

**“At the Will of the Future”
The Rev. Dr. Terasa Cooley
First Parish Church of Needham
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Sermon

It’s a real pleasure to be with you today. I’ve had the opportunity to get to know many of your leaders and I’ve been impressed with how committed they are to this community, which says a great deal about what kind of community this is. I’m particularly excited to be here on this day when you are so poignantly positioned between your past and your future: commemorating your founders, and welcoming new members is a wonderful way to celebrate the time and tide of congregational life.

It feels like right now we are experiencing a lot of what I call “positional moments” – times when we are equally aware of our past and our future, when we realize what a great debt we owe to those who have come before, and at the same time a sense of promise to come in the future. I imagine you feel that in your congregational life right now – something about building something new makes us so grateful for those upon whose foundations we build. And I would guess it helps you to feel connected to those who will inherit this beautiful place of worship, and wonder what new life they will bring.

Maybe I’m projecting onto you what I’m experiencing in our nation right now: the historicity of this moment is lost upon no one. Not only does it feel like something really new has come, I can almost viscerally feel the sign of contentment from our ancestors who

find in this moment a fulfillment of our great promise as a land upon which any dreams may be realized. Even from those who did not vote for Obama, I have heard a real sense of satisfaction that such a milestone has been passed.

And even just a few weeks ago, did we really believe it was possible? Many of us hoped and prayed and voted and worked to bring this into being, but did we really have full faith that such a change could happen? How can such swift change come to pass? A few months ago it felt like we were mired in division and cynicism and hopelessness. Certainly divisions still exist and many still struggle mightily but the soft air of possibility plays about us. I feel it more than I have ever have at any point in my life.

I have always been fascinated by the question of what enables change to happen, for mostly I can rarely predict when true and deep change will come. I often find myself frustrated when things seem like they will never change and befuddled when I find myself in the midst of a dramatic change swirling around me that I never saw coming.

Years ago I read a book that continues to help me in my wonderings about change. It's called *The Fourth Turning*, by William Strauss and Neil Howe, and it confronts the myth of linear time: that the future will unfold in front of us as a continuation of the past, that what we know now will always be the case in the future, except maybe a little more or less so. They point out that no matter how

much we may wish it so, we are never fully in control of what will come next, and often cannot even predict what will be.

I was talking with a 20-year-old friend of mine recently about this theory – that we cycle through generational patterns rather than moving resolutely in the same deliberate direction – and she said to me, “You’re really taking away my motivation for living! Isn’t it my generation’s job to do something absolutely new?” So I told her what Strauss and Howe say, that the difficulty with the myth of linear time, as they say, “is that it obliterates time’s recurrence and thus cuts people off from the eternal – whether in nature, in each other, or in ourselves. When we deem our social destiny entirely self-directed and our personal lives self-made, we lose any sense of participating in a collective myth larger than ourselves. We cannot ritually join with those who come before or after us.” Something new can indeed happen in the future, but it always has ties to the past as well as to the future, and new changes do not come just because we try to make them happen.

Think about it with me: we always seem to be surprised by what happens, because it doesn’t seem to follow naturally from what came before. If, for example, you look at what was happening in our culture during the Sixties -- the time of free love, radical individualism, anti-institutionalism, of questioning any and all authority – if you apply linear thinking and just project that forward, the assumption would be that all that radicalism would just continue

and deepen; that everyone would be self-actualized and that radical democracy would have come into being.

But did that in fact happen? Instead, the orientation toward individual fulfillment of that time transformed into a kind of narcissistic emphasis on the importance of “me”; the willingness to question authority disappeared into the fears of a post 9/11 world in which our individual rights seem to diminish daily; our fantasies about democracy devolved into the cynicism brought about by Vietnam and Watergate.

Don't get me wrong, there were a lot of things about the sixties I would not like to see continue. Public bra burnings comes to mind, for example. (What were we thinking??) But you get my point, I hope: the future is not just a continual unrolling of the past, events and cultures change in unexpected ways, sometimes following some cyclical patterns, and sometimes completely turning everything upside down, leaving us to question any and all of our assumptions about life and clinging to the few things we feel that we can trust.

All this is to say in a much more long-winded way what I said much more briefly in my title: we live at the will of the future, not the other way around, no matter how much we may desire it to be otherwise.

Strauss and Howe tell us that change comes about because of the natural cyclings of generations. I don't have time to explain the complex structure of their theory, though I do highly recommend the book to you. What I found astonishing is that they predicted this

seismic cultural shift that we are now experiencing, almost to the exact year, largely because of this generation coming of age right now – what is called the “Millennial” generation, the largest generation ever, born roughly between 1985 and 2003.

If we follow the patterns described by Strauss and Howe, this generation is one of what they call a “civic generation”, comparable to the “greatest generation” that helped bring us out of the Great Depression and the second World War. These kinds of generations are pragmatic, positive, service oriented, and believe strongly in the democratic process. Sound familiar? It was a generation such as this that helped pull us through one of the most difficult times of America’s past, and it is this Millennial generation that will help bring us through what is to come. It is to this generation already that we owe this election, for they are the folks who glimpsed in Barack Obama the embodiment of the leader they sought, and began to encourage him and follow his career through websites and MySpace and Facebook even before his 2004 convention speech. These are the folks who organized voters and turned out in record numbers. They did not do it alone, of course, but they put this election over the top.

So what do we already know about the Millennials? For this I turn to another mind-blowing book I read recently (I am nothing if not a book-seller’s dream) called the *Millennial Makeover* by Morley Winograd and Michael Hais, which applies the Strauss and Howe theories to cycles in American politics. Despite the fact that this

book was written before the end of the primary season, Winograd and Hais also predict in almost every particular what has transpired in the last few months.

They remind us that American politics has always cycled in dramatic ways every forty or so years, and that these changes are not so much triggered by big events, but even more deeply by “underlying changes in generational size and attitudes and advances in communication technology”. In other words, a really large new generation coming of age can bring about dramatic change, not just because of their own activities, but by how they reshape all of American society. Think about how much YouTube has already changed the way in which we are educated politically!

Anytime one speaks of a generation as a monolith it must be acknowledged that these stereotypical portrayals clearly do not apply to each individual. But there are generalizations that can be said about demographic patterns and practices of a group. So with that caution in mind let me offer these observations that Winograd and Hais have compiled:

- The Millennial generation is not only large, it is very different in some interesting ways: it is the most ethnically diverse in history (40% are of African American, Latino, Asian or mixed race origins), and so they accept as normal different identities and lifestyles and perspectives.
- This group, because of the way in which they have been raised with such a positive sense of self-esteem is in fact more

positive in their outlook on the world. They believe good things are happening and will continue to happen.

- Endless debates about values and ideas and differences are far less motivating to this group than actually doing something pragmatic and real.
- They believe that government and institutions can be made to work for people and that issues of personal morality are not really their business.
- This is a group for whom “group” is really important: they stay constantly in touch with friends and acquaintances and even strangers via email, messaging and social networking sites.
- They believe in a radical kind of equality among people, and strive for consensus and participation over hierarchy and rules.
- For them a global understanding of life is assumed, and the need for everyone to take responsibility for the quality of that life is essential. Being of service to others is simply assumed as what everyone will do.

My experiences with the young adults that I know have born out this profile. In the Mass Bay District, we have just hired a new Youth and Young Adult Ministry Coordinator who, before he came to work with us, worked as an organizer for the Obama campaign in New Hampshire. Greg is 25 years old, graduated from Harvard, and could easily get a high paying job in the biotech industry or anything else he wished to do. Instead he works 20 hours a week for us,

picks up odd jobs where he can, lives in a coop, and dedicates himself to green living. When I first interviewed him, I asked what he thought would happen to all the young people so excited about Obama if he lost. Greg's response surprised me: "You know," he said, "during the course of this campaign we've learned how wonderful it is to win, and we've also learned how to lose and keep trying." Wow, I thought, how different is that from the many cynical and hopeless folks in my generation.

Soon after his announcement that he was seeking the nomination, Barack Obama spoke about this new generation coming when he went to Selma for a reenactment of the civil rights march. Sitting there with the lions of the civil rights movement, he acknowledged that he and the generation to come have a huge debt to pay to those who have brought us to this place where it would be possible for a black man to run for President. They were, he said, the Moses generation: those who inspired the people to believe they could escape the yoke of oppression. But, he noted, in the Old Testament Moses never gets to see the Promised Land. It is Joshua, the next generation of leader, who was able to take the people across into the new land and a new way of being.

What I think is so remarkable and promising about Obama is that he was talking about himself, yes, to some degree. But he was also talking, and has talked over and over again, about this race not being about him, but about him being the vehicle through which our hopes and dreams can be realized. He is, in this sense, the bridge

between those who have come before and those who are coming after. And, he continues to emphasize, we need one another. None of us can do it alone. We need the Moses generation and the Joshua generation and the Millennial generation and everyone in between because none of us is self-sufficient, and each new generation brings something essential to help bring the change that we seek.

To me, the meaning that I take from all this analysis of generations is some paradoxical understandings. And it is in the paradoxes, in my belief and experience, the God is found. Change can indeed happen; our experience in the last week has been the greatest testimony to this truth. And, at the same time we can realize that something eternal is being resurrected. We recognize the hope and goodness that has taken new root in the world because the seeds of it were planted within our spirits at the beginning of time. One person has helped bring us to this place by speaking to that hope within us. And one person cannot fulfill this promise: that is everyone's task in this new time.

I will leave you with the conclusion of President-elect Obama's speech in Selma:

There will be days when the water seems wide and the journey too far, but in those moments, we must remember that throughout our history, there has been a running thread of ideals that have guided our travels and pushed us forward, even when they're just beyond our reach, liberty in the face of tyranny, opportunity where there was none and hope over the most crushing despair. Those ideals and values beckon us still and when we have our doubts and our fears, just like Joshua did, when the

road looks too long and it seems like we may lose our way, remember what these people did on that bridge.

Keep in your heart the prayer of that journey, the prayer that God gave to Joshua. Be strong and have courage in the face of injustice. Be strong and have courage in the face of prejudice and hatred, in the face of joblessness and helplessness and hopelessness. Be strong and have courage, brothers and sisters, those who are gathered here today, in the face of our doubts and fears, in the face of skepticism, in the face of cynicism, in the face of a mighty river.

Be strong and have courage and let us cross over that Promised Land together.

Through connecting one to another, generation to generation, knowing that we are not alone, we can find that courage we seek and move on into this new day. Amen.