

Welcome to Sarasota, Fellow Baby Boomers!
Rev. Roger Fritts
February 28, 2016

On the Back of the Order Of service

The Bradenton-Sarasota-North Port area was ranked No. 1 in well-being out of the 100 largest metro areas in the United States, according to Gallup research. That means that residents like what they do, have supportive relationships and are proud of their community.

The results are based on more than 176,000 interviews with U.S. adults across all 50 states and the District of Columbia, conducted from January through December 2014.

The score is based on the "five essential elements of well-being":

1. Residents exercise more frequently and are less likely to be obese.
2. They feel safe where they live.
3. They are more likely to have basic access to food and healthcare.
4. They live effectively within their means.
5. They are able to use their strengths and learn new things.

North Port-Sarasota-Bradenton, is the community with the highest overall Well-Being Index score in the United States.

No other Florida areas made the top 10.

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Baby Boomers are retiring and some are moving to Sarasota. Our county's population increases each year by about 7,000 people. Some of course, are babies, born here. Some are young people looking for work, serving our retired population by working in pharmacies. But many are people in their 60s who have come to retire, no doubt

because we have the highest overall Well-Being Index score in the United States.

Intense common cultural experiences form generations. The Lost Generation is a term originating with Gertrude Stein to describe those who reached young adulthood during and just after the First World War, referring to the directionless, aimless life led by some post-war. The members of the lost generation were typically born between 1883 and 1900. When I started in the ministry, I had the opportunity to meet and talk with members of the Lost Generation-- I think of the man who privately talked to me about what it had been like for him to serve as a secretly gay man in the Army in World War I. I think of the woman who told me how she started working at Hull House in Chicago in 1916 and told me stories about the great Unitarian Social Worker Jane Addams, and visited President Wilson in the White House.

The GI generation includes those referred to as the generation of Americans who reached adulthood during the Great Depression and the Second World War. They were born from around 1900 through 1924. I have had the opportunity to meet and talk with many in this generation. I think of the woman who told me how she founded the chapter of Planned Parenthood in Washington, D.C. and Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt invited her to have dinner. I think of the woman who as a child, with her parents, got the last flight out of Vienna to London in 1938. I think of the woman who told me how she worked in the Kodak photography store in Honolulu, Hawaii in December of 1941.

The Silent Generation were born from approximately 1925 until 1942. It includes some who fought in World War II, some who fought the Korean War and some during the Vietnam War. [The term silent generation first appeared in a 1951 essay in *Time* magazine, with reference to many people's silence during the McCarthy era.] I think of the teachers I have had from that generation. In Berkeley Robert Bellah taught me about the sociology of religion. In Kentucky Wendell Berry taught me about poetry and the environment and in Bethesda Rabbi Ed Friedman taught me about congregational politics. However, in one way the Silent Generation has been skipped over for leadership. President Jimmy Carter is the only person in the Silent Generation to have been elected president. One current candidate, Bernie Sanders, is from the Silent Generation, having been born in 1941.

The Baby Boomers were born from about 1946 up to 1964. Some served in the Vietnam War and a few in the first Gulf War. President Clinton, President George W. Bush and President Obama are all part of this generation. Rush Limbaugh, born on January 12, 1951 in Missouri and Roger Fritts, born eight days later in Arizona, are both Baby Boomers. The year I was born Hillary Rodham Clinton was three years old and Donald

Trump was four years old. We are part of a varied, diverse group of about seventy-five million women and men who defy simple generalizations.

Yet as members of the same generation, we share some common experiences. The events of our late adolescence and early adulthood had a lasting influence on our lives.

After a childhood of stability and prosperity featuring the Mickey Mouse club and the hula-hoop, on a Friday in late November of 1963, the baby boom generation tasted death, together, in an instance. I found out in Phoenix, when I walked home from school for lunch. My mother had the TV on and Walter Cronkite was on the black and white television. The President was dead. I walked back to school. My teachers, most of them Goldwater supporters, were not sure how to act. We kids were excited that something so dramatic was happening, but we also felt uneasy. All weekend the TV showed the events unfold in Washington and the boomer generation gained a set of shared memories and images burned on our brains. Everyone in my generation grew up a little that weekend. We learned that life was more than Barbie dolls and Davie Crockett hats.

After November 22, we went back to living life. Johnson announced the Great Society, the Beatles were on the Ed Sullivan show, Kellogg's introduced the Pop Tart, and Ford introduced the Mustang.

However, from 1963 on, the joy and the fun of life has always been mixed with the reality of tragedy, suffering and stupidity. We lived through the deaths of Martin Luther King, Jr. and Robert Kennedy. We joined in the civil rights moment, the women's movement, and the environmental movement. We lived through the Tet offensive and watched the moon walk . . . We celebrated the joy of Woodstock and protested the killings at Kent State. . . . We read *Europe on Five Dollars a Day* and discovered youth hostels . . . Waterbeds were invented and Nixon resigned. . . . We danced to disco music and more than 900 died of suicide at Jonestown . . . thousands of our generation died of a virus called AIDS, while the rest of us lived to see the fall of the Berlin Wall, the fall of the Twin Towers, and the election of the first African American President of the United States.

As we matured, many of my fellow baby-boomers have contributed to the progress of the human race. In 1973, Stephen King's first novel was published. In 1977, boomers created the Apple II personal computer. Ben & Jerry started selling ice cream in 1978. In 1981, we invented the scanning tunneling microscope that allowed scientists for the first time to visualize individual atoms. In 1982, one of us created the implantable artificial heart. In 1983, we created synthetic skin products. In 1984, we invented DNA

fingerprinting. In 1989, a Unitarian Universalist named Tim Berners-Lee invented the World Wide Web. That same year Boomers created a TV show called *The Simpsons*. In 1993, a baby boomer invented the portable dialysis machine. In 1995, we invented the digital camera. A year later one of us invented the first disposable, pre-paid cell phone, made from recycled paper products. In 1996, one of us invented the automated external defibrillator. In 1997, we improved rechargeable lithium batteries and in 1998, we invented another form of recharging called Viagra. These are a few examples of the positive contributions of my generation, moving the human race forward.

Now we Baby Boomers are starting to feel old. Personally, I know I am getting older when I can no longer remember the name of the host of the Tonight Show.

The approximately seventy-five million Baby Boomers, who did not die in Vietnam or of AIDS, are slowly finishing our work life. Each year about 7,000 move here, the community with the highest overall well-being score. In Sarasota, Baby Boomers enjoy theater and sailing, bridge and biking, golf and tennis. Thursday I went to a wonderful play about the 1960s called "All the Way" which explores the first year of President Johnson's Presidency— a perfect play for Baby Boomers. Last night I attended a Cabaret at Florida Study Theater called *Yesterday*, with music from the 1960s, especially the Beatles, another program designed for Baby Boomers.

And some boomers decide to join a church.

For some the choice is a conservative church. A few years ago, Dean Kelley wrote a best-selling book called *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*. He presented four guidelines that characterize the largest and fastest growing religious institutions.

First: Authoritarianism. Usually, a charismatic minister directs the church with an iron hand. The leadership permits no opposition. Everyone obeys. The hierarchy completely controls the followers.¹ This is not the Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota.

Second: Orthodox Dogma. Dogma does not allow for error or ambiguity. A closed system of thought, sufficient unto itself, it represents an uncritical attachment to a single

¹I think of a fundamentalist minister who one Sunday asked everyone in the congregation who supported his ministry to stand. Next he told everyone who was not standing to leave the church. (Later a federal judge sentenced this minister to thirty months in prison for conspiracy to commit bank fraud in connection with a \$1.75 million loan he obtained.)

interpretation of reality. This is not the Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota.

Third: Conformity. The leadership does not allow anyone to deviate from the norm. The leadership responds to those who question the teachings with shunning, suspension, or excommunication. This is not the Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota.

Fourth: Missionary Zeal. The church is right; all others are wrong and need to be converted. This is not the Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota.

We do not follow the formula. Nevertheless, we are growing.

When I ask Baby Boomers, "What are you seeking in a church?" I hear three answers.

First, you tell me that you hunger for a place where you can develop friendships with people who believe in the free exchange of ideas in an atmosphere of mutual respect. You say you are looking for an environment without arbitrary restrictions, a sanctuary of both safety and discovery, where, with others, you can explore the meaning of your lives. Our two men's groups are popular and there is talk of starting a third. We have two memoir groups and one has just published a wonderful book called *UU Musings: Episodes in the lives of your friends at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Sarasota*. We have a discussion group called simply "Baby Boomers." The Forum each Sunday and the Free Thinkers once a month on Fridays are important. Other adult education events like the visit of Bishop Spong provide opportunities to make friends in an atmosphere of exploration of ideas.

Second, you tell me you want a church of quality. You have high standards. This means fine music, meaningful worship, good programs for children, a place where things are done right, not sloppy, not half-heartedly, but with a sense of excellence.

Third, for many of you retirement is also a time for social activism. You know that a lasting satisfaction in life arises out of giving, and not just receiving. In this congregation, many of us are deeply concerned about social issues. We provide shelter to a homeless family and we support Planned Parenthood. We volunteer to help feed the hungry and we volunteer in the schools to help children learn to read. We support overseas projects through the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee and the Unitarian Universalist Partner Church council. We hold conferences and classes on Climate Change, exploring ways to reduce our carbon footprint.

Therefore, some retiring Boomers have been joining our church!

- Some feel a need to explore the meaning of their lives within an open, supportive community.
- Some are hungry for excellence in worship and in music.
- And some are looking for a community of people who share their motivation to engage in social action.

Whatever the motivation, they suspect that this church might offer an opportunity to rejoice together, to mourn together, and to delight in each other.

Personally, what I most admire about our new members is their continued search for value and meaning in a complex, uncertain, and fast changing world. So welcome! Welcome to everyone whatever your age. It is good to have you with us. Your presence will enrich the life of our religious community.

Sources: I got ideas for this sermon from three sermons by two colleagues.
Why is a Liberal Church Growing? September 7, 1986, David O. Rankin
Can A Boomer Be Loyal? October 23 1994, David O. Rankin
and Feeding the Hungry Soul, January 12, 1997, David E. Bumbaugh
The book *Dave Barry Turns Fifty* (1998) was also useful in preparing this sermon.