

What if we wanted bridging youth leaders to continue their work?

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What if instead of youth leaders bridging and seeing no future for themselves, we had opportunities for them to create programming as young adults and actually *paid* them for their skills?

Or, what if bridgers knew there were roles within an adult community waiting for them - community development roles, roles within a circle-style community, roles that valued the skills and understandings they acquired in RE or youth ministry?

What if their skills as raised-UU adults, youth leaders, bridgers, OWL graduates, RE graduates, or circle-style worship leaders were recognized, welcomed, and made use of by an adult church community that valued those things too?

What is the possibility that the lack of young adult programming across the country is not the result of young adults being too busy in their stage of life to participate and create programs for themselves, or the result of the uprooting that happens when some going away to university, or the busyness of underpaid and overworked young people, but: a lack of denominational interest, money and resources going towards meeting the needs of raised-UU adults?

Unitarianism has a retention rate for those who grow up within the denomination of 12.5%. This is compared with 44% in the Presbyterian Church and 48% in the United Church of Christ (Rev Christina Wille McNight, “The Cost of Losing our Children”, <https://uugrowth.com/2010/01/16/uua...>).

These numbers tell us that adult Unitarianism is peopled by those who convert to the denomination as adults. They raise their children Unitarian, but when the children grow up they find they do not want to stay.

In her report "The Cost of Losing our Children," which was reported to the UUA General Assembly in 2010, Rev. Christina Wille McNight lists four reasons why raised UUs leave. Her findings are based on her own research done between 2004 and 2009 and are supported by the report Engaging Our Theological Diversity from The Commission on Appraisal of the Unitarian Universalist Association (Boston University Press, 2005). I am going to focus on three of her reasons [order mine]:

1) *"An historical culture of focusing the adult church experience around meeting the needs of people who have not been raised in our faith. From the Commission again: “Born-inners, it seems, have some different religious needs than come-inners.”*

2) *"A significant difference between the religious education program and the adult church. The Commission report found that “The way UUs raise our children seems to prepare them for something completely different than what*

Unitarian Universalism actually offers."

3) *"Congregational challenges with accepting and encouraging raised UUs to be in positions of power and authority within the church."*

(Rev. Christina Wille McNight, "The Cost of Losing our Children"

<https://uugrowth.com/2010/01/16/uua-retention-mcknight-paper/> January 16, 2010)

Let's start with number one: *Born-inners have some different religious needs than come-inners.* What does this look like in practise?

More research could be done on what the needs of raised-UU adults are. I have no doubt they are diverse. Author Sharon Hwang Colligan offers her perspective in her book *Children of a Different Tribe: UU Young Adult Developmental Issues* written in 2000. She begins with a list entitled "Formative stories that we never heard:"

"God is an old white man in the sky.

The world is a battle between good and evil.

The spirit is higher and better than the flesh.

The spirit is something separate from the flesh.

What is important about man (or about his intelligence, his civilization, his religion, etc.) is that he is above the animals (or the women).

The basic animal nature of man is wrong and you must rise above it.

You are going to hell.

You are unworthy.

God is angry.

God doesn't love you.

God will punish you.

You will be excommunicated.

Fear God.

Sex is a sin.

Masturbation is a sin.

Homosexuality is a sin.

Sex doesn't belong in church.

Perfection is desirable.

Being better than other people is desirable.

Cleanliness is next to Godliness.

Don't talk about sex, religion, or politics in nice company.

The body is a hindrance to the spirit.

Your body is weak, ugly, dirty, wrong.

People are born sinful.

Pagan religions, atheism, agnosticism, or other churches are undesirable.

There is only one right religion.

Christianity is better than other religions.

The Bible is better than other good books.

Obey the word of your Lord.

Unquestioning faith is beautiful.

Homosexuality is foreign and frightening.

Religious leaders and church ministers are male.

UUism isn't a real religion.

UUism is a religion for dry rationalists.

UUism does not offer powerful, ecstatic religious experience. "

(Sharon Hwang Colligan, "Children of a Different Tribe, page 3

<http://www.circlemaker.org/cdt/Chil...> 2000)

Whether you identify with all, some, or none of these, the point remains that if you were raised within a liberal religion or cultural context, you have been taught differently from someone who wasn't. My parents were both raised Catholic but left the church as young children or teenagers. I was raised within first an alternative schooling system (a Steiner school) and also within Unitarian RE and youth culture. My mother raised me with her own quiet love for her own spiritual background. We lit candles for Advent, and celebrated the passing of the seasons. My teachers were Feminists and anthroposophists and Unitarians. I don't identify with all of Colligan's list, but a fair few strike a chord. I'd add a few things I never grew up experiencing:

Religion as a harmful experience

Faith as mandatory

Religion as mandatory

Being told you are not the one who chooses what you believe

God as male

Ritual as staid and boring

Hierarchy as a valid way of being

The world as inanimate or without magic

People as wholly physical

Science as incompatible with religion

What did you grow up without learning? What did you learn instead?

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Number two: *“The way UUs raise our children seems to prepare them for something completely different than what Unitarian Universalism actually offers.”*

As an example of one thing we may be raised to expect, I want to talk about the Magic Pool. This phenomenon goes by many names, including “community,” “intentional community,” and other names that are more or less vague. As a youth I learned about creating it, but I didn’t have a precise name for it until I read author Sharon Hwang Colligan. Colligan wrote a book in 2000 entitled *Children of a Different Tribe: UU Young Adult Developmental Issues* about the needs, traumas, and challenges of raised-UU young adults, informed by her experience creating young adult ministry for UUYAN in the San Francisco area. Despite the fact that it was written fifteen years earlier and on the other side of the continent, I recognized my experiences, needs, and traumas in it. Colligan names the phenomenon I called “community” as “The Magic Pool of Communion” and calls it, rightly, a religious ritual. Forgive me for quoting at length --I want to define the term clearly. She starts with a description of a young adult conference:

“First scene: Friday night, about 6pm. People are still arriving [....] The planners have decided that people will be most comfortable if we start gradually, so the event scheduled is an “adult-style” coffeehouse with some really good musicians performing. [...]

When I walk into the room, I see them all sitting in rows, and scattered. Lots of empty seats between each person, no one sitting close to one another. I feel a little concerned, but they’re happy enough, or so they tell me. They like the music. The rows and the separation are normal adult behavior. It looks a little like church on a Sunday morning.

Next scene: the following morning, Saturday, 9am. Fifteen hours later. Just after breakfast and before the first workshop. Something is different. If this were a play, you’d think that Scene Two was supposed to represent an alternate reality, not the same people. The participants are now sitting close to one another, in groups or piles. Their bodies lean trustingly against one another. Hugs have become part of a normal greeting; reassuring or affectionate touch has become part of a normal conversation. “Normal” conversation is no longer the polite social chat of the evening before; now it is either a free-flowing sharing of the heart, of real life issues, or a free-flowing sharing of silliness, of spontaneous word games and free-association humor.

Something has melted. The “normal adult” well-being people claimed to be feeling during last night’s music performance now seems like a distant and shallow mask.

Walking into the conference after a morning errand in the outside world, I can feel the conference like a strong energy field that is warm, like a physical warmth; relaxing, like a bubble bath or a day at the beach.

It's this energy field that the YRUU call, "community."

I happen to think that this is not really the right name for it; a "community" is more like all the people who live in the same town together. They may or may not feel this deep sense of love and connection. Even if they are hippies who have all moved into the woods together to form an Intentional Community, they may or may not have this energy field with each other. Chances are, at least most of the time, they don't.

The conference is not a community. It's a weekend event. What it is, is a religious ritual. I think a closer word for that magical feeling that YRUU calls "community" is actually: communion. Because it feels like a relaxing bath, I've been calling it "The Magic Pool of Communion." And because I tend not to use Christian language, I've been calling it just: the Magic Pool.

This Magic Pool is a powerful thing. People organize their lives around it, and yet they don't really know how to explain what it is. They just say "conferences," "community," sometimes "workshops," or "worship." YRUUers sometimes call it "UUism." Other people might try "circle worship," "youth worship," or "participatory, experiential worship." They might also try "mysticism," "ecstasy," sometimes maybe "paganism" or "animism."

I often hear adults say that there is a spiritual nothingness, a spiritual flatness, at the center of UUism. They write about it in World magazine. They speculate on whether it ought to be filled with Ecofeminism or Science or Christianity.

One thing is certain. The youth who go to conferences do not think that there is “nothing” at the center.

The Magic Pool of Communion is a powerful ritual and a powerful spiritual experience. As far as I can tell, it is the UU conversion experience. Not only youth converts, but also young adults, ministers and lay leaders will tell you: intellectually, they think the ideas are nice, but they first knew they were really a UU when they attended a certain conference, summer camp, assembly or retreat. That’s why our adult lay Leadership Schools last for a week and focus so much on bonding: we know that once someone has been to the Magic Pool, chances are high that they will serve this movement for life.

Even if they still can’t explain what it is.

Being a visitor to a UU congregation can be a frustrating experience. It’s like, you know that there is a flame burning somewhere, because it attracted all of these people. But you might not see it really burning at the Sunday Service. (I have seen it there, but not often.) You might not see it at coffee hour or at the monthly potluck. If you ask, people might give you a little printed card full of nice words, or they might say, “well, it’s the community.” Those things make reference to it, and yet they are not the flame itself. It’s as if you can’t find it, but

you can smell it. It's around here somewhere. Maybe it's being used to heat the building, or something. A lot of these people have seen it—they look happy.

Maybe it's hidden down in the basement somewhere. (Like, near the RE rooms?)

I have talked to people who have been in a UU congregation for years and they are still feeling confused and looking. And they are still “new members”—when they finally give up and leave, they will feel as if they never were able to quite make it “in.” No one could explain to them how to reach the spiritual flame, the center, the Magic Pool.

One of the reasons why it is hard for people to name and talk about the Magic Pool is the paradoxical nature of its magic. On the one hand, a visit to the Pool is a rare and ecstatic experience that totally changes your whole life; on the other hand, what it feels like while you're in it is profoundly, profoundly, ordinary. Like, everyone is finally acting normal.

The spell we cast is that “it's OK to be yourself.” Just normal people, humans. Humanism.

The trick is, when you really do that, “normal” turns out to not be what you see on TV.”

(Sharon Hwang Colligan, *Children of a Different Tribe* pages 23-25

<http://www.circlemaker.org/cdt/Chil...>, 2000)

This is the Magic Pool.

As a youth leader, I learned about this ritual. I learned about how to create the space for it to happen, about rituals and rules to maintain it and keep it safe, about trust and safety and boundaries, about listening to the group and gauging their needs. About what is needed to create that magical spiritual experience in a safe way.

The rituals I learned to help create it were not simply natural. They were designed by religious educators, parents and advisors who studied adolescent psychology. They don't come from nowhere, and they worked because they were designed for the adolescent stage of life. But the central experience, what some call community and Colligan calls the Magic Pool, is a ritual that adults can also experience, and that adults can also need. It happens in places other than youth conferences with people who are older than youth. As a raised-UU adult, that kind of connection, that affirmation that I am ok and you are ok, that we are all humans, that we can be ourselves authentically, that is the central thing I look for and expect from Unitarian ecstatic experience. There are other things as well, but that is central. It is a lived ritual of the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

I learned things from that Magic Pool, and from the groups that try to create it. I learned the spiritual power of seeing the divine in each other. As an adult, I don't want a church that ordains ministers who can stand at the front of a room and talk. I want a circle, where every person's human potential is revered, and we minister to each other by recognizing our shared humanity.

Analyzing various religions from a cross-cultural perspective, Colligan writes

"UUism, at least in the form it takes in our camps, conferences, and Sunday Schools—which I believe are the heart of our spiritual community—is in my perception a Pagan religion. It is circle-based, earth- honoring, and present rather than distant in spirit. It honors human sexuality, and female leadership. It seeks harmony rather than domination. In a Cross-cultural perspective, that is pretty much the definition of Paganism. The boring, overly rational Protestant style Sunday morning services for which we are famous? They're a front." (Sharon Hwang Colligan, *Children of a Different Tribe*, page 34 <http://www.circlemaker.org/cdt/ChildrenOfaDifferentTribe.pdf>, 2000).

Whether you agree with the cultural designation of pagan or not, this is one example of how different RE programs are from adult church. Perhaps one of the things RE programs prepare UU children to grow up into is a religion that encompasses deep spiritual experiences that are created by and for the group, like the Magic Pool.

That is how it feels to me. I don't want a church that is embarrassed to sing. I want a church where it is normal to hold hands with permission, to close your eyes, to lean in to feel the heat of the flame of love that beats at the centre of the circle-community.

Sometimes I look at Sunday morning worship services, at the whole structure of a church that ordains ministers to speak in front of rooms, and I don't recognize

my religion. My religion is one that exists in the middle of the night, in the woods, around a campfire, around a tree, around a labyrinth. The flame is at the centre, not at the front. We create the sacred space together.

I'm not arguing for the abolishment of leaders or ministers. I'm arguing for a different way I expect community to be arranged. The church hierarchy seems foreign to me. When I realized that so many of my friends were going to divinity school and there was now a separation between what I could learn and contribute, and what they could - that our community was no longer one where we all minister to each other --I cried.

It's not surprising that the wider church can't fix the issue, because it is composed of 88.5% of adults who simply have different needs and different expectations of what a church will give them. It's almost impossible to think of needs you yourself don't have, much less put money or resources into meeting them. Adults do this for children, but not for other adults. Hence the energy and resources that have gone into creating spiritual experiences and development opportunities for Unitarian children and youth, but no higher. Perhaps the needs of different adults even feel threatening.

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Finally, number three: *where are the places, the positions of authority and leadership, for raised-UU adults?*

I'd love to see more data about how raised-UU adults are included in the

congregational and denominational life. I'd like data about what roles they are filling. I think it's important to have some raised-UU young adults in leadership roles to help fulfill the needs of other raised-UU young adults.

Over and over again I hear from young adults that they would love to have groups, conferences, and events but are too starved of resources, both time, energy, and money, to take on event planning roles. In young adulthood we're moving away from home and there are school, careers, and for some family to contend with.

In my region we've gotten good at having events that are more informal to cut down on planning. They're still few and far between. I can expect to go to one, maybe two, a year. Maybe none, depending on how far away they are and if I can afford to get there. But key to even those informal events is having at least one person in a staff role. If the CUC hadn't blessed us with Ariel Hunt-Brondwin and now Asha Philar (both raised-UU young adults with youth leadership experience in their background) as dedicated staff, I doubt that the conferences that drew me personally back into Unitarian community would have happened. Without the young adult mini-cons that have been happening at the CUC ACM for the last several years, it's likely I would not be connected at all with the denomination any more. The pain of the adult community not recognizing my needs or filling them or believing in me --and worse, the gaslighting effect of them not even seeing the problem or recognizing that my needs were different from theirs --was too traumatic. As a recently-bridged university student, I used to go to the local UU church in my new university town, hoping for peace of heart, only to end up crying in a back pew, unable to stop. For years, I'd cry every time I entered a UU

congregation, even my own back home. I didn't understand why I was crying. The people around me were friendly and uncomprehending. "I miss youth group," I'd say, unable to explain what it meant, and they'd pat my arm with a concerned confusion. They didn't know what I needed, and I didn't know how to explain. You should be understanding this, you are supposed to be something else to me, you are supposed to be my beloved community, but you're not behaving that way, I can't find the Magic Pool here. My reality was invisible to them.

Six years later, I have now studied trauma and its effects, and I now recognize this as a gaslighting effect - that crazymaking message that tells you there's nothing wrong and makes you doubt your reality. After several years away, it took a huge emotional risk to attend my first Young Adult mini-con. I remember my heart beating hard when I first entered that space. It was full of ex-youth and some new-to-the-faith young adults. The ex-youth, who had all been accomplished leaders who had given much to the denomination as youth, all had a slightly wary expression on their faces, a deep reticence to take on any leadership, to risk themselves too much. I wasn't sure if I was ok even holding hands, even being in the circle. For me, it wasn't until a person in leadership, young adult CUC staff member Ariel, listened. "Yes, I'm so sorry you went through that, many people have." I was amazed when I realized I wasn't alone in my experience, I wasn't crazy for feeling this way, and it wasn't my fault. That was the moment I could start healing.

I believe this personal anecdote speaks to the need for dedicated staff and resources and the impact one raised-UU (albeit thoughtful, listening, and amazing) staff member focussing on young adults can have. Several years later I

would recognize this psychological experience exactly in the work of Colligan, writing about raised-UU young adults in San Francisco fifteen or sixteen years before. From her own shamanistic lens, she calls what Ariel started for me with that one sentence Soul Retrival, and suggests it is something many, many raised-UU young adults need. Even now, unless there's a community that knows about my needs there, I rarely attend a regular Sunday morning worship service. That feeling of my needs going unrecognized is too painful.

The need for leaders. Money can create time because it gives someone the ability to not be doing something else they need to do to eat.

I don't offer the idea about having more paid roles for young adult leaders or dedicated to young adults because I think bridging youth have all the answers. They don't -- they are trained in rituals that were created for their age range, and they need to learn more to create worthy rituals for themselves and others as adults. I think it needs dedicated study and the attention of young adults, raised-UU adults and elders, and religious educators and ministers and other leaders, the study of young adult and adult psychological needs.

But to me the idea of bridging youth looking ahead and seeing a place for themselves in the faith -- a role, a dedicated role that is expected of them to fill -- makes me realize just how undervalued the skills of youth bridgers are by the wider church. Because what shows what we value more than where we put our money? The very idea of it seems so foreign that it casts the reality in high relief. When I talk to adults about what I feel I have to give, what I learned from the

community about worship through being the CanUUdle worship coordinator, what I learned about facilitation through leading meetings, what I learned about being human through finding out about who people are authentically in OWL or at a conference, I'm met with confusion or lack of understanding. What is it I'm talking about? After serving on the board of my church for several years and the board of the Canadian Unitarian Council for another, I came back from a year away in University to be asked if I was new to the congregation.

Space needs to be made for the religious experience that raised-UUs need. What message would it send to youth leaders, who have often given so much time and energy to this faith, if their skills were actively valued and recognized by the adult community? What if we valued them enough that there were actual roles for them when they bridge?

What if instead of expecting them to go out and create young adult campus ministry on their own as a busy and cash strapped student, they could apply to be a campus ministry leader and access grants to pay them for their time, and a mentorship program to support them as a leader and connect them with a minister? What if there were leadership development, peer-led spirituality development, and other training opportunities for Unitarian adults, that were not aimed at people who were new to the faith, or who wanted to volunteer in Sunday school, but as a continuation of religious education and youth education?

What if there was a circle community of worshippers to welcome them, which saw their skills in facilitation, in ritual-creation, in listening to a group, their experience of ways to create the Magic Pool, and other rituals, their

understanding of the religion, as valuable? What if adults were also worshipping that way, and youth who had grown up learning how to lead those worships were given opportunities to use their skills and learn more? Some of my best cross-generational connections have been with adults who once attended LRY, or who worshipped in similar ways at pagan circles. Many of them were advisors, and some I still have a close bond with today.

I'm focussing on two particular needs of mine, circle worship and the magic pool, because it's necessary to talk about something concrete and it's a part of what I feel I need from church, as a raised-UU adult. I'm not saying those are the only needs. I think there is a diversity of needs and ways to address those needs for raised-UU adults and often of non-raised UU young adults as well. There are also Unitarian children who don't connect with the youth culture or who were excluded from it but who gained something from RE culture. These things are not perfect. But it's necessary to have a starting place and I can only talk about my own needs and experience.

My personal dream of best church includes events that create the Magic Pool, perhaps in small group ministry form, in intergenerational form. It includes circle-worship style weekly worships. It includes other events that are more intellectually focussed, events where we listen to sermons, lectures. It includes social justice gatherings and groups. It includes a community that develops leaders from within and teaches and learns from each other, so that many people can take turns ministering to each other in small and large ways, and that is recognized and celebrated and held in balance by the community. It includes the

support of trained staff and it includes the support of spiritual leadership from the members.

I'm not suggesting we prioritize one person's needs over the other, but I am suggesting that within adult church, one set of needs is already widely prioritized and the other is not even understood or recognized.

I don't claim to speak for all raised-UU adults, all young adults, or all people who were once bridging youth. I'm not speaking to the needs of young adults who are new to the faith, here. But I think of the way that I felt, how hurt I was, how alone, how much suffering I went through because of the rejection of my community and the fact that the community I was supposed to be entering had no idea how to be what I needed. And I think: the central story I was given about growing up Unitarian was wrong.

I was taught that youth culture was that way because youth needed it. That adult culture is that way because that's what adults need. I was told at bridging time that when I grew up, I'd like adult church too. I was told it was about age.

It's not true.

It's not about age, it's about upbringing and spiritual needs. If you grew up, like my grandparents, in a faith like Catholicism and you need to reconnect with a church community that has some of the aspects of that church structure but which helps you unlearn some of the toxic things you need to unlearn, adult UU experiences are going to be valuable for you. If you grew up learning about the circle, the good of the community, that authentic conversation is valuable, that

human sexuality (and asexuality) is valuable, that you need to make space for minority voices, that diversity is valuable, and if you grew up going to the Magic Pool, your needs will be different. The Magic Pool may be a central religious ritual you want to return home to.

I'm not going to age out of this need. Yes, I will grow and develop and need other things too. Yes, there is a space in my life for Sunday morning style worship sometimes, for a more individual experience, for lectures and intellectual experiences, for social justice. But I'm not going to age out of this. My ideal experience of the Magic Pool includes, in a safe and healthy way, people of all ages, all together. I'm not going to age out of this when I'm 35. I'm not going to age out of this when I'm 50. It might look a little different, but my needs will not grow to look like the needs of my parents.

I'm going to quote Colligan one more time, because I want to have a conversation about her work and I keep asking people to read it and getting nowhere. In her poem entitled "A Letter from the Elders To All the UU Youth Who Fell Off A Cliff: We're Sorry," one stanza reads:

"It was our mistake to send you away.

We somehow imagined it would make you more free.

In our own past, most of us left the church of our youth.

We thought that you must want to do the same.

We forgot about the pain.

We're sorry.

We did not mean to stop loving you."

(Sharon Hwang Colligan, The Cliff Poem <http://circlemaker.org/shc/uuyan/th...>, July 1998)

Is the denomination re-enacting the trauma of those many members who grew up in another religion and left it? Who experienced a loss of their spiritual home? Am I experiencing the trauma of my own grandparents, who grew up Catholic, had formative and ecstatic experiences in a Catholic youth group in the 1950s, then rejected their religion and spiritual home in their early adulthood, and were bitterly hurt and spiritually homeless till they converted to UUism in their 60s?

Is the trauma of our parents' leaving and lacking a spiritual home re-enacting on an institutional level over and over again as wave after wave of young Unitarians grow up and find they are not wanted?

I think the denomination needs to start recognizing that the spiritual needs of raised UUs are not the same as the spiritual needs of 88.5% of adult Unitarians. I think to meet those needs means dedicating time, resources, professional study and energy. It means listening to many people's opinions, and the willingness for the protestant style church to be transformed, to maybe not look the same or be the same, to sometimes trade the Sunday morning worship space for a different kind of gathering, to share itself a little. I think it means building places for people who grew up in that culture to create the community, rituals, and spaces they themselves need, with support from the institutions and community. I think it means learning from the children.

With many thanks to the work of Sharon Hwang Colligan and Rev Christina Wille McKnight.

For more information on Bridging Trauma and how to overcome it, and for more information on dangers and considerations of the Magic Pool, and the pitfalls of creating youth-style young adult gatherings, please access Children of a Different Tribe at <http://www.circlemaker.org/cdt/ChildrenOfaDifferentTribe.pdf>.

For the entirety of the Cliff Poem, please see <http://circlemaker.org>.

For more information on UUism and retention of children, please see *The Problem of Retention in Unitarian Universalism*

<https://uugrowth.com/2010/01/16/uua-retention-mcknight-paper/>

For another analysis of the difference between youth and adult culture, I recommend Ruth E. Hinkle's paper *The Disconnect Between Unitarian Universalist Youth and Adults*, written in 2013

<http://www.ruthhinkle.com/wp-content...>

I welcome your comments, suggestions, and friendly corrections. You can reach me, Hazel Gabe, at hazelnut@sympatico.ca