

Thomas Owen-Towle  
Minns Lecture III

# Feeding Men's Souls

Toward a Mature Liberal Religious Masculinity

Given February 6, 2003

## I. Introduction

*May I be accountable to my best self and my God!*

Lee Mun Wah

Our Unitarian Universalist faith offers a singular approach to deepening the reflective and prophetic lives of men. We are quite dissimilar from the evangelical mission of Promise Keepers or the alternative "men's movements" circulating in the larger society. We're also different in content and manner from the smattering of mainline Protestant or Catholic, Jewish or Moslem men's programs. Not necessarily better, just distinct from these other growth options.

Hence, this third lecture will attempt to delineate some of the salient features of our liberal religious masculinity.

## II. We are Utterly Religious

*We Unitarian Universalists must create a real community for men rather than maintaining the institutional collective. We need a place where men are drawn in to share ourselves without fear of ridicule or rejection; a place where we are given the freedom to be understood rather than judged; a place where truth is replaced by meaning; a place where we can be unashamedly **religious**.*

Dick Michaels

From the beginnings of human life, men have congregated to hunt, to fight, to make plans, and to share meals. Sports teams, military squads, and brotherhoods of all configurations have formed as well—both within and without the church. In the last three decades, an embryonic Men's Movement has launched, flourished, then receded in prominence, with the bulk of its programming having transpired in the secular domain. Despite a strong undercurrent of spirituality, especially in the mythopoetic wing, men's work has

rarely been institutionalized in religious form, except for the zealous outfit called **Promise Keepers**.

Nonetheless, it remains the persuasion of these Minns' Lectures that brothering is most fully realized in a spiritual setting. Religion combines its significance from the Latin words *re-ligare* which translates "**binding** again" and *re-legere* which connotes "**gathering** together." Clearly, temples, sanghas, churches, and mosques are designated sites where women and men gather to bind themselves to the values and visions of their sacred traditions.

Through religious affiliation, brothers aspire to be securely bound *within* their own beings, bound *alongside* other like-minded men, bound *beyond* in service to society, and bound *through* kinship with the very cosmos itself. In truth, men's growth, when done well, balances the triune mandates of the full-service religious journey: personal renewal, social justice, and spiritual expansion. It grows men internally, externally, and eternally.

Consequently, houses of faith are the natural as well as optimal locales for serious, honorable pursuit of the deep masculine. The central charge of UUMeN—"nurturing a positive liberal religious masculinity"—summons Unitarian Universalist men to be a revolutionary force for abundant justice and joy within our chosen tribes and beyond.

Brothering is categorically a religious endeavor, since it prods men to address the primary questions of human existence: Who am I? What is my calling? Where am I going? Who will accompany me? What sustains me? and Whose am I? In religious homes, we answer these queries not alone but in community—being critiqued, challenged, and comforted through the embrace of kindred spirits.

In San Diego we've led *Brother-Spirit* sessions where the bi-focal needs of the masculine religious journey are addressed, hopefully met: brothering or *intimacy* and spirituality or *ultimacy*. We believe the religious life must always juggle reaching **within** through self-examination and meditative prayer, reaching **outside** in compassionate service and community-building, and reaching **beyond** to commune with the Infinite Spirit.

Other faith traditions have stepped up their own efforts to arrest men's flight from church involvement. Roman Catholic theologians have spawned a handful of books; so have Protestant and Jewish thinkers. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) has even instituted an office that oversees the specific needs of men in their local parishes, with implications not only for programs, but also for liturgy, theology, and language.

The current emphasis of men's outreach, in most every religious communion, is more "support-focused" and less "project-oriented" than in the past. Furthermore, the reasons given for launching men's

programming in other traditions rings familiar to our own ears: (1) When men are actively involved, the church thrives; (2) Spiritually-nourished men become role models for others; (3) Men can lead the social ministry of the mosque, church, temple, or sangha in the larger world; (4) Men have unique concerns of their own to share and need stable and secure places to do so; (5) Men yearn for opportunities to grow and train for religious leadership.

But while we harbor much in common with other contemporary religious enterprises, we whittle our own pathway for men's soulful and prophetic growth. Ours would be a "mature liberal religious masculinity." What might that look like?

### **III. We Are Unabashedly Liberal**

The smudged yet noble watchword of our Unitarian Universalist faith heritage—*liberal*—has multiple meanings of relevance to the brothering revolution.

Unitarian Universalist men proudly claim to be liberal as in receptive of mind, inclusive of spirit, generous of heart, and responsibly free of conscience—all bathed in a buoyant sense of hopefulness. We brashly contend that the world would be better off if more men embodied the liberal temper and spirit.

To be sure, brothers in the Unitarian Universalist fold often prefer alternative words to liberal such as progressive or freethinking, but sometimes we need to salvage and refurbish decent words. We must pour new wine into old wineskins. This may be the case with liberal.

First, brothers are *open-minded*, not closed or empty-minded. Revelation is not sealed and meaning has not been conclusively captured. Nothing is complete, thus everything and everyone are exposed to constructive criticism. This means that Unitarian Universalist men who are either ardent skeptics or believers must learn to work amicably, even productively, within the bosom of the same congregation. A wide range of political ideologies, theological opinions, and behavioral lifestyles needs not only be tolerated but truly welcomed in our brothering circles.

This charge furnishes painful yet useful wisdom for any men who are set in our views and secure in our privileges. I urge men to remember that we belong to a movement marked by swinging doors and open windows. Liberal denotes that.

Of course, we hear the statement that "liberals never know what they believe." This reproach carries a gram of truth, for we liberals don't know anything absolutely. But instead of taking this critique as a blow, let's receive it as a compliment. To know in part, to hold our operational wisdoms tentatively, means men are seriously engaging the complexities of reality rather than succumbing to slick dogmas.

The trouble with our world, according to Unitarian Universalist brothers, is that there are too many people who are too sure of too many things. Liberal religion is the opposite of literal religion. The mature masculine world requires ample freedom to believe and doubt, to affirm and protest, to agree and dissent.

Eschewing the extremes of utter sureness on the one hand and chaos on the other hand, Unitarian Universalist men proudly confess to being "card-carrying muddlers," who, according to Unitarian Universalist colleague Jack Mendelsohn, "live somewhere between the certainty that is repeatedly wrong and the uncertainty that leads to paralysis."

Second, being liberal means being *inclusive*, creating brothering tribes that are inviting to the *whammm* (white heterosexual, anglo-middle class, middle-aged males) majority within Unitarian Universalism but also embracing of brothers who represent different constituencies. Men's groups, in our Unitarian Universalist households, can devolve all-too-quickly into smug, homogenous clans.

Our American world remains loaded with male-dominated, nay male-exclusive, organizations...some of which still only allow certain kinds of men into their membership, invariably whammers. It's the aspiration of authentically liberal brothering clans to stretch our imaginations and extend our arms—graduating from clubs, even coalitions, to genuine communities.

Men share the same gender embodiment; hence our histories are interlocking. This condition calls us to become inclusive, to welcome fresh and foreign brothers along our life-journey. As Parker Palmer notes: "Community is that place where the person you may least want to live with always lives!" Brothering demands such genuine community.

Third, being liberal means being *generous* of heart. The truly liberal man is magnanimous. His life is marked by open-handedness. He contributes freely and liberally, unstintingly of self and resources, energy and time. Grown-up men are not hoarders or simply takers. Brothers are givers and receivers in all zones of our lives: at work and play, home and church.

Fourth, liberal men are summoned to become *liberators*. Peter Maurin offers a pessimistic portrait of liberals as frozen in dispassionate mindsets:

*Liberals are often so liberal about everything that they refuse to be fanatical about anything...and not being fanatical about anything liberals cannot be liberators. They can only be liberals.*

While I don't advocate fanaticism, I do exhort liberals to embody our sentiments. As bona fide liberals, brothers are more than freedom-seekers; we dare to be freedom-fighters on behalf of those who are enslaved: socially or spiritually. As Jack Mendelsohn pens: "The Latin word, *liber*, from which both liberal and liberation spring—was the name of an ancient god of deliverance and growth. I believe in deliverance. I believe in growth." So does the brothering path in Unitarian Universalism.

There is a demoralizing caricature of liberals as being those who have both feet firmly planted in the air. In actuality, the real liberal maintains that freedom is an instrumental value rather than an end in itself. As Martin Buber describes: "Independence is a foot-bridge, not a dwelling-place. It's the run before the jump, the tuning of the violin. It's the possibility of communion."

Brothers aspire to become carriers of emancipation wherever bondage or servitude exist: be it men who are depressed, women who are oppressed, children who are suppressed. As the Bible alerts: "By their fruits shall ye know them!" The independent thoughts of brothers transform into responsibly freeing deeds.

Finally, the liberal man-ifesto denotes a chastened yet abiding *hopefulness*. A bedrock buoyancy. What does building a mature **liberal** religious masculinity mean? Our continental organization, UUMeN, answers thusly: "It means both honoring the goodness and courage in men as well as taking responsibility for the harm that we and our gender create."

Note the necessary balance. Without being blind to our male flaws, we don't believe that masculinity is an irredeemable estate. The brothering path is neither optimistic nor pessimistic but hopeful. On the right sit reactionaries who disregard male privilege and ignore male-generated violence, espousing that men are as maltreated as women, merely in different ways. In the opposing camp reside radicals who claim that masculinity constitutes a fatal condition, a hopeless cause.

UUMeN rejects such extremist postures in the name of religious equilibrium. On the one hand, we contend that male economic and political power are indeed privileged in contemporary culture, and on the other hand, we hold that men suffer greatly under the current social system. Perverted patriarchy cuts both ways, harms everyone. Consequently, we are called to be proud of being men but never at the expense of other men, women, or children.

When UUMeN purports to be a male-positive or male-enhancing organization, we are declaring that no matter what social travesties men perpetrate, ours can become a healthy and honorable station. The history of men is replete with both delivering and receiving wounds, but we are never exhaustively described by those wounds.

We have been the beneficiaries of unearned entitlements; we can modify, even relinquish, those same benefits. We have stuffed our emotions and stunted our souls; but we can reform. We have learned racist behaviors; nonetheless, we can unlearn them. Bottom line: men can change. It will prove a lifelong, rugged endeavor, but men can change.

We are hopeful about the male gender. We believe that men can repent, resist, reconcile, and rejoice...trekking toward the full manhood for which we were created.

#### **IV. The Promise Keepers *And* the Progress Keepers**

This is a challenging time to sustain a brothering presence, since the initial popularity of men's programming in American culture is waning. Except for some fine New Warriors' (renamed the Mankind Project) outreach and occasional Men's Gatherings with Robert Bly, Michael Meade, Martin Prechtel, James Hillman and sundry cohorts, the only burgeoning alternative on the scene appears to be the religious right's option called *Promise Keepers*.

Our UUMeN's approach, while admiring certain elements of these secular and fundamentalist male endeavors, furnishes a clear alternative to both. Kenneth Beldon likes to think of UUMeN as being *progress* keepers. I have no quarrel with his amendment; I only pray that such a title proves factual in our local congregations, where brothering challenges are fired and tested.

*Promise Keepers* in its hey-day, in the mid-1990's, was replete with a \$100 million budget and a staff of 400, plus a slick magazine **New Man**, whereas our UUMeN organization is without any paid staff person and still scrambling for sufficient membership and funding, as we advance toward our 10th anniversary (2003) in Boston.

However, *Promise Keepers* is scuffling now and has made sizable cut-backs. Just a few years ago 280,000 evangelical men packed seven football stadiums glorifying God, slapping "high-fives," and pompously greeting one another with "Thank God, you're a man." Their uncompromising objective remains to "take the nation for Jesus Christ."

It's worth doing a modest exegesis of the tenets of *Promise Keepers*, since UUMeN offers a strikingly distinct version of masculine spirituality. In noting consequential differences in the three areas of sexual orientation, gender, and racial justice, it will help clarify our own liberal religious agenda.

#### ***Sexual Orientation Justice***

Almost as a foundational principle, Promise Keepers refers to gays as "stark raving mad...an abomination against Almighty God." Or "homosexuals are a group of people who don't reproduce yet want to be compared to people who do." On the contrary, Unitarian Universalist men are intrepid pacesetters, progress-keepers, if you will, in the drive for the full dignity of lesbians, gays, bisexual, and transgendered people, although the dehumanizing monsters of heterosexism and homophobia have yet to be eradicated from our own "liberal" nest.

Does society realize the crushing devastation to the soul and body of gay youth who are trapped in an ever downward spiral of shame as they struggle with the same need every male has for tenderness and love? Daniel Helminiak in *What the Bible Really Says About Homosexuality* (1994) recounts two tragic results of societal intolerance of being a gay youth: (1) 30-40% of children living on the streets have been thrown out or left their homes because they are gay; (2) 30% of teenage suicides, two to three times higher than the national norm, are among homosexual youth.

Issues of erotic preference especially cause men to squirm, become defensive and rigid, often lashing out belligerently, even destructively as in the case of Matthew Shepard's killing. Conversely, when gay, straight, bisexual, and transgender men risk moving from closets to closeness, speaking our deepest truths, venturing beneath surfaces, beyond expectations, and beside prejudices, the results can be utterly transformative.

But don't be lulled. We live in a culture that is both homophobic and philiaphobic, and this double whammy renders male intimacy a rare accomplishment, even in our Unitarian Universalist fold. So the task of growing affectional honesty, if not friendship, across sexual orientation lines, continues to constitute a revolutionary adventure.

### ***Gender Justice***

*Lord, there are lots of holes in my life. There are some in the lives of my brothers and sisters, too. But if you wish, we shall hold hands. We shall hold very tight, and together we shall make a fine roll of fence to adorn Paradise. Amen.*

Michael Quoist

*Promise Keepers* also defends the primacy of the male in the household and unabashedly commands members to "take back the reins of spiritually pure leadership God intended men to hold." One of their pastoral leaders, Tony Evans, upon instructing husbands how to recover their manhood, declares: "The first thing you do is sit down with your wife and say: 'Honey, I made a terrible mistake. I gave you my role. I gave up leading this family, and I forced you to take my place. Now I must reclaim that role.'"

He goes on: "Don't misunderstand me, men. I'm not suggesting that you *ask* for your role back, I'm urging you to *take* it back...Be sensitive. Listen. Treat the lady gently and lovingly. But LEAD!" As an outgrowth of their sexist posture, *Promise Keepers* targets "sissified men" as the main cultural problem in America.

*Promise Keepers* assumes the only thing required to improve women's lives is for men to seize the reins. They contend that patriarchal power is legitimate and, in fact, desirable, so long as it is not "misused," and the patriarchs practice benevolent domination.

*Promise Keepers* are dedicated to keeping their women kept or as someone has phrased it: "Promise Keepers wants men to be masters, just not abusive ones." As another *Promise Keeper* leader put it: "Man is the head of the household and women are responders. God's revelation comes through man not woman, so the two genders can never be equal." The women's auxiliary organization is aptly called "Suitable Helpers."

A pertinent concern relates to women's reproductive health and rights. While moral convictions about abortion vary across all religious persuasions, those of us partial to mature liberal religious masculinity suggest that men's movements ought to be dedicated to male responsibility in preventing unintended pregnancies. Abortion rates would drop dramatically, if men simply refused to have unprotected intercourse, unless we're willing to be devoted, supportive, lifelong fathers.

Unitarian Universalist brothers oppose male supremacy and female subordination in our culture, in whatever guise, and labor steadfastly for gender fairness socially, politically, physically, economically, familiarly, and spiritually. It's critical that men play a staunch, sympathetic role in women's struggle for equality. The health and welfare of our mutual destinies are interwoven.

Gloria Steinem puts it compellingly:

*After all, if it's fair to say that there is more virtue where there is more choice, then men who choose to reject male privilege may be more virtuous than the rest of us. They will earn our trust. They will also discover the full circle of human qualities within themselves. The truth is this: for both women and men, completing our full circle lies in the direction we have not been.*

As men we will never discover full humanity solely by reclaiming our emotions, connecting with brothers, and making peace with our fathers. The way to wholly restore our lost masculinity and to heal the fractured earth is through toiling for a scope of revolutionary justice that serves the disenfranchised of our globe: women and children; persons of color; gays and lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered folks; the physically and emotionally disabled; the homeless, the incarcerated, the marginalized.

## **The Challenge of Being Pro-feminist Men**

*Pro-feminism is very male-affirmative because it affirms men shedding their violent ways and becoming more whole, caring men.*

Andrea Dworkin

I often hear Unitarian Universalist male comrades saying, "I don't have the energy or time to be political. I'm hurting too much myself." I offer two plain responses.

First, I enduringly care about the personal plight of my brothers and energetically invite any men-in-need to join a support group. In San Diego we've sustained upwards of 15 active men's kinship circles. I've personally belonged to one for 18 years. So I attend deeply to the sizable hurts and hungers of men, including my own

I understand, even applaud, the process of men venting long-festering agonies and woes. Wounded animals are the most dangerous, and mature men must aggressively face our injuries on the path toward healing. But being wounded is only part of our story. We men are also wounders, and we must answer for that. We need to heed the unbearable pain and terror that women and children feel, living in a world in which one in four will be raped and one in six is the victim of child sexual abuse.

Second, since we're incorrigibly social animals, we men can ill-afford to smugly gaze at our navels without being public contributors. Mature masculinity, and our brand of religion, require that we heal both the body personal and the body politic.

Feminism reminds men that women's rights and concerns have not been satisfactorily addressed yet and that sexism has not been conquered—yea, even in our liberal Unitarian Universalist world. Several years ago our Beacon Press published a trenchant volume entitled *Against the Tide: Pro-Feminist Men in the United States, 1776-1990 (A Documentary History)* edited by Michael S. Kimmel and Thomas E. Mosmiller. It remains a timely book that belongs in the library of every Unitarian Universalist pilgrim dedicated to creating gender justice and joy in our religious association and the larger world.

The authors, whom I've met from common participation in the "National Organization of Men Against Sexism" (NOMAS), are not detached social analysts, but committed pro-feminist brothers. They're active contributors of both word and deed in diminishing gender injustice. When launching this six-year project in quest of "men who supported feminism," they were chided, "Well, that'll be the shortest book in history!"

Much to everyone's astonishment, the search unearthed over 1000 documents (135 of which are presented) attesting to men's support throughout American history for women's equality. The statements are crisply

excerpted and organized under the rubrics of "Before Seneca Falls," followed by the struggles for equal education, economic, political and social equality, concluding with a revealing section on "contemporary pro-feminist men." Intentional effort is made to include gays as well as men of color, men from diverse economic and vocational backgrounds, conservatives as well as card-carrying progressives, famous men and unsung advocates, too.

One of the most stirring essays is that of black abolitionist Frederick Douglass, who resolutely linked the anti-slavery and pro-suffrage causes. "Woman," he wrote, "cannot be elevated without elevating man, and man cannot be depressed without depressing woman also."

The only arena unaddressed is women's quest for religious equality, which is surprising since so many of the pro-feminist men represented in this collection are spiritual leaders and clergy, including some ten Unitarians and Universalists.

The authors clarify that in the struggle for women's equality, pro-feminist men have provided support, not leadership. They've labored in the background rather than paraded in the foreground. Occasionally men have paid the price of derision, even vilification, for opposing male supremacy and female subordination.

In truth, many of American history's pro-feminist men were reluctant reformers, displaying periodic ambivalence and inconsistency, failing to match their public pronouncements with private behaviors—advocating, for example, equal education while opposing suffrage. They were men of their times, flawed justice-builders whose records on behalf of women's equality were imperfect. Yet all remained steadfast for the transcendent cause, standing behind and alongside their sisters.

The pro-feminism articulated in *Against the Tide* falls into three main categories: men supporting women's equality because it's right and just; because women were believed to embody a superior morality; and because feminist gains generated benefits for men as well.

The authors judiciously label these exemplars pro-feminist because "...they believed in feminism. But to be a feminist requires another ingredient: the felt experience of oppression. And this men cannot feel because men are not oppressed but privileged by sexism." I also prefer the term pro-feminist over anti-sexist, because it's strikingly affirmative.

This splendid book records an undeniable, oft-forgotten strain in United States history where men boldly witnessed to gender justice. As long as women have valiantly pursued equality in this land, against continuing resistance, there have also existed male companions in the struggle. The tide has been met but not stemmed by these pro-feminist brothers and the sisters whose quest they've undergirded

UUMeN has joined this illustrious, living tradition of pro-feminist brothers. It explicitly urges contemporary men to be pro-feminist supporters up close with the partners, mothers, daughters, and women who share our personal and professional lives, recognizing that gender justice that is practiced publicly but not privately is fraudulent.

Privilege, while granting men power, causes costly, irreparable damage to our own bodies and souls. Therefore, it's an undeniable lesson of our Unitarian Universalist brothering revolution that feminism lies in men's deeper interests. Working as allies with women to make the ideals of equality substantive is integral to the fullest expression of what it means to be brothers.

Both genders have much work to do, for we've still not approximated the mid-19th century exhortation of our Unitarian foresister Margaret Fuller: "A new manifestation is at hand, a new hour is come. When Man and Woman may regard one another as brother and sister, able both to appreciate and to prophesy to one another."

### ***Racial Justice***

*Promise Keepers* also boldly invites racial reunion, yet with sweet and inoffensive riffs, never even mentioning systemic racism. Persons of various colors joining hands in song or testimony, even apology, is important but insufficient work. Institutional racism may be momentarily soothed, but never permanently tackled, with merely caring embraces.

However, as Unitarian Universalists know, our own movement possesses a checkered record in confronting the overt and covert racism both within and beyond our walls. There's probably no more cantankerous sin for Unitarian Universalists to confess and combat, not as a three-year task force but as a lifetime effort, than racism. Deep is our liberal denial of the intransigent racism that permeates Unitarian Universalist culture and results in paralyzing guilt or resignation rather than heartfelt repentance followed by substantive change.

Repentance is a key concept in anti-racism work, because it denotes our persistent willingness not to turn away or turn against but to "turn around"—to change wrongful ways. Repentance means blowing the whistle on the blatant as well as the small, disguised, unintentional assaultive acts white men, individually and collectively, perpetrate against persons of color. It means making right what has been wrong. Authentic remorse results in both attitudinal adjustment and behavioral change.

The poet D. H. Lawrence puts it memorably in his poem entitled "Healing":

*I am not a mechanism, an assembly of various sections. And it is not because the mechanism is working wrongly, that I am ill. I am ill because of wounds to the soul, to the deep emotional self  
and the wounds to the soul take a long, long time, only time can help and patience, and a certain difficult repentance...*

*long, difficult repentance, realization of life's mistake, and the freeing oneself from the endless repetition of the mistake  
which mankind (sic) at large has chosen to sanctify.*

Combating racism requires nothing less than a "long, difficult repentance," the remainder of our lives.

Racism is primarily a white responsibility, and we men must battle it in our souls as well as carry our load in its institutional elimination. However, liberal religious folks, men as well as women, are often more enamored with maintaining a positive self-image or looking good to the outside world than dedicated to opposing the demon of racism itself. Yet being an agent of revolutionary justice must transcend being cloyingly polite or politically correct. It means pursuing the path of prophetic compassion in a society that escalatingly undermines racial and gender affirmative action.

White folks are doing all they can to keep tight-control of my home state of California, precisely when minorities are rising to power in numbers and the demand for equity. Where will Unitarian Universalist brothers stand as matters heat up, as lines are drawn, and as the culture clash intensifies across the continent? What will we say and do when the forces of intolerance, bigotry, and exclusion grow more intractable in the outside world, and, subtler within our own religious walls? Will we stand tall for justice as men of the UUA, or will we step down, back off, and sneak away to another more fashionable social cause?

I personally identify with the way white activist Robert Terry phrases the challenge: "I'm not offended if you call me a racist but am if that's all you call me!" In fostering a mature liberal religious masculinity we aspire to be anti-racist racists!

In summary, when *Promise Keepers* talks about "privilege," they aren't referring to unearned male entitlements in modern society, they are talking instead about the privilege of knowing Jesus.

Well, their promises and ours are markedly different, and while these fundamentalist men are ardently trying to regain male supremacy in western culture, our UU Men's Network aspires to forge a more just and merciful reality. A clash of religious worldviews prevails in our world, and ready or not, the men and women of our Unitarian Universalist faith must rise up and be counted for the equitable, compassionate, life-affirming sacred path.

## **Our Lives Are Measured by the VOWS We Make**

Nonetheless, *Promise Keepers* and UUMeN agree in our mutual conviction that in order for men to change, we must make and keep our commitments. Vows are solemn pledges by which we bind ourselves to certain acts. Unitarian Universalism is a covenantal not a creedal faith and as such based not on right beliefs but on enduring promises. We are a vow-making religion.

As Lewis Smedes puts it: "When we make a promise, we control at least one thing. We will be there no matter what the circumstances are." In our religious faith, being liberal has too frequently been misequated with being foot-loose and fancy-free—committed only so long as we feel like it.

On the contrary, Unitarian Universalists choose neither bondage nor bondlessness but healthy, holy bonds. To contribute to a saner and more respectful universe, men must do our fair-share in enflashing vows that major in results not rhetoric. As our Unitarian forebrother Horace Mann urged: "Be ashamed to die unto you have won some victory for humanity."

Men need to grow adept at pledging our full *troth* to building a more just and joyful world. While a bit quaint, troth is a splendid word that combines both *truthfulness* and *trust*. Truthfulness means men will intentionally spread no lies. And trust means we will commit no deliberate harm unto one another. The author Brenda Ueland claims that mature community entails two major virtues: "No lying and no cruelty!" Our brothering path heartily agrees.

If UUMeN were to generate seven key vows that mature liberal religious men are advised to sustain in order to become soulful and prophetic brothers, the list might resemble the following.

### **Vow I: Live RELATIONALLY**

first and foundational vow is for men to live **relationally** not independently. Lone rangerism is a damaging malaise, learned from boyhood on. We are men by birth; but we become brothers through an intentional effort to relate caringly and justly to other living entities— starting with other men, often the hardest relational challenge for males.

ur liberal religious heritage has venerated rugged individualists such as Henry David Thoreau while underrating institutionalists like Henry Whitney Bellows. We've well-nigh forgotten those distinguished Universalist men who formed spiritual-prophetic brotherhoods such as the Hopedale Community and the Humiliati. We proclaim the interdependent web as an ecological and cosmic principle, as well we should,

but we frequently fail to embody it in the smaller kinship groups where we dwell. We remain gravely underdeveloped in the craft of relational power.

Consequently, the governing mandate of our Unitarian Universalist Men's Network has been to establish an intentional community of brothers and sister-allies committed "to building a positive liberal religious masculinity that is pro-feminist, gay-affirmative, culturally and racially inclusive and diverse...We understand such positive masculinity, *working in alliance* with various movements for social justice, as essential for personal and social progress, healthy spirituality, and the good life" (By-laws adopted on August 18, 1993). Right off the bat, our Unitarian Universalist brothering revolution saw the absolute necessity of "working in alliance" with others, that is, operating relationally.

UUMeN forces us to admit that we're not self-sufficient either as individual males or as autonomous brotherhoods. UUMeN is at heart a shared ministry by, for, and to men. And we covet women standing nearby, rooting men on, even as they need us to return the favor on their gender quest.

When men risk living relationally—trading in patterns of aloofness, alienation, and abuse for bonds of affirmation and affection—then we'll bring an astounding wealth of inner resources to the table with other men, women and children, earth and deities.

Brothering is direct validation of the relational principles of Unitarian Universalism.

## **Vow II: Be RESPONSIBLE**

*You've been given just the one life in this world that matters and upon which every other life somehow depends as long as you live, and also given the costly gifts of hunger, choice, and pain with which to raise a modest shrine to meaning.*

Leonard Nathan

We must pledge to be **responsible** men. Being accountable means neither playing ignorant nor inadequate, but utilizing whatever power we males possess, both individually and collectively, to alter the world. In our UUA Principles and Purposes, responsibility signals a high priority, being referenced twice: we affirm "the free and responsible search for truth and meaning" and we are called to "respond to God's love by loving our neighbors as ourselves."

Men being responsible denotes redressing our wrongs rather than ignoring or wallowing in them. Brothers dare to approach another man, woman, or child and apologize for how we may have mistreated them: to make amends, to restore, if possible, any outstanding tormented or devastated bond.

But there's more to address. Responsible men not only aspire to mend brokenness with other individuals but also with those institutions we've ignored or aggrieved. Reconciliation is often construed as merely a

personal matter, but it's always more. In combating any injustice, we must atone with specific sisters and brothers as well as confront the underlying, transgenerational, systemic wrong.

David Livingston in his courageous book, *Healing Violent Men: A Model for Christian Communities*, draws a cogent distinction:

*Reconciliation is distinct from forgiveness and is a communal rather than an individual phenomenon. Reconciliation has its linguistic roots in re-conciliation, that is, rejoining the **concilium** or community. This aspect of rejoining the community is distinct from reunion, which is merely re-uniting something that was once a unity. Reconciliation must address healing in the individual sphere, the interhuman sphere, and the social sphere. It is only through accountability on all three levels of relationship that a transformation to a nonviolent society is possible.*

Men are challenged to be fully responsible in all spheres of existence.

However, too many members of WHAMMM (white heterosexual Anglo-Saxon, middle-class, middle-aged males) languish in self-pity because we're targeted as the Pharaoh in everyone else's Exodus effort. In truth, whammers have three basic options: (1) Self-denial where I continue to benefit as a dominator; (2) Self-commiseration where I moan and snivel; or (3) Self-fulfillment where I confess my culpability without succumbing to guilt, then proceed as an ally for justice and joy.

The question remains for a still predominantly whamm-run enterprise such as Unitarian Universalism: Will we be motivated to continue or arrest our domination? Will we exhibit foot-dragging and backlash or demonstrate sincere repentance?

Repentance doesn't mean breast-beating. It means, in the parlance of 12 step groups, to take a fearless moral inventory—then to apologize and to deliver compensation. Repentance calls men to halt what we're doing, change directions, make restitution, get back on course.

I implore my fellow-brothers to quit blaming other men or women and cease banking on any deities to accomplish what we must and can do ourselves. Reconcile, repent, be responsible.

I've discovered, in my brothering circles over the past 30 years, that men actually want to be held responsible for what we do with who we are and what we possess. Unitarian Universalist minister Peter Fleck recalls seeing a drama on television in which a man dies and finds himself standing in line, dressed

by a nonchalant usher who tells him he can choose either door, the one on the right leading to heaven, or the one on the left leading to hell.

"You mean I can choose either one?" the man asks. "There's no judgment, no taking account of how I've lived?"

"That's right," the usher says. "Now move along, people are dying and lining up behind you. Choose one door and keep the line moving."

"But I want to confess, I want to come clean, I want to be judged."

"We don't have time for that. Just choose a door and move along."

The man chooses to walk through the door on the left, leading to hell.

Fleck's conclusion is that, in the end, we want to be held accountable. We want to be judged for the character and conduct of our lives, and, ultimately, to be forgiven as well.

### **Vow III: REJOICE in Our Own Gender**

Men must learn to **rejoice** in our own gender but never at the price of others. I say learn, because so many men possess a highly-honed negative self-image, no matter how self-assured, even pompous, we may appear in public. We would also delight in our own peculiar embodiment of maleness but never in comparison to another brother. Rejoicing is grounded in authentic, earned pride not arrogance.

Therefore, we don't tolerate the bashing of women, gays, lesbians, bisexuals, transgenders or persons of color, and we refuse as well to scorn or humiliate men *qua* men. Mature men want our single selves as well as our entire gender to be celebrated without being idolized, to be challenged without being trivialized.

Joy—deeper than happiness, and more enduring than pleasure—is central to any brothering path. You've probably heard about the Bishop who lamented: "Wherever Jesus went, there was a revolution; wherever I go, people serve tea!" Well, that's but a partial truth, for, in fact, Jesus was both a party-goer and a prophetic force. And while the Nazarene didn't attend tea parties, he did gravitate to wine feasts.

Even one of our premier work-horses for justice, Theodore Parker, noting the glaring absence of exuberance among his mid-19th century Unitarian colleagues, was impelled to write:

*Most powerfully preaching to the conscience and the will, the cry was ever "duty, duty! work, work!" They failed to address with equal power the spirit, and did not also shout "joy, joy! delight, delight!" Their vessels were full of water, but they did not gush out, leaping from the great spring...*

Indeed, our brothering quest is joy-filled. It hankers for an abundance of laughers, singers, clowns, and dancers among its revolutionary company. To keep men off-balance, Robert Bly often remarks at the beginning of a conference: "Today we will say a few things that are true, but we don't know which ones they are!" Such self-humor keeps brothers relaxed and matters flowing. Music generates merriment as well, lest we take ourselves too seriously. As the African saying goes: "Bad people have no song."

#### **Vow IV: Be RECREATIVE of Body**

*When I sense the holiness of my own body, I begin to sense the holiness of every other body.*

James Nelson

Brothers aspire to be **recreative** of body. Integral to re-creation is becoming playful beings: playful not for triumph, although competitive push-and-pull can prove growthful, but primarily for the sake of bouncing and sweating, moving and leaping, chanting and drumming. Men need to engage in frisky, gleeful activities where we recreate more for renewal than for reward—being the animals we truly are.

As Robert Fulghum reminds us: "To be a useful Hopi is to be one who has a quiet heart and takes part in all the dances." Dancing has never hurt either the ground or anyone else, and men sorely need to learn how to touch others and the earth for delight not for harm.

Upon returning from their solitary exploits, the 12th century Knight Templars would seek communion not through talk, though there were many spirited tales to be told—but through dance. With their arms clasped in a circle and their bodies moving in unison on the earth, they received one another through dance. No wonder we're called a men's movement, not a men's system!

Integral to the art of recreative behavior, we regularly invite men to exchange hand-massages during the course of a brothering weekend. Not only is it a rare occurrence for men to touch one another for pleasure not pain, but once we've gently massaged another man's hands we're far less likely to perpetrate verbal or physical hurt upon him or anyone else.

Countless men have chosen to place in their wallets a pledge, crafted by men's fellowship member, Tomas Firlé, that charges us to employ our hands for embraces, caressing, creative activity and play, but never for damage.

The card reads:

**My Interpersonal No-violence Pledge:**

*I SHALL NOT:*

- raise my voice or use threats to dominate others*
- raise my hands in an intimidating manner*
- hit or hurt anyone—physically or emotionally—to get my way*

*I SHALL:*

- seek help when I feel moved to the point of violence*
- speak out when I witness abuse by other*
- encourage others to take an active stand against violence*

Then we sign our names at the bottom of the card. I find it morally invigorating to have such a card butting up against family photos, credit cards, and other wallet miscellany as a constant reminder of what's truly important in our male quest.

**Vow V: RELEASE Our Psyches**

For men to shape an evolving brotherhood, we pledge to **release** our psyches from emotional miserliness. It's no secret that men are socialized to live emotionally constricted, physically shortened, spiritually blocked lives. Whole men are both pale-blooded (reflective and sweet) and red-blooded (fiery and assertive) and exude such expansive emotionality on a daily basis. Mature men exhibit testosterone-with-heart.

One of the most prevalent yet almost completely ignored disorders in modern society is male depression. It remains unmanly and shameful for men to admit their despondency, let alone seek help. Yet the high price men pay for withholding our feelings of hurt and anger results in sleeping disorders, irritability, indecisiveness, a sense of worthlessness, recurrent thoughts of death, or clinical depression.

Conversely, when men risk sharing feelings of rage, fright, and mourning (the threesome I delineate as anger, angst, and anguish)—whenever we open ourselves up in faithful intimacy with men—we're never able to close up as tightly again. Mature liberal religious men are starting to recognize that the best antidote to depression is not medication, essential as that can be, but verbal revelation and tearful release.

Native Americans consider spirituality equatable with possessing a moist heart, because the soil of the human heart is necessarily watered with tears that keep the ground soft. And from such turf new life is born

Tears of joy, sadness, and gratitude furnish one profound gauge of a man becoming a brother. We must open the tearducts and allow our crying to fertilize the earth. As novelist Pat Conroy put it:

*I could feel the tears within me, undiscovered and untouched in their inland sea. Those tears had been with me always. I thought that, at birth, American men are allotted just as many tears as American women. But because we are forbidden to shed them, we die long before women die, our hearts exploding or our blood pressure rising or our livers eaten away by alcohol because that lake of grief inside us has no outlet. We men die because our faces are not watered enough.*

#### **Vow VI: RESTORE Our Souls**

Men typically spend our days climbing over fellow-human beings or climbing up all sorts of mountains yet fail to recharge our batteries via quietude and rest. We are driven to do and have but have forgotten to be.

Men revise our own beings as well as the greater world when we decide to **restore** our harried, thin souls with intentional times of Sabbath and self-care. That's why we call our San Diego weekend get-aways: renewals. They are deliberate respites geared to replenish our beings.

Adult males possess few clues about how to surrender to the yearnings of our hearts, the flow of an unscheduled day, the caress of our partner, the invitation of the Divine. This lack is glaringly evident among goal-oriented, productive Unitarian Universalist types.

In order to be mature male beings, we should practice the unaccompanied art of reflection, being still without having to acquire or achieve anything. When we spend but 15 minutes a day in restorative silence or prayerful contemplation, men become less frenzied, more serene and centered. Better professionals, partners, and parents too.

#### **Vow VII: Bridge with RESPECT**

Mature men vow to build the bridge called **respect** with the entire universe, starting with our human brothers and sisters: pledging to disarm our souls in their presence, to share our truths with growing trust. Right relationship is the phrase the Buddhists use to describe being in just and caring connection with all living reality. It entails deliberately pursuing intergender understanding and equity, companioning children

in kindly ways, being stewards (husbandmen) of the earth's resources, growing in reverential communion with the Eternal Spirit.

**Vow VIII: Undertake a REVOLUTIONARY Adventure**

*What we choose to fight is so tiny! What fights with us is so great...this is how we grow: by being defeated, decisively, by constantly greater beings.*

Rainer Rilke

*Masculinity is not something given to you, something you're born with, but something you gain...And you gain it by winning small battles with honor.*

Norman Mailer

Any dazzling enthusiasm in the larger culture for men's work and growth has died down. Men's retreats in the woods are less frequent. Robert Bly has returned to his principal passion: composing poetry. There used to be numerous gender studies departments in universities that specifically addressed issues of masculinity—not so anymore. Nowadays you can rarely find a shelf in bookstores specifically on men's growth. Our concerns, if locatable, are burrowed in the sections on women or sexual orientation. For many, the men's movement is now perceived as a passing fancy, essentially kaput. That's all the more reason for local brothering circles to deem ourselves not a short-term fix but a presence. We need to keep on keeping on as long as men walk the earth.

Authentic brothering marks not merely a corrective measure but a revolutionary endeavor. Changing men changing the world causes radical, ongoing repercussions. When men become brothers, all our bonds are altered, our work and family lives are enriched (even if initially destabilized), and our drives to repair society and heal the cosmos are rendered more urgent. And remember: any robust revolution worth pursuing is both personal and global—it changes the heart while contributing gifts back to the universe as well. A revolution has internal, external, and eternal ramifications; otherwise, it will play partial, or false.

But why call this summons to brothering a revolution? Because UUMeN contends that contemporary times require more than new *information* or the gradual *reformation* of attitude. The 21st century demands the full-fledged *transformation* of being, wherein our male lives are turned both outside-in (reflectively) and inside-out (prophetically).

The brothering imperative reminds men that, with grace and grit, the perils and tyrannies pervading our lives can be diminished. Furthermore, men, both individually and organizationally, must take the lead in our own overhaul. Consequently, the membership of the continental UUMeN is not interested in the

evolution of male consciousness so much as the revolution of male conduct. As Unitarian Universalist compadre Albert Schweitzer exclaimed: "My life—my argument!"

The word **revolution** comes from a Latin word denoting "to roll back, to unroll." Consequently, the unclouded purpose of brothering is to roll back the assumptions, biases, and behaviors that suppress men's psyches, oppress women socially and economically, and wreak ecological havoc. Rolling back the negatives so that positives might be unrolled is the delightful duty of practicing revolutionaries committed to growing a mature liberal religious masculinity.

I appreciate the way Kate Millett phrased it in her ground-breaking book entitled *Sexual Politics* (1970): "Guys still have it in their heads that a revolutionary is a murderer. Uh-uh. A revolutionary is a changer, a teacher, somebody who hangs in and keeps at it, and keeps loving people until they change their heads." And I would amend: until they change their hearts and souls as well.

Life is a partisan fray, and the tests and tribulations facing men are colossal. To confront our own stubborn aches and buried wounds will require revolutionary honesty. To modify the course of our chosen faith-tradition will require revolutionary defiance. To cultivate spiritual terrain while navigating political waters will require revolutionary balance. To stop the emotional and physical harm we daily perpetrate on women, children, other men, and ourselves will require revolutionary courage. To bridge the power gap between whammers and non-whammers will require revolutionary *chutzpah*.

Launching the continental UUMeN a decade ago in 1993, specifically to challenge the privileged status of one's own gender, has taken what writer Toni Cade Bambara terms "sheer holy boldness." In the annals of human history, it's quite unusual for men, basking in entitlements, to promote and affirm brotherhoods that call for men to change: in effect, to jettison rather than fortify our empires. Yet, we assert that now is the time for whammers—still the most empowered group of human beings that ever inhabited the planet—to rise from our seats of privilege and to commit the revolutionary deed: extend the realm of justice to enfold every living reality.

An Hasidic tale underscores the primacy of our male accountability. When Rabbi Ammi's hour to die came, he wept bitterly, not because he wasn't a thoughtful gentleman or a learned scholar of the sacred Torah, both of which he exemplified, but because Ammi failed to become a public servant. He wept because, as he put it: "I was given the ability to extend justice, but never carried it out." If UUMeN progressively embraces rather than evades our founding mission, we will become imperfect yet persistent justice-builders and joy-bringers.

To evolve from being males, our biological fate, to brothers, our relational destiny, requires revolutionary strides. Being a brother to other men and women, to plants and animals, to the deities and demons roaming the universe signals nothing less than a revolutionary passage from dominator to collaborator. The revolution we're trying to sustain demands extraordinary masculine fortitude and, yes, will extract a substantial cost. And while I'm not optimistic about our common tomorrows, I remain uncompromisingly hopeful.

As this new millennium advances, we are shamelessly agitating for every registered Unitarian Universalist man and supportive sister-ally to join our revolutionary voyage. The by-laws of the UUMeN are unavoidably clear: we "challenge men to confront gender injustice, homophobia, racism, loneliness and distrust between men, and violence by men against women, children, other men, themselves, and the earth." And to do so at our places of residence, work, play, and worship.

However, as Thomas Sankara said during his Presidency of the West African country of Burkina Faso, "You can't make fundamental changes in society without the occasional mad act."

The mad act could mean confronting gay-baiting or lesbian-bashing humor on our jobs. It could mean caring for a child so an overworked single mother can have a day that is her own. It could mean being willing not only to assist women caught in harm's way, but also to applaud women in times of their power and glory. It could mean refusing to hold a men's retreat until the active presence and gifts of blue-collar men and men-of-color are included. It could mean becoming a true husbandman: prudently conserving the earth's resources, cultivating the soil, and exhibiting kinship toward plants and animals.

Unitarian Universalists are notorious for feverishly passing resolutions toward changing institutions in the outside world while failing to modify the unjust policies and deeds of our own religious clan. In the recent efforts to grow an anti-racist, multi-cultural religious movement in the UUA, we've had to look squarely at the nagging inequities that riddle our own household rather than simply addressing societal damage.

So, don't expect the revolution of true brothering to be either effortless or pleasant. We are still, for the most part, a male-entrenched and controlled operation, and manifold men—as well as some women—will not readily modify the comfortable arrangement in our Association from which so many of us gain considerable and unquestioned benefit.

Revolutionary religious experiments that exemplify what Unitarian forebrother Roger Baldwin called "holy discontent" are seldom popular or centrist. Avowed Unitarian Universalist brothers must persist and plod, remaining true to our purpose, marked by what Gloria Steinem calls "outrageous acts and everyday rebellions"—ever striving to embody the sentiments of Adrienne Rich:

*My heart is moved by all I cannot save:  
so much has been destroyed  
I have to cast my lot with those who age after age, perversely,  
with no extraordinary power,  
reconstitute the world.*

Liberal religious men confess that life's infirmities and inequities will not be eradicated during our lifetimes. We cannot hold to optimism but neither are we cynics who futilely throw in the towel. As Unitarian Universalists, we remain inveterate hopers who know that, on occasion, our faulty revolutionary talk and walk may just, as the Native Americans say, grow some corn.

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