations, we are told, are being formed by the ubiquitous presence of digital media. They may be digital natives, but they are living in a place whose human systems—of government and education and commerce and transportation are still controlled by legions of change-resistant immigrants, caught in a grip of self-preservation. This is not a good thing. But it is the reality that will not change unless we can find ways for natives and immigrants to address it together, to acknowledge how the common ground on which we stand is a fear of the unfamiliar.

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Change resistance, even resistance to understanding and supporting valuable and necessary changes, is not categorically a bad thing. It arises out of a desire to protect our vulnerability. It arises out of fear of the unknown; at best it arises out of measured wisdom—the kind that recognizes that there is value in both the old and the new and that some kind of value judgment needs to be part of the equation. My father was fond of quoting E.B. White who wrote, "Man's restless mind is forever ranging; he thinks he's improving as long as he's changing."

What we face is the perennial issue of how do we create and sustain communities where it is safe to learn and change and also to be loved and accepted for who we are. This is a principle central to our Unitarian Universalist tradition. This is why our Unitarian Universalist community—and diverse

communities in general—are so essential in the face of cultural revolution. In many ways it is the only intergenerational community where shared values form a foundation on which to build a healthy future that allows for the evolution of our essential humanity in tandem with the evolution of new ways of processing and integrating information.

It is in the context of intergenerational community, learning together, that we are most likely to find the coming link to respect and compassion, patience and acceptance in the face of new learning; where we experience people who are older and younger, who are differently able, different in size and color of their hair and skin, people who are different kinds of natives and immigrants, all seeking to understand each other's language and culture.

We can ill afford a culture in which the future is separated from the past by allowing competence with digital media to become the standard by which all value is measured. We will always need communities in which people's brains are also formed by singing and dancing and laughing and playing, where stories are shared and love is nurtured.

The digital revolution is certainly an inevitable feature of the unfolding future, and it is critical that we create bridges that integrate rather than isolate. We need to understand this as an opportunity for interconnection and interdependence rather than separation and alienation. Technology has always been a factor that has contributed to one generation gap or another. I think of how being able to drive a car has transformed my life choices. Hard to imagine, but there are women in my own family, now in their 80s who lived in rural communities and never learned to drive.

So, I'm not talking here about the good old days. These can *be* the good old days.

Using a computer has transformed many aspects of my life and work, but I am sorry, the digital terrorism embodied by some clever natives' capacity to flood cyberspace with Viagra ads is *not* progress. Progress comes when communities work together to bring balance and principle and integrity to the use of its resources.

Our digital native children still need to learn the universal language of love and suffering and compassion and humility. There are no short cuts, no digital solutions to the awkward, sometimes painful enterprise of learning how to be a whole person. Like me learning to skype our children, through trial and error, through confronting their vulnera-

bility and fear of failure, every generation needs to navigate the tricky waters of human relationship. Their success will depend as much or more on this as mine does on being able to use a Blackberry to sync my calendar. Somehow we need to understand the value of each generation's unique and common experience.

Digital native children still call me about how to make grandma's apple cake or how to deal with their partners. They are smarter than I am in so many ways, but they didn't get that way from more time online, and they still seek the perspective that comes from credits earned in the university of life.

Times of great and rapid change require vigilance and judgment to winnow value from fancy, to maintain the critical balance between the acquisition of new knowledge and its application to making this a more welcoming and habitable place.

Everything old was once new. Making a god of either the past or the future dishonors both.

I challenge you today to think about the ways we can leverage our commitment to diversity to use this community to hold and honor the best of both.

Closing Words

Generation to Generation By Antoine St. Exupéry

In a house which becomes a home,
one hands down and another takes up
the heritage of mind and heart,
laughter and tears, musings and deeds.
Love, like a carefully loaded ship,
crosses the gulf between the generations.
Therefore, we do not neglect the ceremonies
of our passage: when we wed, when we die,
and when we are blessed with a child;
When we depart and when we return;
When we plant and when we harvest.
Let us bring up our children. It is not
the place of some official to hand to them
their heritage.

If others impart to our children our knowledge
and ideals, they will lose all of us that is
wordless and full of wonder.
Let us build memories in our children,
lest they drag out joyless lives,
lest they allow treasures to be lost because
they have not been given the keys.
We live, not by things, but by the meanings
of things. It is needful to transmit the passwords
from generation to generation.