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MINNS LECTURE II

START A HUGE, FOOLISH PROJECT

Given November 17, 2002

Setting Up a Men's Table on Every Church Patio

*Start a huge, foolish project,
Like Noah.
It makes absolutely no difference
What people think of you.*
Rumi

*Whatever you can do,
or dream you can, begin it.
Boldness has genius,
power and magic in it.*
Goethe

Where Art Thou Brother?

There is nary a local Unitarian Universalist congregation across the land that doesn't house religious education for children. And most of our tribes have programming for women and youth. Unfortunately, statistics show that roughly 10% of our faith communities have male-specific opportunities for spiritual nurture.

It strikes me that every one of our parishes could profit by taking an audit to see how well we're doing in response to the heart-needs of our men. Remember the sexism, racism, and heterosexism assessments many of our congregations have undergone over the years? But don't just take my word for it; listen to some testimonies from colleagues in the field.

Our Weston, Florida minister Kenneth Beldon writes in his provocative essay entitled "O Brother, Where Art Thou?": "Women, it seems, are stepping *up* to the call to service in our congregations, while men, it appears, are stepping *out*. To say it plainly: we don't need fewer women; we do need more men."

Current UUMeN President and parish minister in Paint Branch, Maryland, Jaco Ten Hove offers this sentiment:

Whenever I inquire about the percentage of women members at a given UU congregation, I'm usually told around 65-70%, often rising. Thus, it seems hard to dispute that men, as a whole, feel less inclined to participate in our churches, relative to the increase in women leaders and members...

But I prefer to approach this issue from a positive angle: How male spirituality might be drawn out. We are, after all, a religious community, and we should aim for our niche, which, in this case, would be offering something of value to men that could deepen and strengthen their religious identities. My current premise is that "every man has an inner life,"...and I predict that as the men in leadership in a congregation help make it safe and easy for other men to share pieces of their inner lives, that community will thrive with a gender equity to be admired.

Women leaders are echoing a similar sentiment. Melitta Haslund, former parish minister in Santa Paula, California, addressed the men of her congregation through the newsletter:

...it has come to my awareness that there may be a need for our men to meet together for reasons other than fixing a drain pipe or sanding a banister. Each of us needs a time to talk about those difficult, joyous times with folks who have similar experiences. I have happily helped to facilitate the women's spirituality group and would be glad to offer any assistance to men who are interested in forming a group, however facilitating it would be a

different story. Brothers, attending the district-wide UU Men's Retreat might be a good starting point.

Carol Rosine, our minister in Franklin, Massachusetts, has worked long and hard over the years initiating, then supporting, men's programming in the congregation she serves. She has assisted in the formation of both discussion and support groups, as well as a social venture called the "Franks."

The optimal answer to attracting and holding men in our UU congregations is to provide programming that intentionally nourishes their personal and social growth, internal yearnings and external duties. But two cautions: first, men will not change appreciably by attending periodic retreats; and, second, altering the classic roles of male as primary provider, protector, and teacher-as *paterfamilias*-won't happen without ample, often agonizing, adjustments on behalf of everyone concerned: men, women, and children.

It's the Church's Job to Feed the Souls of Men

We're lucky, because we belong to a hopeful, renewable faith. Unitarian Universalism contends that men can alter, substantially and enduringly, through regular participation in supportive brothering clans. A vital parish is the best place in town to push men toward self-critique without subjecting them to self-denigration. For a healthy religion affirms men without coddling them. The church is a special kind of community: historically continuous, intergenerational, and a field site for moral stretches and life transitions. In short, nothing less than a communally-based masculinity will adequately grow men's souls.

In truth, the church exists essentially to assist its members (in this case, men) in changing themselves in order to change the world. As Protestant leader James Dittes proclaims: "Men should not have to look outside the church to find support and direction for living the manhood for which we were created. This conversion from a worldly definition to a self-definition open to the abundant riches of God's creation-this is the church's business."

Lodges for men, from Elks to Moose, are historically grounded in social camaraderie and philanthropic outreach, worthy ventures in their own fashion, but none of them is specifically geared to tackle the spiritual needs of men. That's the job of the church, the temple, the mosque, the sangha.

Consequently, our liberal religious congregations must become trustworthy sites for men forging intimate bonds of renewal with other men. Such growth happens through discussion, support, worship, service, and retreats. When a man comes onto our church campus, he must find an open door, with something meaningful for him on the other side of the door; namely, religious growth and learning alternatives tailored for his masculine evolution. Full-service faith communities provide men with robust opportunities to become brothers.

The novelist Emile Zola wrote: "If you asked me what I came into the world to do-I will tell you. I came to live outloud!" Too few men live outloud, that is, divulge our heart secrets in open, caring circles. Shouldn't that be one of the central purposes of a religious tribe: to coax, challenge, celebrate our courage to live congruently, outloud, in every region of our lives?

Brothering is not a puny, part-time endeavor. It entails men's *programming*, but more. It means having a men's *presence* on the patio every Sunday. At least a staffed table with literature. It signifies the construction of a *path* that may be followed by individual men in their own pace and manner, but a path nonetheless.

The resolute warrior or inner king always seeks a quest greater than ego-fulfillment: a transpersonal mission that grants their lives incalculable purpose. We may be men by birth, but we become brothers through deliberate cultivation of our masculine beings. Becoming a brother constitutes man's healthiest and holiest vocation-a calling that produces universal hopefulness for all living entities.

The brothering path constitutes both revolutionary and sacred work; in all honesty, it represents a huge foolish project, not unlike the big, brazen one ventured by brother Noah way back when. And whether we fail or flourish over the long haul in building a viable ark, it matters not, for we men are called to faithfulness not success. Moreover, as Rumi implies, it doesn't really matter what people think of us...for if men truly risk this huge, foolish project I'm proposing-namely, a brothering revolution-we will assuredly be advancing on a route of justice-building and joy-sharing. Men will be living our purpose.

The Whammm Factor

Mine is not an exceptional odyssey, but, like that of every brother walking the earth, worthy of some retelling. But three admissions, at the outset, are necessary to cleanse my heart, if not clear the air. First, my story is not of one living at any margins of social acceptance but rather essentially as a card-carrying member of WHAMMM (white, heterosexual, anglo-saxon, middle-class, middle-age males). Now, I have no illusions: I didn't earn this condition (some would say predicament) of multiple entitlements; I was ushered into it by fate.

A second reflection. I'm also aware that when I look into the mirror I basically see a human being, your generic person, so to speak. My class, race, and gender are hardly visible; whereas men of color tell us that they see color before maleness, before anything else. They see color and feel its attendant societally-induced stresses and disadvantages. My point is that we *whammm* constituents possess the unearned luxury of emotional space and economic freedom to work straightway on maturing our masculinity. We move relatively unencumbered in the world.

That's one reason why the men's movement, in all its variations, (there are exceptions like the Million Man March) has been predominantly Whammers doing their own growth, as important as that is. And, unquestionably, a sizable hunk of that growth needs to include getting to know non-whammm men upclose and personal, hearing who they are and bridging with their authentic identities in ways that are respectful not patronizing. For while men of color need to know pretty much everything about the dominant "white" culture in

order to navigate it (as Celie puts it in *The Color Purple*: "Can't get that white man off my eyeballs!"), whammers can conveniently remain in relative ignorance about the variant cultures of persons of color.

But the changing world changes men, whether we're ready or not, at least in part. The 21st century demographics of our local Unitarian Universalist tribes, especially in metropolitan areas, are starting to resemble, more and more, the diverse colors and classes and capacities in the larger world. The hegemonic masculinity of European culture, while still in ascendancy in our liberal religious fold, is loosening.

Furthermore, we can, and should, be intentional about diversifying. For example, our brothering revolution would endorse men's movement leader Michael Meade's refusal to hold any conferences unless men, especially the marginalized, are specifically welcome and present.

Another reflection. Not only are these categories unjust to the oppressed, but by allowing some people to flourish precisely through dominating others, all human beings are diminished. Yes, whammers suffer too in the oppression we sustain. We are hurt by our ignorance, our arrogance, and our moral bankruptcy.

As Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, in her book *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability*, cogently observes: "The solution is a politics of solidarity grounded in the realization that no one is free until all are free-and that only by being accountable for privilege and working together to establish equity for all can we truly be a just society." And I would add: a joyful one as well.

A final admission. My particular whamm journey has been quite sheltered. To be sure, I've not hidden out in a cocoon. I've known illness, divorce, misconduct, death, insecurity, and inadequacy, but most of my torments have been internally generated not externally imposed. One quick example. In 1965 I went to Selma, at the urging of Dr. King, to assist disenfranchised African-Americans in the push for civil rights legislation. Yet I didn't live,

as did they, with daily threats to my dignity. I was slandered and spit upon for a week, not a lifetime. I was a visitor. I left Selma.

Mine has been a privileged place, even if punctuated by occasional detours and disturbances. But it's also true that members of whamm are not totally immune to the slings and arrows of misfortune. Examples abound. Plenty of whammers are trapped in depression. Or they've beaten others and been beaten themselves. Or they've incurred the indelible scars of both military trauma and triumph. Or they've lost their jobs in the ongoing quest for affirmative action, a program they sometimes both understand and applaud. And their stories are stories to be heard, their bodies are bodies to be embraced, whenever they choose to join our fellowship and pour forth their oft-buried interiors.

At the close of all our brotherhood conclaves, I invite men to join hands, as is comfortable. But I consciously leave an opening between me and the next guy. The circle is intentionally broken, as a reminder that there are men who aren't in our company: men too frightened to appear, men who don't feel welcome, men who don't possess the time, resources, or wheels to attend, and so on. My closing words, before our benedictory chant are: "May our circle always remain open for yet another man on the road toward becoming a brother."

From Boyhood to Brotherhood: The Unmuffling of a Voice

All any of us can do is speak from our souls, rooted in our own soil.

I was a shy little guy, barely opening my mouth until I went to kindergarten. I didn't feel unduly frightened or dwarfed, at least not consciously; perhaps I was merely pondering things in my heart, like the biblical Mary. Yet, finding my voice, both literally and vocationally, has been one of my hard-won blessings as a male.

Despite increasing verbal facility in the primary grades, I continued to shake and shiver, if not freeze up, when speaking before authority figures or simply outside the home. I remember entering speech contests as a teenager, mainly as a countervailing to bone-deep,

sweaty fright in voicing my views. I pushed myself and was shoved by others as well in order to confront my demons of outside judgment and potential rejection.

I was a good boy, liked by both adults and peers, and I didn't want to disturb my rather snug (probably smug too) state by doing or saying something objectionable. So, whenever I did speak outloud, especially in the presence of adults, it was to please them. I was your classic placater, and still am-in both the best and worst senses: a gentle-man, a nice guy who adroitly sidesteps conflict and difficulty. Sweet but susceptible to being syrupy.

After my opening lecture two nights ago, when I dealt with some heavy material around men's violence, I not only felt sweaty and unduly anxious during the talk, but had trouble sleeping that night, because I kept reviewing what I didn't say or what I said poorly. As you can see, I'm still wrestling with being a good guy who dares to say tough things!

When it says in Robert Bly's Iron John: "Is there anything dangerous to do around here?" the best equivalent I can usually muster reads: Is there anything adventurous to do around here? And my adventures are invariably well-calculated and guarded.

Although I've developed into an active, occasionally assertive, rarely aggressive, pro-feminist, gay-affirming, male-positive, racially inclusive voice for men, it's real hard for me to stand anywhere near the direct line of fire, or be labeled a bad guy. And it's relatively easy for me to speak out against our own crimes as men; since that way I'm occupying the moral high ground, plus usually reaping the praise of progressive women.

Strident, cutting statements like that of radical gay feminist, John Stoltenberg, "If you ain't catchin' shit, you ain't doin' shit!" still unnerve and haunt me to the core. Oh, the eternal and infernal struggle from being a good boy to a mature man.

A relevant aside. Some of the publicity for this very lecture, I learned too late, misprinted a key word. It invited, men and women alike, to come learn how to start and sustain a **bothering** (not brothering) path in your local congregation. I laugh, in retrospect, at this

goof, but it was clearly a prescient blunder, for men who truly become brothers in any revolutionary sense, become bothers as well-nagging bothers to society as well as to their own life-flow. But, as I'm confessing in front of you, becoming a brother who bothers, disturbs, stirs up shit is hardly my preferred way of moving in the world

Back to my odyssey. As a student, I was outer-directed, working more to charm others than match my own standards. As an athlete, I was skilled in sports but lacked the hard-nosed drive necessary to excel. In my teen years into early adulthood, I remember frequently saying "I'm sorry, I'm sorry", after I fouled someone in basketball, almost as a mindless mantra, clearly apologizing in inappropriate fashion.

As a mate, I'm still conflict-avoidant, rarely fighting at all, let alone fairly and firmly. As a parent and grandparent, well I wholeheartedly confess to having been a fainthearted disciplinarian.

And as a singer, my muffled voice has only been freed since my Father's confident, expansive voice was silenced when he died on Christmas eve, 1987. For whatever reasons, it matters not, but my voice reaches belly-ward now. At least sometimes, when it's not hoarse or congested.

And so it goes.

My growing edges are mine and yours are yours. Comparisons are odious; the last thing we need to do as men is try to out-confess or out-steep one another. As a man you will need to set your own growth agenda, but central to my becoming a more balanced masculine presence in the world has been migrating from convenient silence to courageous forthrightness, from being an habitual stroker to an infrequent shameless agitator. My gnawing bone has been to retain my temperamental softness without turning spineless...to give up chickenheartedness, once and for all. Yes, every knight has his own dragons to elude, slay, or make peace with.

A Painful Turning Point

When I went through a divorce in 1972, at the age of 30, it was improbable that I should seek the solace and support of men, but I did. Like most men, I had been notoriously dependent upon women for my social, sensual, and sexual energy. Like most men (even gay men), I had few male friends and those were relatively shallow. Like most men, I was pretty insecure around and scared of men, especially those strong, hefty guys in charge.

Too many men still avoid seeking help (especially from other men), even when we're despairingly trapped by a lost job, a shattered love, a physical injury, a persistent shame. Typically, we men choose to lick our wounds in solitude. So I'm not sure why I reached out to males during this time of grave emotional need, but I did, and it proved a wise move indeed. For, ever since savoring the deep caresses of male friendship, some thirty years ago now, I've never turned my back on men. And I never will. Indeed, now I regularly turn toward men for gentle embraces, even swift kicks.

Once connected, I've become an unapologetic believer in the benefits of brothering. Make that, an unabashed missionary for men's intimacy and ultimacy. In fact, I started my first men's support group during this season of personal turmoil and trauma. And I'm proud as punch to announce that there's a remnant of that group still kicking—a saving remnant if you will.

I recently re-read the talks I gave to community groups in 1973 concerning gender identity and growth, and although our embryonic men's movement was basically reactive to the more vigorous and developed women's movement, I still concur with much of what I penned. I acutely needed, at that juncture in my life, to share serious, candid, trustworthy male conversation and companionship beyond sex and sports, business and beer. I still do. And I'm hardly alone in that need.

M.A.L.E.

In 1973 we West coast men were guinea pigs or pioneers, take your pick, there being little psycho-spiritual fare available for men who were on the grow. This was pre-Warren Farrell

and Herb Goldberg, let alone Robert Bly and Ellis Cose. And religion was doing little to feed our souls. So a few of us set out to build an ark, to undertake a huge, foolish project in direct lineage of Noah. We named our group M.A.L.E. (*Men's Awareness Liberation Effort*).

M.A.L.E. spelled a pompous acronym to be sure, although there was an early men's group with the same designation back East (Mid-Atlantic Literary Edification Society), that sounded more obtuse and equally pretentious. But we Unitarian Universalist men were at least risking our own growth apart from (not overagainst) women and children. We were clarifying our own identities as men *qua* men not simply as partners, providers, and fathers. It wasn't easy, pacesetting work never is, and while we were clumsy to be sure, often chided and parodied, the path we were hewing was the right one, no question about it.

Back then, both genders stumbled a lot in each other's liberational presence. Actually still do. Here's but a modest example of ineptitude from 30 years ago.

I was invited to speak on a intergender panel before a Southern California crowd of family counselors on the theme: "A Man's Response to Women's Lib." The coordinator of the program, in her letter to me, inadvertently penned: "We are delighted you have consented to participate in our program. The evening promises to be an exciting one, and you may want to invite friends and relatives to watch you perform."

Whoops! I winced then and still do at the choice of the loaded term: "Perform!" I mean, intergender dialogue was new, scary territory for men to enter in 1973. So, while I was willing to swap notes on a panel, indeed share my embryonic views, "perform" wasn't descriptive of what I was ready or willing to do. We men had been perennially pegged to be performers-with our minds and bodies, verbally and sexually.

As women were climbing down from pedestals, we men were trying to climb off stages. This program, an inaugural event of sorts, was not the time to produce, protect, or perform some more. Just sharing would be challenge enough, thank you.

But we women and men can't be too critical of one another; pioneers will regularly say and do awkward, even hurtful, things on the road toward greater justice and joy. Sometimes deliberate but usually unintentional. What really matters, in retrospect, is that what we men introduced with M.A.L.E. was neither faddish nor fatuous, however occasionally foolish. And that evening, while a bit rocky, went pretty well.

In fact, some of what I said that night contains wisdom I'm still trying to emulate three decades later.

If we men want to know what our blindspots or sorespots are with respect to women's oppression, then I invite us to ask ourselves: When do I as a man feel anger, threat, embarrassment concerning who women are and what they do to, for, and with me?

Given this statement let me move on to say that more of us men are blind to our own suppression as adult males. Our primary responsibility and gift to women, ourselves, other men and children is to free ourselves from the masculinity trap (both subtle and blatant) to which we allow ourselves to be enslaved.

Additionally, I would say tonight that maleness doesn't derive from femaleness, so we men must form our own identities per se, risk our own voices. We would seek to be fuller, freer, more flexible adult male humans and begin by facing our own pain and assuming our own pride and power

With sensitive support from men, women can be aided on their journey to liberation. With sensitive support from women, men can be aided on the journey to liberation

The crux of the struggle, however, is that I as a male am primarily in charge of my own liberation and women their own. If we can get clear about who is

ultimately responsible for whom and who can be supportive of and involved with whom, then we should really have something freeing for all humans. And imagine the great stuff our children will get in on!

We M.A.L.E. advocates were essentially concerned about changing male reality *internally*-shedding suppressive male stereotypes and *externally*-stopping our oppressive male behavior toward women, children, and other men. We wanted to become more emotionally expressive and ethically worthy men. Plus we were simply hurting, and many like myself, undergoing life-altering distress. However, substantive change doesn't come smoothly, for, as they say, only wet babies willingly change their situation. The rest of us hanker to have our recurrent discomfort go away without having to make any actual changes.

Yet I've held tenaciously ever since, even if haltingly, to self-change, because I've believed, from my head to my toes, that when men, culture's ascendant power-brokers, dare to make additions and corrections to our living minutes, the entire globe will undergo seismic shifts. Changing men changes the world.

Such was the driving vision of this little band of Unitarian Universalist brothers back in 1973. This basic impulse and imperative remain valid in 2002.

Branching Out...An Evangelist in Training

Ever since those initial forays I've aspired to be a dogged ambassador for men's soulful and prophetic growth. I awoke to the realization that, as a man, I should focus primary energy upon the privilege, plight, and promise of my own genderal embodiment: becoming the healthiest version of masculinity possible! I'm related to others, but I'm responsible for myself.

My missionary zeal on behalf of authentic brothering has converted some men to the cause, ignited others, and repelled a few. But I've kept on course, believing that if there exists a critical mass of mature men in our country and beyond, we will contribute toward the creation of a more just and enjoyable globe. Plus I've never abandoned the conviction that,

for better and for worse, we must engage the brothering revolution with the chosen clans with whom we have cast our fortunes. You start at home.

Consequently, moving from Pasadena, California to Davenport, Iowa, I continued my brotherhood work there, with a jolt from a man in my church. It's been my experience that our changing is activated more often by external crisis or prod than by our own internal desire or good will? Remember 16th century Francis David's pivotal cry: "Semper reformanda" literally meant "always in need of being reformed"? It signifies that we Unitarian Universalists are prone to cowardice and must bank on outside agents pressing us, whether screaming or receptive, into changes frequently beyond either our expectation or our grasp.

Such a moment occurred for me in Davenport, when Edward rushed up after the worship service and chewed me out right there on the chancel: "Damn it, Tom. your sermons have dealt with most every imaginable social oppression except the one I suffer daily. I challenge you to dig deep into your conscience and dare to preach about homosexuality and homophobia-then launch a gay-straight dialogue in the Quad Cities, starting right here in our church. I'll match your bravery with my own. Hey, let's come out of our respective closets and do something truly religious, even revolutionary, for folks here in the Iowa cornfields!"

Well, Edward was persuasive and I was converted, for all time. As the Zen Buddhists say: "When you're ready, your *roshi* will appear." Edward was the first of many teachers, in various guises, who have since graced my life on the matter of crashing barriers and constructing bridges between gay and straight men, then with bisexual men, now transgendered folks.

Edward and I started a scathingly honest dialogue process that I've continued for decades, confronting fears and fostering trust across sexual orientation lines. It's been a process full of mutual awkwardness, anger, and acceptance. Yet once Edward launched me, I've seldom strayed from the path.

But it was upon return to California, when Carolyn and I were called to be team ministers in San Diego in 1978, that opportunities opened up to revolutionize the milieu for men in our local parish life. Carolyn has supported my efforts from the beginning, even as she has done her own work with women. She's been my unyielding soul-mate in the quest for gender justice and joy, goading and cheering me on as needful.

Additionally, when my father died in 1987, then shortly thereafter my beloved father-in-law also entered the ground, "they left me the earth" as the Navajos say, and my ministry to men plunged deeper and soared wider.

In fact, the very night my dad stopped breathing, I'll always treasure the gift I received from another man in our congregation. A true brother. It was Christmas eve around 6:00 p.m. when I received news of my father's death. I immediately asked Carolyn to take total charge of our ministerial duties while I drove, weeping the whole way, from San Diego to Los Angeles (a 2 1/2 hour drive) to comfort and be comforted by my mom.

Back at our church, during the midnight Christmas eve service, Raymond, a member who but a few years earlier had been wrongfully charged with killing his wife, and whom I had faithfully visited in jail until his release...strode slowly to our trencher, lit a candle, and said: "This one's for Tom. He was there for me when I was imprisoned; it's my turn to stand for him during his grief!" And such is the nature of brothering.

Brothering isn't the only song I sing, but it has become a foundational melody. At highest common denominator, I am a man and compelled to tell the plain story of my incontrovertible yearning to become a bona fide brother.

Another Kind of Intimacy

*Home, home on the range,
where the feel and the touch are so strange,
where seldom is heard*

*an emotional word,
and the MEN are so lonely all day.*

Joe Fisher, "A Refrain for Us 20th Century Cowboys"

We need same sex friends because there are types of validation and acceptance that we receive only from our gender mates. There is much about our experience as men that must be shared with, and understood by, other men. There are stories we can tell only to those who have wrestled in the dark with the same demons and been wounded by the same angels. Only men understand the secret fears that go with the territory of masculinity.

Sam Keen, *Fire in the Belly*

Whereas our physical **incarnation** may be maleness; our spiritual **vocation** is brotherhood. Brothering is an intentional choice, revised daily, to relate to men, women, and children, indeed all reality, with the eyes of compassion and the hands of justice. This conscious, radical choice constitutes our ultimate challenge as men. Soren Kierkegaard goes to the heart of the mature masculine quest when he translated Socrates' admonition "*know thyself*" as "*choose thyself*." In short, the core of the brothering journey is to determine precisely the kind of men we want to become...moment by moment, decision by decision.

There are two orthodox ways we have acted as males throughout history: either as lords and masters in charge or as underlings executing the command of superiors. Both extremes have produced considerable ill-effects for society and men as well. We need to exemplify liberative attitudes and behaviors of manhood-what I call, the way of brothering: where men treat self and others with fundamental respectfulness.

Journalist Roger Rosenblatt writes that "men are programmed to be isolated from one another and that aloneness is our natural state. Silence in male friendship is our way of being alone with each other." Hogwash! Quietude isn't our only mode of connecting with

our own gender. Men are not constitutionally incapable of intimate bonding with other men through soulful word and caring touch.

Certainly, men are socialized to lead fiercely independent lives, yet as a member of our UU Men's Fellowship in San Diego once confessed: "I'm a self-made man, but if I had to do it over again, I would call in others." All is not lost for this particular individual, for Peter (as we'll call him) is now fortified by the quickening embrace of responsive brothers in one of our dozen men's support circles.

The word integrity means "whole and undivided," and Unitarian Universalist brothers would rebuke the maverick mentality and instead seek to become whole, not divided or split from our peers. Wholeness banks unalterably upon men forging healthy mature bonds...becoming brothers.

Transformative masculinity necessitates men migrating from solitariness to solidarity across the gulfs of age, profession, gender, theology, race, orientation, ability, and class that continue to segregate men from men. Brothering occurs when men gather together to care for and confront each other. As Michael Meade rightly remarks:

Without some sense of genuine group, too easily the individual man falls asleep or gives up. The history of men, of animals, and of learning has to do with groups, with common effort. A man can risk more exploration of his potential and of his grandiosity-he can risk more encounters with grandeur-when connected to other men who can reduce him when necessary and encourage him when needed.

Men have classically related to one another *side-by-side* at work and *back-to-back* in the military. Undoubtedly, in the life of a church, there will be ample times for men to relate in such fashion, undertaking a common project or competing together on a softball team. These remain honorable ways for men to socialize. Furthermore, they often furnish the

entree for many men to feel sufficiently comfortable with one another to disclose pieces of their personal stories.

But there exists a third, albeit under-practiced, mode of male intimacy: relating *face-to-face*. Much healing remains to be achieved between men, because we've been pounding upon or climbing over or even destroying one another ever since Cain snuffed out his brother Abel. Men need to learn more respectful ways to be brothers...not be our brother's boss, lackey or keeper, but our brother's brother. There are male-based angers, hopes, fears that are more properly shared staring directly into the countenance of one's brother. We owe a "terrible loyalty" to our own gender, and payment is long overdue.

Three cardinal rules follow when men pursue face-to-face intimacy with one another: speak honestly, be brief, and listen from the heart. In due course, those three basic guidelines will enable men to brother at astonishingly deep levels.

Many Explanations, No Excuses

However, men consistently eschew brothering circles by decrying their lack of time. This furnishes an explanation but no excuse, for I know few modern men (or women), even retirees, with oodles of spare time. Our rejoinder to resistant men is simple: "The rest of your life will be unspeakably enriched by the moments you spend upclose and caring with men. Go ahead, check it out, talk to men who participate in same-sex kinship circles. They will testify that everyone else (including the women and children) in their lives benefits from in-depth disclosure with other men." An evening of intimacy with other men will recharge a good week's worth of enriched life at home and work. The dividends are real.

We basically challenge reluctant men to give us credence-which, of course, is no small feat, for men trusting men lies at the crux of the revolution.

Other men lament that our male species is futilely competitive, even combative. Of course, supremacy struggles can devastate brotherly ties and only confirm what militant feminists may fantasize: "Let them clobber themselves into submission." It's no secret, inter-male history is marred by self-and-other destruction, but masculinity per se is not a hopeless

disease. We have learned immaturity; we can outgrow it. We can work, play, and share intimately and productively with our own gender. Give peace a chance, give brothering a chance!

In truth, brothering can unveil a rare and precious jewel that radiates joy throughout the rest of our life-connections. As colleague James Ishmael Ford notes: "Most Zen koans end with 'and she was enlightened' but some close with 'and he became more intimate.'" Yes, men are inherently capable of creating and sustaining deep, intimate bonds of brotherhood. "Taste and see," as the Hebrew scriptures urge

But healing our male-male wounds won't occur through noble intentions or prayerful attitudes. It doesn't occur through osmosis. It happens only by spending ample time sharing our aches and aspirations, our transparent stories, as peers in non-competitive, nurturing places. It takes real effort and requires a "deep seat" as the Buddhists say.

Men also confess to being frightened of other men. Many of us are, and often with good reason. But embraced in safe, un hurtful circles, men can entertain the transformative gift of trust from other men—the building block of authentic brothering. But safe doesn't mean cuddly, or only soothing, although God knows men need to hold and be held. Safe signifies men going to work, not with a hard hat so much as a firm heart. Safe denotes being sufficiently secure so that a man can face his caged and uncaged demons, as well as descend into long-buried ashes, arising often strangely cleansed and more whole.

Another excuse arrives. Men also protest that our gender can best, if not only, relate in a personal fashion with women. Again, that's a stereotypic straight-jacket that multitudes of men have shattered with male-specific sharing. The proof is in the pudding.

Actually, mixed company often derails men and women from experiencing the necessary camaraderie for developing our distinctive souls. I challenge all men to answer this one question: Why benefit from the resources and gifts of only half the human race? Why spend

all our waking time only with adults and bypass the children? The whole world needs the fullness of each of us engaging everyone in sight.

Consequently, women and men (transgendered folks will choose their own optimal growth-circles) must labor independently but alongside one another to create a globe of greater gender justice and joy. As author-activist Alice Walker comments: "As a womanist, I am committed to survival and wholeness of entire people, male and female. I am not a separatist, except periodically for health."

More Salvation Stories

*Pursue, keep up with, circle round and round your
life...Know your own bone: gnaw at it, bury it, unearth it,
and gnaw at it still.*

Thoreau

Both of the following stories were voiced during worship services, the prime time of our beloved communities. If such public occasions carry saving power, you can imagine the depth of healing that also occurs in the more private milieu of covenantal men's circles in our congregations.

Here's a portion of what George courageously related in our midst:

In early childhood I suffered some wounds that are common among male children in our culture. This included an absent father and a brother who was at best a negative role model. In addition, I discovered that the way I felt toward other boys was anathema, and must be hidden forever, even from my own self. I was sent to a boarding school at age 14 and there I looked for a father or a brother. Finding neither, I realized I was alone and on my own.

My life became a balancing act of copying those around me in hopes of being accepted and approved, maybe even loved. But I was forever careful not to let anyone know who I was inside. I put together an apparently good life, but there was always something missing, a vast void between me and other people, especially between me and other men.

When I was still a stranger here at First Church, a man on the patio table asked me what I was looking for. I said some kind of structure within which I could learn to grow spiritually. He replied: "That's exactly what we do here in the Men's Fellowship." I've been a part of the UUMF ever since. I've found myself surrounded with brothers.

On several occasions, when one or another of these brothers came too close, I tried to chase them away. I learned instead how to stay at the table and to apologize and be forgiven. Living alone has lost its loneliness, because there's always a brother who will help. There have been cards and calls and hot food and home visits and hospital visits and dog walks. Whether it's pneumonia, the death of a beloved friend from AIDS, or a broken toe, a brother has been there. Another brother has made a habit of phoning me regularly to inquire about my physical and about my mental and spiritual health.

Can you imagine what it means to be brothered for the first time? The immense power and comfort of that?

And from my brothers in the Fellowship, I've learned to use the word "I" to speak my truth, to speak for myself not for others, and to speak from my heart. I've learned from my brothers here at church that, until I share my secrets, I'm not safe from them, but among my brothers, it's truly safe to share whatever I need to share.

The work of our UU Men's Fellowship is the process of renewal, and the result for me has been incredible healing and wholeness. Amen and Blessed be.

And another second testimony comes from a young adult in our Men's Fellowship in San Diego. He shared his heart-soaked odyssey on Sunday morning as well:

Real men don't get nervous. Real men don't get scared. Real men never cry. Well, I'm nervous, scared and in the next few minutes I will likely cry. My name is Mark Alan Penney. I'm thirty years old. I'm the son of retired Marine Corps Captain, John Penney. I'm especially nervous because my father, my brothers and my girlfriend are here today.

I've played baseball in front of Dad for years. Ever since my first cap league game some 23 years ago, I remember my Dad at those games. Later when I would pitch at Oceanside High, he would come straight from work to see my games. He would stand behind the backstop, watching me as I warmed up. He would cross his arms and lean against the fence, and he wouldn't leave before the game was over. It felt unbelievably good having him there.

Yes, I'm nervous and scared, because the chain link fence that separated us while I played baseball is not here this morning.

When I joined the UU Men's Fellowship I had no idea what would be awaiting for me near the end of the year. In September, my mother was suddenly diagnosed with cancer, and one month later, died on October 13th at the San Diego Hospice.

I owe to these men, the men of my support group and the men of the UUMF, a huge debt. During this difficult time they supported me while my mom was

dying. I know it embarrasses Jack Schmidt when I tell this story, but he and I stayed together at the men's retreat right after my mom passed away. When everyone left and we were doing cleanup, Jack stopped me from what I was doing and gave me a hug.

He asked, "How do you keep it all together after having just lost your mom?" I answered with something like, "I can handle it, it's no big deal." I wanted to get back to my busy-work, and started to pull away, but Jack wouldn't stop hugging me. He just held me. A man just held me.

I was very uncomfortable with this long hug, but Jack wouldn't let me go. After about fifteen minutes, I finally started to relax and let my defenses down. The next thing I remember is being overwhelmed with this huge wave of emotion. Jack told me I didn't have to go anywhere.

He put his arm around my shoulder and we walked over to this bale of hay near the pond at Camp Marston. The tears began to flow, tears I'd been holding in about the loss of my mother, tears about the difficulty I was having with it all. Pretty much 30 years worth of tears.

Jack continued to listen. He didn't try to tell me that everything was going to be okay. He just spent time with me. It was the first time in my life that I allowed another man to be so close to me while my defenses were down like that.

It changed my life forever.

Brothering Spreads Universally

The toughest yet most satisfying vow of our earthly journey as men is the eternally evolving pledge to become brothers...eventually with the whole of Creation. But we need a beginning place.

So, we begin by paying holy tribute to those male ancestors in whose debt we stand and who are luring us forward: Kokopelli, the Native American humped-backed flute player; Orpheus, the father of music and poetry; Jesus of Nazareth, who incarnated the way of love; Francis of Assisi, a brother to the animals; John Sigismund, the first and only Unitarian monarch in history, whose ground-breaking edict established religious toleration and freedom; Unitarian Universalist Whitney Young, Jr., a resolute warrior for racial justice; Mark DeWolfe, an openly gay Unitarian Universalist minister who, in the throes of dying with AIDS, wrote: "Remember your love as a source of strength; remember who you are: lovers tossed by these difficult times"...and countless, other unsung brothers throughout history, pilgrims from the North and South, East and West.

Becoming brothers with a solitary man, then a few men, followed by more men, has a multiplying effect that fortifies us to become brothers with women and children as well. An authentic brothering sensibility becomes contagious, creating ever-widening circles of embrace...enfolding animals, stones, plants-creations related to yet quite distinct from humanoids. Brothering may also, certainly for some of us, produce linkage to infinite mysteries and powers beyond our comprehension, let alone our control...divine companions for the road.

This brothering adventure, this huge foolish project that places us squarely in the lineage of Noah, is stunningly inclusive, beyond our wildest dreams, but it launches with those who share our general embodiment, with other men. It must start there, concurring with Walt Whitman that "all men are my brothers," not just the progressive, stimulating, agreeable ones of our choosing. Every man is our brother-including those men who frustrate, anger, even desert us; including those men who abuse, abandon, and kill women, children and other men; including you yourself on your worst day; and yes, including those guys who think that changing men's way of being in the world is irrelevant or worthless...all these men are our brothers too.

Brothering would re-member all men lest we inevitably dis-member. We salute men who are dead, living, yet to be born; men of all sexual orientations and celibates as well; men of every capacity, condition, color, class, and conviction; the athlete and the nurse; the outcast and the dictator; the hermit and the knight; the foe and the lover; the welder and the lawyer; leaders and followers and those who saunter to their own drumbeat; the honorable and the heinous, and an incorrigible mixture in us all; the magician and the impostor; the right-winger and the socialist.

We profoundly honor differences of color and ethnic heritage as gifts that contribute to a more resourceful brothering community. There is a special perspective obtained in being African-American, Latino, Asian, Native, as well as Euro-American, in our Unitarian Universalist movement. We often ignore or forget the veritable richness in diversity. The blessings as well as the burdens of inclusion.

And certainly we are called to affirm, then serve, men who are numbered among the lost, the last, the least of society...in the respectful embrace of our ongoing Unitarian Universalist brotherhood. We would recall the judgment day parable in the Christian scriptures when Jesus pointedly says: that "if we've been serving the least of our brothers and sisters, we've been serving him."

If we've been clothing the naked, visiting prisoners, taking care of the wounded, the hungry, the homeless, the sick, then we've been displaying compassion not only to these folks (the bulk of whom are likely to be men) but also to Jesus and Budha and Mohammed and Mother Teresa as well. And, conversely, when we consistently fail to serve the least of these, our religion is fraudulent and futile.

I think of the man who having just left prison, found a measure of restoration in our local men's fellowship. And the young adult who bravely described himself as "bedeviled with mental illness", crying out to our gathering of men: "Don't leave me out, don't leave me behind." It could have been our 41 year-old son, Chris, who is plagued with an emotional disorder that keeps him out of the flow of productive, mainline society yet, of whom his

mother lovingly remarks: "Even the bird who cannot fly, has a song." Yes, there must always be room in our brothering circles for all kinds of melodies, even dissonance.

But lest I romanticize matters, we aren't always successful. Men in recovery have fallen off the wagon while participating in our kinship; homeless men have tried our fellowship a few times, then wandered away, finding us too "stable" and "high functioning." We started a group for battered and abused men, even one for male perpetrators of gender violence, and both of these circles enjoyed but a short life-span on our liberal religious campus. You see, certain men are considered more audible and visible, that is, more spiritually acceptable, or plain comfortable, in our brothering circle than others.

But Whitman's mission still obtains: All men are my brothers and to be treated as such.

We brothers remain an incorrigibly hopeful lot. Why? Because we belong to a life-affirming heritage. Why? Because our redemptive religion makes us do it. We even contend that if Saddam Hussein and George Bush spent an hour together, talking no politics, exchanging pictures of their grandchildren, making no demonizing references, being quiet for ten straight minutes, then placing their respective hands on the other man's heart and taking turns, each man voices his deepest life-wounds and life-desires...if something even close to such intimacy could happen between Bush and Hussein, then these two men would be far less likely to ever harm the other, let alone do destructive things to other men, women, and children...over whom they hold massive sway.

Our ardent commitment to inclusive brothering reminds me of a Tolstoy story. One day the great Russian novelist was stopped by a street person who seemed weak, emaciated, and starving. Tolstoy searched his pockets for a coin but discovered that he was without a single penny. Taking the beggar's worn hands between his own, he said: "Do not be angry with me, my brother; I have nothing with me." The lined face of the homeless man became illumined as he replied: "But you called me brother, you called me brother-that was gift enough!"

Yes, it is. Yes, it is.

Tom Owen-Towle

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