

Introducing Reverend X

by the Revs. Tamara Lebak and Bret Lortie

Flashback to 1993. I was finishing a Cultural Studies thesis for my M.A. when I first encountered the term Generation X. That I had never heard the term spoke volumes: to that point my generation hadn't forged the cohesive identity of previous generations such as the Boomers and Silent Gens. Then I found a book called *Thirteenth Gen: Abort, Retry, Ignore, Fail?* The subtitle was a reference to what the MS-DOS computers of the day would return when an unreadable disk was inserted into a disk drive: "Error: Abort, retry, ignore, fail?" It was an appropriate metaphor to discuss a generation which at the time had not expressed a collective identity, had not claimed a place in society, had not yet made itself known, had not found its way into places of leadership and authority.

Was "Generation X" a lost generation simply to be aborted, retried, or ignored? Could an entire generation be considered a failure so early in its ascendancy?

The book *Thirteenth Gen* was written by two sociologists who thought they had something to say about our generation. They took the bold move of uploading their findings, chapter drafts, and thoughts to what was then one of the precursors to the Internet, an online service called USA-TALK, using the online moniker "2Boomers."

Once uploaded, their project was almost immediately crashed by a Gen-Xer named "crasher." He was angry, insulted, and ready to engage. With his input, and the feedback from other online Gen-Xers, the report took on a different flavor. Instead of a conventional sociology book, each page of their resulting volume contained cartoons, pull quotes from dozens of voices, and a running transcript of the online conversation critiquing the project itself.

A plurality of voices, passions, dispassions, humor, anger, vision. I read the book and felt confused, affirmed, found, lost — all at once. They made their point

The authors wound up changing the title of the book to sound less judgmental by replacing the term Gen-X with 13th-Gen — although today, almost 15 years later, the term Generation X has been claimed by our generation as a badge of honor.

“Think you can X us out?” it says? Just try.

Generation X: Abort, retry, ignore, fail?

This is the Generation where free love become a flirtation with death. Where social security became mythologized. Where a college education became a ticket to nowhere in particular. Where the glass ceiling increasingly became a universal norm that said there isn't room for you in places of authority and power.

Generation X: Abort, retry, ignore, fail?

None of the above, for Generation X has now come of age. We are doctors, foremen, managers, leaders—and yes, even ministers. That's what this book is really about: Capturing the visions and voices of our generation of ministers as they enter the profession.

In the Unitarian Universalist ministry, Gen Xers represent a third wave of UU ministers. The first generation were those who forged a new denomination out of two allied and distinct traditions, the Unitarians and the Universalists. The second generation were those who went to task to make our fledgling denomination viable, recognizable, and strong. We are viable, recognizable, and strong thanks to their efforts, sacrifices, and lives. Both of these “generations” still dominate our ministerial ranks and leadership.

But a third wave is rising: a wave of Gen-X ministers born roughly between 1961 and 1981 who often have very different ideas than their predecessors.

To use the language from some of the essays this book, we are reclaiming an identity, “re-churchifying” our sanctuaries, and claiming a voice. We are attempting to replace the question mark so long placed at the center of our faith with an exclamation point. We are here, and we hope you enjoy the work of these excellent writers!

—*Bret Lortie*

While still in seminary, Bret and I commiserated at the kitchen table one morning about whether or not our ideas of the grandeur of Unitarian Universalism and our visions for our own ministries were simply the naïve dreams born of inexperience. For example, I am personally interested in large church ministry, so I found myself frustrated when some of my now colleagues discourage even the existence of current large churches much less the idea of starting or growing new ones. I had read the *Almost Church* and *Living the Call* and felt there was a natural third story to tell. What about this next generation of ministers newly ordained, fresh out of school? Surely the generation before us must have been as optimistic as we at some point in their careers. Where had their optimism gone, or why weren't we seeing it?

Our conversation turned to how we might capture this particular moment in time. What if we invited some of these newly trained and eager ministers—those who feel they have both a critique and a plan—and offered them a platform to state their cases now? Do we first need to “earn the right to speak,” as conventional thinking often goes? I was also curious on a personal level. How would I feel ten years from now? Will I have distanced myself from my current optimism or critique? I was curious about the impact that such a collection of writings might have on the contributors themselves. How would preparing the book influence our ministries now? How would putting our ideas out to a wider audience affect the ideas themselves?

At the kitchen table, Bret and I talked about the need for ministers at every level of experience to navigate the polarity between individual and institutional needs: the individual needs of the congregants, the minister, the staff, the prospect—and the institutional needs of the congregation. What we noticed is that everyday ministers make choices that had this polarity buried within its context. As we looked at our own and others decisions, it seemed that when we agreed that a good or healthy decision was made, it was when this polarity between the individual and the institutional was considered in depth and brought to balance.

As we gathered the authors in this collection we offered them some guiding questions and direction: What do you want to say to the movement at this time in your ministry? What is the sermon that you seem to be preaching over and over again but with different illustrations? And as you write, we asked, consider the polarity of the individual versus the institutional.

We looked for Gen-X ministers who we believed were navigating this balance well. We made a serious attempt to pay attention to our own inclusion and exclusion of diversity. We feel we did well with gender, sexual orientation, interest, and background. We feel it is important to acknowledge that we are aware and disappointed in our ability to solicit essays from ethnically diverse authors. Let this be a beginning, a slice of a whole we know is larger, and let it be a catalyst for conversation and change.

—*Tamara Lebak*