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Reflection for the 2006 General Assembly Bridging Ceremony

I have spent the past two years working with Unitarian Universalist young adults. As most of you probably know, the young adult age range begins at 18 and ends at 35. When I tell people about my work, the age range is usually one of the first things they ask about. I can see it coming: a sort of puzzled frown as they think about the young adult section at their local library and try to connect RL Stine and Judy Blume with people between ages 18 and 35. And then they wonder, is there really that much in common between an 18-year-old and a 35-year-old?

The age range for Unitarian Universalist young adult and campus ministry was established based on statistical and anecdotal evidence indicating that, by and large, people between these ages were not being served by our congregations or our wider faith community. And so we have established young adult ministries and campus ministries to try and meet the admittedly diverse needs of this group of Unitarian Universalists.

The next question I most frequently hear about the age range is more difficult to answer, in part because it usually comes from young adults themselves; active participants in some form of young adult ministry. The question is about the upper end of the age range, and why it cuts off so abruptly at 35. "Is there really that much difference between a 35-year-old and a 36-year-old," they ask? Or I get a story: "I have a really close friend in my congregation's young adult group, and they just turned 36 last month, and they've been coming ever since they were 20, and it's still their spiritual home, and none of us want them to stop coming -- do they really have to leave our group?"

This is always a difficult question for me to hear, because most of the time the person asking it won't like my answer. I will tell them that, in my experience, young adult groups and communities that allow the upper end of the age range to stretch do not remain healthy for long. When a UU young adult group decides to allow people over 35 to participate it is almost always because an established member of the group is aging out but continues to feel that the group meets their spiritual needs. This is probably true, and the other members of the community usually agree. However, the continued inclusion of the older UU cannot help but effect the character of the group.

The culture of any group, organization, or church is created by its most numerous, active, and vocal participants. We create spaces in which we feel comfortable and safe, and in which our needs are met. When our needs and interests change, the culture of our communities changes to reflect our new interests and needs. I have found this to be especially true of young adult groups and communities that become flexible about the upper end of the age range. The character of the group changes to accommodate and serve they're new needs, usually in such a way that the

group is no longer relevant or welcoming to the younger end of the young adult age range. There comes a time for older members of a young adult group or community to step back and allow the community to change away from what they need. Allow the community to become what it needs to be for younger young adults.

So that's what I say to these older young adults, regardless of their disinclination to hear it. And now I have a message for everyone. As we heard in Plenary yesterday, our denomination gains about one thousand adult members per year. However, we annually graduate at least three thousand young people from our YRUU and religious education programs. Even with attention, time and resources devoted to young adult ministry, people who have been raised in UUism, by and large, don't stay. Why?

I grew up Unitarian Universalist. I'm still a member of my home church, First Paris in Concord, Massachusetts. I participated in religious education, and was very active in YRUU in my congregation, my district, and at General Assembly. Church was an integral part of my life. I have always loved my faith and my faith community.

All throughout the time I was growing up, I learned that Unitarian Universalism is an amazing faith because of its freedom from creed. My adult mentors were so glad that I could grow up in the safe escape from dogma that they had found so healing. But having never been part of the kind of religion from which Unitarian Universalism was apparently sheltering me, I didn't feel the same need of a spiritual haven, much less a spiritual hospital. I was not spiritually scarred.

I learned that Unitarian Universalism would allow me to be any faith I wanted when I grew up. I could have the freedom to explore many different religions and choose my own spiritual path. But I was left wondering, why do they want me to explore? Don't they want me to stay? Don't they want me to be a Unitarian Universalist?

And then I went away to college. My campus did not have a Unitarian Universalist campus ministry. I visited my local UU congregation a few times in my first year, but I didn't find what I was looking for. The Sunday services did not speak to my life and experiences. The only people in the congregation who were even close to my age were the participants of the high school youth group. The adult members of the congregation didn't seem to know how to talk to me, and our experiences of our faith were very different. If I was welcomed at all, it was as the future of our faith. Part of the next generation of Unitarian Universalists. I would be a wonderful Unitarian Universalist leader someday. Ironically enough I had been Unitarian Universalist far longer than many of the adult members of the church, and I was definitely already a leader.

I don't know if I would still be Unitarian Universalist if I've not been hired by the office of young adult campus ministry. I kept my faith because of a job. I find that kind of scary. The UUA can't hire everybody.

I'd like to remind you of my message to older young adults, and the reasons behind it. The culture of any group, organization, or church is created for the safety and comfort of its most numerous, active, and vocal participants. UU-ism's most numerous member group are people who have converted to UUism in adulthood, not people who grew up here. The culture of adult UUism has been created as a space that is safe and comfortable for people who have come to this faith, often fled to this faith, from other religious communities. Not as a space that serves those of us who have always been here.

Now I don't want anyone to misunderstand me here. I am well aware that many people find Unitarian Universalism as youth and young adults. I certainly don't think it's a bad thing that people are finding our faith and making it their home. In fact that is a good thing. But it does have implications. Nor do I think that people who are raised in the church have some higher, more valid or authentic claim on this faith. I don't believe in a birthright to UUism. But I know that the culture of our congregations is by and large unwelcoming to the people we raise in them. If we as a denomination do not intentionally create ways for our youth and young adults to effect and change the culture of our congregations, then our denomination will not be a home for those of us who have grown up here.

This is particularly true of our growing community of Young People of Color, many of whom are transracial adopted into this faith. The newest data from the survey conducted in connection to the Consultation on Ministry to and with Youth shows clearly that youth of color are even less likely to feel at home in our congregations than their white peers.

Our adult UU culture must change or we will never authentically thrive. We Bridge to create space for people and communities to grow and change. We Bridge to find new challenges and new opportunities. Most importantly, we Bridge to make Unitarian Universalism a relevant, welcoming, challenging, and inspiring faith for people of all ages and experiences.