

**“Eliot Stronger”**  
**A Pledge Sunday Sermon**  
**The Rev. Barbara H. Gadon**  
**Eliot Unitarian Chapel**  
**April 8, 2018**

A few years ago, my family had a big gathering at my brother’s cabin. It was a loud, noisy affair, about 30 of us with 5 kids under the age of 5, all running wild, which you could do at the cabin. My great-niece Kaymin, decided to play the piano with her head. Her father, my nephew, stopped her. He wanted to get his cell phone to record it. One morning after breakfast, my niece Kristen told us she had downloaded some old family pictures onto her laptop, and we gathered everyone around as best we could to look at them. They were in no particular order, and there was much teasing about ‘70s hairstyles and unfortunate clothing choices. And then we came to a picture of my father and mother. My mother had died years before; my father was at home, too weak to make the car trip. But here they were in 1943, a young couple holding their first baby, Jeffie, now in his 70s. My mother wore a chic dress with squared shoulders and a tapered hemline. Dark lipstick. My father, so handsome in his army uniform. When we came to this picture, something happened - all the buzzing and banging and running and yelling and teasing just stopped. We knew what we were looking at. We knew if it were not for this couple, we would not be here. They began us, they connected us.

My parents were born in 1921 and 1923. The music we’re hearing today has a special place in my heart because of them. Aren’t we fortunate to have the Oasis Jazz Ensemble playing for us today? The generation that produced swing music is called by different names - the WW2 generation, the GI generation. Tom Brokaw called them “the greatest generation.” Most of them are gone now. In my ministry of 20 years, I have seen and felt the influence of this generation on every congregation I’ve served, including this one.

Western culture does not have many rituals to honor our ancestors, but we do well to remember them. To claim them, to draw on their strength. This was a generation of tough cookies. They faced the worst economic depression America had ever seen. They worried constantly about family and friends who were deployed in the war, with tremendous

losses. And out of these hard times, arose this wonderful music. I think of it as the music of resilience. It has to my ears a confident sound.

Some members of this generation faced challenges that went beyond the depression and the war. Racism. Sexism. Homophobia. Xenophobia. In wartime, these Americans had the urge to serve like anybody else, but had to prove themselves.

There was Rosie the Riveter - women taking jobs in munitions factories and proving themselves capable, not just as workers but managers. Women also served in the military - it was the beginning of the Women's Army Corps or the WACS, and the Women's Navy Corps - the WAVES. Women headed households - they learned how to fix the family car, because who else was going to do it?

An official report from the U.S. military actually outlined the inferiority of black soldiers, including the inability to pilot sophisticated aircraft. The NAACP challenged this, and in 1940, the Army Air Corps started a training program for black pilots in Tuskegee, Alabama. They trained more than 1,000 pilots. They were called the Tuskegee airmen, and they were so successful, had such a remarkable reputation as escorts for pilots, that they became the most requested unit for this job. I had the great honor of conducting a memorial service for one of them in Chicago.

In 1942, in response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the United States interned 120,000 Japanese-Americans on the West Coast into camps in Arizona, California, Colorado, Utah, Wyoming, Idaho and Arkansas. These families faced incredible hardships - losing their businesses and their homes. Sometimes families were split up - if they felt that the father was enough of a threat, they rounded up all the men together. And despite this, despite the terrible betrayal by their own government, Japanese-Americans raised and educated their children, and built strong communities. They built gardens and made art and music. Many enlisted and served honorably as soldiers.

Unfortunately, the service that they gave didn't change the way women, black Americans and Japanese-Americans were treated after the war - in fact, it was mostly the opposite. The 1950s were a time of great conformity and repression. When Johnny came marching home, Rosie did too, and was expected to give up her good-paying job for him. Jim Crow

was a special insult to black servicemen. Black veterans couldn't take advantage of the GI Bill or good VA housing loans. It would be years before LGBTQ people would have anything resembling civil rights. Japanese-Americans were eventually released from the camps but came back to nothing, and were still treated with suspicion - as not real Americans.

And yet, the seeds had been planted. Their experiences in the war and their service would stir in them a dissatisfaction that demanded change. The generation that followed them would produce great leaders like Gloria Steinem and Martin Luther King, Jr. We continue their battles today.

It was the GI generation that, in large part, started Eliot Chapel. When people tell me the story of Eliot Chapel, they usually begin it the same way with the same words. "It was in 1953, in the home of Joe and Nikki Tanaka." It is said with reverence. These were extraordinary people. Joe was a Nisei, a second-generation Japanese-American, trained as an architect from Washington University. He was a pacifist and served as a medic in Italy during the war. Nikki had a graduate degree from Bryn Mawr. They were natural leaders.

Joe Tanaka joked that they started Eliot Chapel basically because it was darned inconvenient to do church if you lived out in West County. He said that by the time you got home, it was "hardly any time at all before you were packing up to go back for the evening dinner and lecture. And for what? The food wasn't all that great."

But starting a new church was anything but convenient. The people who sat around the Tanaka's living room in 1953 would end up putting enormous resources into this church. They would work hard, they would pour themselves into it, just as many of you do today. Why?

John Wolf, the late great preacher in Tulsa, OK, said, "You want to support a UU church because it stands against superstition and fear." We need to be in the company of people who are actively overcoming their fears. Including the fear of differences. The 1950s were not known as a time that supported differences and encouraged free thought. Imagine, if you will, 1950s Kirkwood. A small group of white families meeting in a Japanese-American home. A Japanese-American couple casting their fortunes with white people. Nobody talks about this like it was any big deal, which makes sense given the times. Back then, you showed acceptance and

respect for people by minimizing differences. But to do that, less than 10 years out from the war? Was a big deal. We talk about our work on race and racism now like it's some new thing, but it's not. It is deep in our bones as a church.

Today we do it differently, in a way that is needed for our time. A few weeks ago, I attended the most recent "speak up" against racism workshop we held at Eliot. When they had us go around the circle and tell why we were there, I heard person after person give some version of the same thing: I am here because I am tired of being silent. In this administration, in these times, hate has become so much bolder, and I cannot live with myself if I don't speak up. And for three hours we practiced. We fumbled and bumbled and felt stupid but there was love in that room and encouragement.

That is also why you support a UU church, I think. For the encouragement. The word "encourage" comes from the old French *encoragier*, which means to strengthen, and has the word 'heart' in the middle. So you come here to strengthen your heart. Every generation has to do this in their time.

And you support your church because you imagine the generation who will come after us. The Tanakas, the Triplets, the Hennons, the Marlows, the Killebrews, the Wessels did what they did for us. They didn't know "us", but they dreamed of us. They believed in us. We were the children of tomorrow. And this is what they wanted for us.

"You want to support (a UU church)", John Wolf said, "because it is a place where children can come without being saddled with guilt or terrified of some celestial peeping tom, where they can learn that religion is for joy, for comfort, for gratitude and love." Last week, we celebrated Easter in just this way, with Handel's "Messiah". Incredible music written 100s of years ago but made by black musicians and white, by men and by women, with a drummer in high school and violinists in their 70s. A cellist and a violinist in college. Singers of all ages. And this joyful sound gathered us up - Christians and non-Christians and atheists and Pagans, gay people and straight ones, in a moment of glory.

In the last photograph we have of my father, he is holding his youngest great-grandchild, Magnus, only a few months old. My dad looks

terrible in the photo, but it's a beautiful picture. This is what you build something for, the photo says. This is what you spend your life on. When you think about the world, you have to think about what kind of a world you want for this baby.

What do you want for the children of tomorrow? How do you imagine this church, 50-60 years from today? Your pledge supports the Eliot Chapel of today and helps us build a foundation for tomorrow. Some of us have agreed to be sustaining members, which means that we agree to give this same amount - the church can count on us for it - until we say otherwise. I hope you will consider checking the box to do the same. And our community's needs go up - if you are supporting children and grandchildren, you know that is always the case. So we are asking you to also consider increasing your gift by 10% as Robert & I are. Your table captains have your pledge cards, and we will start handing them out for you to make your financial commitment - to pledge your faith to this community. May it be a joyful and meaningful exercise for us all.