

Thomas Owen-Towle

Minns lecture V

MEN AND FORCE

SAYING YES TO AGGRESSION AND NO TO VIOLENCE

Men are not flawed by nature. We become destructive when our masculinity is damaged. Violence springs from desperation and fear rather than authentic manhood.

Aaron Kipnis

Introduction

If you haven't discerned by now, I'm neither a cynic nor an optimist. Instead I'm a pragmatic hoper. In the final analysis, I agree with Stephen Boyd who says that "men are not inherently or irreversibly violent, relationally incompetent, emotionally constipated, and sexually compulsive. To the extent that we manifest these characteristics, we do so not because we are male, but because we have experienced violent socialization and conditioning processes that have required or produced this kind of behavior and we have chosen to accept, or adopt, these ways of being, thinking, and acting."

I contend that men can transform our histories of damaged and damaging masculinity. We can, indeed must, become more mature liberal religious brothers. Changing men will change our world. I behave my life on that premise and promise.

One of the thorny yet useful distinctions for contemporary men to negotiate lies at the heart of lecture V: namely, saying yes to *aggression* or soul-force and saying no to *violence*, or unwarranted destruction.

Our Demonic Male Legacy

There is no such thing as paradise, not in the South Seas, not in southern Greece, not anywhere. There never has been. To find a better world we must look not to a romanticized and dishonest dream forever receding into the primitive past, but to a future that rests on a proper understanding of ourselves.

Wrangham and Peterson

Before men can make substantial progress toward evolving a more responsible and responsive masculinity, we've got to deal with our biologically-rooted inheritance, in addition to the "violent socialization" Boyd referenced. Author Thomas Hardy put it thusly: "A better way to the future lies in taking a hard look at the worst."

In *Demonic Males: Apes and the Origins of Human Violence* Dale Peterson and Richard Wrangham claim that hyperviolent social behavior is deeply rooted in male human genes and common among our closest primate relatives. Rapes, beatings, and killings are as common among the great apes as they are among us. After 40 years of gorilla and chimpanzee watching, these authors find it hard not to conclude that human males are but evolutionary heirs of male ape aggression.

Although history's evidence is overwhelming and depressing, this tandem of authors are not die-hard biological determinists. They offer a modicum of hope: "With an evolutionary perspective we can firmly reject the pessimists who say it has to stay that way. Male demonism is not inevitable." The authors refer to bigger brains and the development of language, moral codes, a justice system and democratic governments as countervailing to our in-bred violence.

Their thesis is congruent with our life-affirming Unitarian Universalist gospel that's grounded in observable reality. Liberal religion claims that men are capable of migrating from our checkered, oft-disgraceful, fate toward a nobler destiny, one that exudes gentle strength, kindly aggression. We can be compassionate beasts. As we progressively mature from boyhood to manhood, then on to brotherhood, we will be advancing from behavioral ruin toward soulful non-violence.

Two Intertwining Truths

But, alas, violence is an exquisitely complex phenomenon, with countless subtle variations, many of which are easy for humans to adroitly ignore, including principled Unitarian

Universalist men. Hence, I offer but two intertwining psycho-social truths, supplementing those of evolutionary biology, that corroborate that we humanoids can indeed be violent creatures.

(1) Violence is Violation of Personhood

Human beings demonstrate an astounding array of violent attitudes and behaviors, both local and global...all rooted in any *violation of personhood*. Here's the way liberation theologian Robert McAfee Brown draws the linkage:

Whatever violates another, in the sense of infringing upon or disregarding or abusing or denying that other, whether physical harm is involved or not, can be understood as an act of violence. The basic overall definition of violence would then become violation of personhood. When we talk about a 'person' we are not talking about an object but about a subject. We are describing someone who is not quantifiable or interchangeable with another. Each person has unique worth.

This expansive definition is certainly in alignment with Unitarian Universalist values. Furthermore, when violence is defined this way, it's well-nigh impossible for men to peg it as something occurring outside our own lives.

Violations of personhood are perpetrated by and against men daily. Such violence happens via hostile remarks and dismissive attitudes. It occurs when fathers stand aloof from or overpower our children. It transpires whenever we consciously or inadvertently sabotage our partners or deride our colleagues, tune out youth or warehouse seniors. We miss the insidious scope of violence if we solely equate it with physical abuse, sexual misbehavior, warring destruction, or racial fury.

Violence is pervasive and permanent in our culture. There is the violence of those who act out their frustrations. There is the violence of the respectable and powerful. There are acts of violence as well as states of violence. There is both overt and covert, personal and institutional violence. Additionally, all social inequities perpetuate one another because each teaches us that it's okay for some people to dominate others. And the varieties of violence are interwoven. Violence against women and children will not be stopped unless violence against people of

color, gays, lesbians, ethnic groups, disabled people, working-class folks, elders and the rest are also eliminated.

We men—particularly good, sweet, caring guys like myself—desperately want to rid ourselves of the virulent virus of violence, but we can't. Some residue of violence lodges in our systems, personally and socially, all our days. However, while we're unable to stop violence, every man can curtail his attitudes and acts of violence, day by day, deed by deed.

In Derrick Jensen's poetic memoir, *A Language Older Than Words*, this visionary naturalist explains violence as a pathology that touches every aspect of our lives, indeed affects all dimensions of life on earth. Jensen documents what it feels like to be a sensitive man living in a savage epoch of greed, violence, inequality, and pointlessness. Yet he emerges with cautious hopefulness:

Because life feeds off life, and because every action causes a killing, the purpose of existence cannot be to simply avoid taking lives. That isn't possible. What is possible, however, is to treat others, and thus ourselves, with respect, and to not unnecessarily cause death or suffering.

In sum, you and I can diminish, even if never end, our violent ways.

(2) Violence Begets Violence

Men are violent because of the systematic violence done to our bodies and spirits. Being hurt we become hurters.

Sam Keen

James Newton Poling notes that the violent men with whom he works learn their violence from two sources: (1) Their own encounters of observing or experiencing violence during childhood; and (2) The power, privilege, and encouragement they get from race, gender, and class ideologies about dominance as the way of being men in our culture.

Indeed, these two sources of violence are often mutually reinforcing. Wounded in our upbringing, men wound in return. Violence becomes a self-enabling cycle for countless men. The German psychologist, Alexander Mitscherlich, has written "that society has torn the soul of

the male, and into this tear demons have fled—demons of insecurity, selfishness, and despair.” Remember, I’m explaining not excusing male attitudes and behaviors of violence.

However, men are not impotent to do something about our backgrounds. First, we can address, if not undo, some damage of our pasts through in-depth therapy and men’s support groups; second, we can vow to break, as possible, the vicious cycle of wrongs done unto us; third, we can applaud the blessings we received from our upbringings and promise to pass similar gifts on to our own children.

I’m urging men to learn from our pasts, neither to bask nor to wallow in them. Too many of us remain stuck in the dysfunctionality of our boyhoods. We continue to live as developmentally-arrested and rage-driven little guys, too scared and shaky to risk maturing into manhood, let alone brotherhood.

As adult men we’ve got to start demonstrating moral and spiritual guts in order to halt the rampaging cycle of violence in America: its streets, media, and sports. Men’s violence is a choice. We select it; we can reject it. The crimes committed in the name of our gender are astounding. As an adult man, I must do my fair-share to diminish the mushrooming violence.

An example. I was reading a reputable sports magazine recently. I love sports both as a participant and as a spectator, but I’m appalled at the burgeoning level of male violence on and off the field, principally in hockey and football. Blatant, built-in brawling. Athletic contest is rarely about sportsmanship, even competition, anymore; it’s increasingly about trying to harm your opponent.

But the following anecdote crossed a new line. Sportswriter Rick Reilly was bemoaning that his teenage son was watching an enormously popular violent video game where acts of NFL football violence, with its attendant taunting and celebratory dances, are shown with realistic graphics.

Of course, there are tons of violent video games viewed by kids daily, but listen to this convoluted trail of immorality. “The NFL fines players for these violent hits, then cashes in on the very same thing with licensed video games” which, in turn, enthrall our young. Violence begets violence. Indeed, in this case, it’s unconscionably passed on from adult males to younger ones, with implicit blessing and mercenary intent. Shameful!

I challenge all men with this fundamental question: who will rise up and stop this societal destruction? Who among our male species is brave enough, I say assertive enough, make that aggressive enough, to blow the whistle on the escalating, gratuitous violence that's sanctioning vicious attitudes and behavior among our male offspring?

The Necessary Gift of Kindly Aggression

God did not give us a spirit of timidity, but a spirit of power and love and self-control.

II Timothy 1:7

The virtues of zeal, fortitude, and perseverance are meaningless without consideration of the aggressive component that gives them vitality.

William Meissner

I propose that one of the keys to breaking, at least abating, this pattern of unchecked violence is for men to learn and practice ways of kindly aggression. This came home to me with cascading relevance when Unitarian Universalist colleague Thandeka referred me to a most perceptive volume by Kathleen J. Greider entitled *Reckoning with Aggression: Theology, Violence, and Vitality*.

Greider's thesis untangles a saving message men need to heed at this moment in history. She says that aggression, while ambiguous in our society, has usually been viewed as evil or sinful. If repaired, aggression can be seen in its healthy light, neither as passivity nor hostility, and can incite us to fight social ills and make the globe safer and more just. As she phrases it: "I am sure that few things in the world are more irresistible than gentle strength and strong gentleness. Perhaps aggression—reckoned with, re-braided with love, and well cared for—will yield them both."

Greider navigates distinctions necessary to producing men sufficiently motivated to change the world. She claims that "*aggression* is significant energy, vigor, agency, enterprise, boldness and resilience; whereas *violence* is force against persons, objects, or principles that intentionally or unintentionally injures, damages, or destroys."

What will enable men to transform our internal, interpersonal, and international strife is precisely an abundant supply of such vital, aggressive energy. Violence spawns violence; it's a futile route strewn with devastation. But quiescence and apathy are damaging as well. Hence, mature males need to pursue the third way of passionate, forceful nonviolence. In the words of Meir Berliner, who died fighting the SS at Treblinka: "When oppressors give me two choices, I always take the third!"

Greider goes on to raise the kinds of questions that adult males need to confront in embodying a mature liberal religious masculinity:

Is it possible to find or create among us a power finely tuned enough to destroy what needs to be destroyed—the structures of violence and other evils—without destroying each other?

Why is aggression generally characterized as undesirable and widely denied to subjugated classes, but its energies and powers often enjoyed and abused by dominant classes?

Recent studies reveal that a deficiency of testosterone, not only an excess, can contribute to negative, violational behavior. I'll go one step further. While assertiveness-training is important, it isn't a strong enough antidote to endemic injustice and suffering. Why? Because assertiveness usually begins and ends with personal catharsis, seldom leading to substantive social change.

Men need to outgrow groveling niceness, faintheartedness of conscience, spongy backbones. We must develop, then practice, the arts of healthy, kindly aggression in order to expand the circle of maturation.

Aggression isn't an ugly word at root. It literally means taking action or moving forward: toward a person, a posture, a principle, an event. It means eluding the grasp of lethargy or fright and advancing toward our goal. Men need to aggress what we value: to move *toward* someone in respect, to move *away* from lone rangerism into nourishing solitude; to move *against* something in resistance. Of course, there will be subtle dangers to dodge. Our respect dare not breed docility. Our solitude can't slide into seclusion. Our resistance must avoid recklessness. But

aggression is the groundfloor, animating energy that undergirds all brave, forward-moving deeds.

It starts with children and play. As Gestalt therapy addresses the theme:

In order to make contact with the environment, in order to get needs met, the child must aggress into the environment. This is a healthy and necessary biological and psychological function. Life is not a passive matter. It is aggression that serves the life of the child; it allows distinctions to be made between the child and the larger world. Aggression, therefore, is essential for growth and learning.

I'm currently an assistant coach for our grandson Trevor's Little League "Caps" team. It's all too tempting for adults (both coaches and parents) to overwhelm these youngsters, between 7 and 10 years of age, with our ostensible "wealth" of baseball savvy. It's usually preferable to transmit a few basic skills, affirm each kid constantly and personally, then shut our mouths and let them evolve in their own fashion.

Nonetheless, one of the universally appropriate pieces of advice for these little guys is to be "aggressive" rather than timid or passive at the plate when they bat. The most successful hitters are invariably those who, when they see a pretty good pitch to hit, swing with resolve rather than freeze with fear. "Be aggressive, Trevor—when you see a pitch you like, drive it!"

Boys, followed by youth, then adult males must progressively learn to express their aggression in constructive and vitalizing ways.

Robert Bly and other men's movement leaders have noted that the current crop of younger men are unduly mushy, weak-kneed, torpid. As he puts it: "the soft or naive male in rejecting the obnoxious male traits has also abandoned the forceful and heroic aspects of masculinity, to the detriment of society." Bly continues:

...a grown man six feet tall will allow another person to cross his boundaries, enter his psychic house, verbally abuse him, carry away his treasures and slam the door behind him; the invaded man will stand there with an ingratiating, confused smile on his face.

Mature men are appropriately aggressive. We set healthy boundaries and limits in every dimension of our lives. We learn how to express anger for impact rather than injury. Anger is truly among the toughest emotions for men to gainfully navigate. Our men's fellowship gatherings in San Diego have been filled over the years with men who, like Robert, are consumed with "anger cemented with sadness and with shame at my own inadequacies." Here's an excerpt from one of Robert's potent poems that reveals his twisted, unresolved rage-filled tussle with his long-since dead father. It's entitled "questions I went to hell because of":

*How come you were never there how come
you were drunk so much didn't you like me
why did you and mommy fight all the time
how come if you never hit me I still feel
so bad how come I can't touch you how come
you won't teach me how to be a man how
come you're so mad all the time how come I
feel so bad when I'm always trying my hardest how come I'm always
afraid what can I do to
make you like me.*

In San Diego we've held various evening sessions as well as weekend renewals precisely on teaching one another how to be positively angry rather than either self-punishing, underhanded, explosive, or hostile: all destructive ways of venting naturally-felt anger. We attempt to create a safe container for brothers like Robert to yell, dance, draw, play, journal their rage through to constructive release.

The elders among us must assist in fortifying the conscience and vertebrae of this younger generation of brothers, by exemplifying the ways of kindly aggression...for we graybeards are often under-exercised in boldness as well. In truth, brothers are all somewhere on the pathway

toward positive anger and kindly aggression. We haven't arrived at a conclusion point. We never do. Our job is to keep trekking in the right direction.

A fundamental way for men to launch the quest for healthy aggression is by locating what the Hindu *Upanishads* calls "our deep driving desires." Sadly, for the most part, men have suppressed our genuine appetites and ambitions, dutifully submitting to societally-endorsed cravings for our gender—unquestionably, at grave cost to our inner lives. Lots of men simply don't know who they are, where they're going, and what they're truly after.

Conversely, a healthy dose of aggression furnishes an enlivening curative to depression; for when we're aggressing, we press forth. Aggression restores passion to the masculine psyche and reinvigorates our rag-doll, listless beings.

It's a wholesome, wondrous sight watching men aggressively playing with children, aggressively combating injustice, aggressively doing household chores, aggressively carrying our brothers, aggressively setting firm not flimsy boundaries in an organization, aggressively abandoning addictions, aggressively competing in sports, aggressively mourning, aggressively meditating, aggressively fighting for result not revenge. And, furthermore, you know what? Without aggression the intransigent problems of sexism and racism, economic injustice and homophobia will unlikely be touched, let alone dismantled.

Gandhi talked about committing "aggressive civil disobedience," and King chose to engage in "militant nonviolence." Justice-building and peace-making are never enterprises for the dispassionate of spirit or sluggish of body; they require joyful decisiveness and aggressive advocacy.

I know this to be true: without aggression, courage chickens out, love turns inept, generosity loses heart, justice is schmaltzified.

One of our Unitarian Universalist brothers, Frank Withrow, recently spoke at his church's Super Bowl Sunday men's service. His talk, entitled "Who are the Real Men?", sparkles with the resolute energy of healthy aggression.

In difficult times the refiner's fire often burns brightly and there are those who stand head and shoulders above others. There are those men whose physical stamina and strength bring out the best. They devote their lives to rescuing the endangered. They deserve the name heroes.

But there are other real men who are not afraid to go against the tide of popular wisdom. They're not afraid to tell the king he has no clothes, the magician that his technology is hollow, the warrior that his fight is folly, and the lover that his love is self-indulgence. They're not afraid to stand for high principles when all others bash those principles to bits on the hard rocks of patriotism. It's not hard to join the U.S. Marines when all others are rushing to join. It's hard to stand against the winds of the time and to speak out for peace and justice for all.

Mark Twain was not afraid to talk of the humanity of all men including African Americans, doing this when the wisdom of the land was the opposite of his beliefs. Commander-in-chief, Dwight David Eisenhower, articulated well his position and warned us against the military industrial complex.

Real men speak out for the things they believe.

Real men honor all living things.

Real men love others as themselves.

What the world needs now is a few real men!

Examples of Healthy Male Aggression

Despite our markedly diverse upbringings, every adult male can conjure up memories of friendly, firm, fair aggressive exchanges with another boy or teenager or man. We more easily remember a batch of negative encounters, but there are positive, encouraging incidents to recall as well.

Here's one, a light poem I wrote about the sacred tie with my blood brother Phil entitled: *Jousting Kin*. It speaks of playful aggressive scraps: in my case, openly wrestling with my

brother, a slightly older male whom I viewed with jumbled admiration and angst. Through it all, our brothering bond remains a positive, precious bond.

Phil and Tom

Brothers sparring affectionately

From cradle forward

Employing bodies, then words.

Healthy pugnacity

Tumbling outside on lush green

Arm-wrestling

Knee-football in the den

Vying for kingship on assorted hills

Stream of verbal tiffs

Happy pushes, jealous shoves

No harm, no foul

Laughter ripples

Rough-housing cements bond

Jousting with colleagues

Boundaries easily crossed

Jesting with mate

Gets touchy

Fencing with friends

Susceptible to wanton gashes

Own kids outgrow bedroom tussles

Visceral urge

Endures

One more scuffle

On old familiar turf

*Then bury
Beloved Brothers
Side by side
In nearby vacant lot*

Clearly, we males are starved for healthy rather than harmful touch. I tender another, more gripping and potent, illustration of how crucial it is to be “handled” in a safe, appropriate manner within our families of origin.

Here’s Bert’s testimony as tearfully revealed to his home congregation in San Diego.

I was raised as the eldest in a family with two brothers and a sister. My full-time mother was intimately involved with her children. My father was distant and unavailable even when he was home. I grew up believing my father really didn’t like me very much.

At age thirty-five, I had a profound experience. A therapist friend who used hypnosis in his practice offered to regress me back to my early childhood. I agreed mostly to see what it was like to be hypnotized.

During the experience I remembered a time when I was eighteen-months old. I was sitting on the wood floor of a line shack where my dad worked as a cryptographer for the railroad. We were together alone for the first time in my life; my mother was in the hospital giving birth to a little brother.

Dad was drinking. He was angry. He was crying as he spoke to the baby a few feet away sitting on the floor. He told the small child how awful his father had treated him when he was small. He sobbed about the horrible wounds he endured, and he spewed out rage that he felt toward a man he hadn’t seen since he was a young boy. And then he made a promise. He promised the little boy that he would never touch him, lest he hurt him.

I couldn’t get this powerful memory out of my head. It dominated my thoughts for weeks. I arranged to travel home for a visit, and I instantly confronted my father about my memory when I saw him.

He denied it all in the beginning, but then as I recreated details about the room—the wooden chair with the black leather seat that squeaked when it turned, the sparse furnishings of the room, windows without glass or curtains, the smell of dry desert air on that still night—and I even recounted with verbatim accuracy what my father had said, he started to tremble and shake. My dad began to cry as I continued to recreate that memorable evening.

I told dad how powerful the memory had been for me, that it had changed my whole perception of our relationship. I now saw his distance as a way of protecting me. I now believed he loved me greatly and his being unavailable was the only way he found to break a cycle of abuse that had been passed down from father to son.

My father and I hugged one another for the first time in our lives that night. I then enjoyed three years of closeness with my dad before he died. And when he died, I knew my father loved me.

Moreover, when I reconciled with my father, I also began to see men in a new way. I found myself wanting to be with men and talk with men about my changing perception of how we might be with one another. I wanted to touch and be touched by men in safe, caring ways.

I went to a men's group meeting at the First Unitarian Universalist Church of San Diego and discovered men there who wanted to be authentic, to share deeply in intimate circles of men. That was 18 years ago. My life has been changed forever.

Let me offer another concrete example of kindly male-to-male aggression.

One of the healthiest, non-invasive actions men can take is to massage one another's backs and hands. We've done back-massages in a train-line early on in men's gatherings, but hand-massaging poses a more radical venture and requires more time and trust. Yet whenever we've invited men to massage another man's hands in a caring dyad, it's enabled men to touch one another for pleasure not pain. Not only is it relaxing and calming, but it provides the first time

most men have ever massaged another brother's hands. It's a surprisingly audacious and important act of restorative *mano y mano* aggression.

We then give men time to talk about this physically intimate exchange, and invariably abundant tears and heartfelt confessions flow. Moreover, numerous men declare that they're far less willing to ever harm another man or woman or child again. Their hands, softened by this simple exercise, are now strengthened to stroke others in soothing not injurious ways.

Assertive men would likely contemplate a same-sex hand massage; aggressive men undertake it. For handling another man is an aggressive deed; it moves us directly toward another man. It requires mutual consent. It requires chutzpah. It's nonviolent but aggressive.

There are further steps to take in the program of deepening men's physical intimacy. Men have found rubbing our brother's feet a worthwhile challenge. I also invite men to do palm dances with our hands. Brothers close our eyes, connect palms with those of another man, then alternately express, via our hands, different human emotions like feeling sad, glad, or mad. One man on the giving end, the other on the receiving side. Again, debriefing follows. These are innovative sensual encounters that stir and expand male bodies and souls.

Dancing with one another is a stretch for most men, so we do it gradually, in unfolding stages. We start modern-style, moving separately in front of one another, occasionally touching, or we folk-dance in lines and circles. Slow dancing comes later, and only for those men for whom it provides comfortable play.

But some mode of dancing consistently proves energizing and evocative for brothering circles. As the African sayings go: "Sad men don't dance," and "No man dancing ever hurt the ground." Most of the men in our brothering path have incrementally grown same-sex confidence, through first participating in all-church dances back at the home church: that is, intergenerational gambols of children, youth, and adults swaying in trusting circles, parties where anyone can dance with anyone...at everyone's own pace.

The key is never to impel, let alone compel, massages or dances (the right of non-participation is always secure). Remember we aspire to promote exchanges of healthy aggression not additional violations of manhood. The brothering path challenges men to grow, to expand their comfort

zones, but the choices remain theirs. Authentic male intimacy is self-determined and mutually-shared as we swim fresh waters on the continuum of social, sensual, and sexual communion.

Additionally, at our men's retreats there are always playfair games such as Frisbee-throwing, building with Lego blocks, and crawling around on the floor as animals...alongside competitive ones from "Simon Says" to basketball to horseshoes. Surely, there are times to play games with scores, but our brothering path majors in furnishing imaginative play options as counterpoint to the conventional fare available in our overly-combative male world.

Competition—when untarnished by either all-out conquest or outright harm—can occasion a holy adventure. We men need the push and pull of robust vying, which, at its finest, is a form of aggressive cooperation. Indeed the Latin root of the word competition means "to seek together or with others." This root honors the co-creative power of true competition.

As Zen sports writer, Tim Gallwey, phrases it: "Healthy competition resembles two bulls butting their heads against each other—both grow stronger and each participates in the development of the other."

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Letter from a Minister to a Marine

Perhaps the best way to tackle the intricacies of this radical, oft-slippery, distinction between aggression and violence is by employing a test case. While my example is imperfect, it certainly is male-focused and the issues are perennially fresh, particularly as our American government has engaged in full-blown warfare in the Middle East, hurdling aggressive measures of international law and cooperation, then jumping straightway into "shock and awe" violence.

The star of this narrative piece, Bruce (not his real name), is one of our very own UU-grown young men. Hence it provides a useful context, I think, from which to wrangle more deeply with the formidable issues at hand. This encounter still means a great deal to me, even as I amplify a letter I wrote 10 years ago.

First, some background. One of the benefits of a religious minority such as Unitarian Universalism is that we're small enough to reach out quite accessibly to spiritual kin across the

land. A Unitarian Universalist acquaintance from the East Coast had a son in the Marine Corps based at Camp Pendleton. This young man went UA (“unexplained absence”) after experiencing extreme upset in response to something he saw at the Camp. In the throes of considerable personal hell he returned to the Marines, still confused, and, according to his father, in need of Unitarian Universalist ministerial support. There was no fellow Marine, officer, or chaplain at Camp Pendleton who could hear, let alone appreciate, his existential anguish. So I was invited to counsel with him.

My visit proved helpful to Bruce and transformative for me. It was a powerful exchange whose reverberations keep rippling in my psyche. Bruce is a sensitive, muscular, reserved yet forthright 19 year-old who for seven years had dreamed of becoming a Marine and following in the footsteps of both his uncle and cousin. He was among the top achievers during basic training, so when he jumped camp, it startled everyone, including his buddies. I think he surprised himself as well.

Bruce is a brave young man saddled with a tormented soul. He still enjoys the drama and grandeur of Marinehood but has grown to loathe the system. He appreciates the discipline and challenge of military life, yet he has learned an irrevocable truth about himself: he’s aggressive alright, a real aggressive kind of guy, but not prone to violence. Bruce cannot kill.

There’s more, lots more. Bruce confided that he’s always been an emotionally expressive young man, crying openly as a child and youth. Now his feelings are stuffed under the standard regimen of the Marines. He’s starved to give voice to his inner feelings and thoughts. Just prior to formally joining the Marines, Bruce was joyfully involved with a group of ten pre-schoolers as an assistant teacher. In fact, he said that he has but two pressing goals for the future and, now, neither of them is being a career Marine.

The first dream is to own and manage a physical fitness gym, with special emphasis on bodybuilding; his second mission in life is teaching pre-school children again. Somehow Bruce hopes to blend these visions in one adult life. I can’t remember hearing a 19 year-old male express either of these specific desires, let alone both of them together. But there’s no doubt in my mind that Bruce is the kind of person who will realize his dreams. As I said: Bruce is

aggressive. Currently, when he isn't agonizing over his status with the Marine Corps, Bruce is dreaming about the pre-schoolers he so dearly loves and whom he left behind for the military.

He told me that these children were like little trees that he was summoned to cultivate, prune, nourish. Now in the Marines he's being trained to cut down similar, if older, trees, and his soul has been torn in two. He doesn't quite know what to do. He can't just up and quit the Marines, because he's the kind of guy who honors commitments; plus to get out of his military contract at this stage would require extreme measures. Although trapped in severe conscience-pain, Bruce will not be driven to either suicide or assault. Furthermore, as he loudly laments: "I'm simply not a quitter."

I reminded Bruce that quitting the Marines was complicated to be sure, but quitting on his soul, an even tougher move, is ultimately at stake. I asked him simply to remember the trees: the little trees he was tending back in Michigan, the foreign trees he was being trained to cut down, and the ever-growing tree he represented himself. I gave him my phone numbers, we hugged, lest he need me again, whatever decision he makes. You see, Bruce is my spiritual brother, scrunched, in an agonizingly holy bind.

When I got back to the car I found myself quivering with deep tears for Bruce, for myself, for our world—for both red-blooded Marines and nonviolent ministers, and for all those countless sojourners conflicted with elements of warrior and peacemaker clashing in our consciences. For whereas my pathway on issues of nonviolence and war has been relatively uncomplicated given my temperament, upbringing, and life-choices, the older I grow, the more puzzling it all gets.

I was reminded of the wisdom of that hard-nosed pacifist, A. J. Muste, who wrote in 1965 that "those who go into war having seriously thought their way to a decision are on a higher moral level than the smug pacifists who have no notion of the ambiguities and contradictions the decision involves." I also ponder the poignant passage from poet Adrienne Rich in her book *On Lies, Secrets and Silence*:

There is no 'the truth,' 'a truth'—truth is not one thing, or even a system. It is an increasing complexity. The pattern of the carpet is a surface. When we look closely, or when we become weavers, we learn of the tiny multiple threads unseen in the overall pattern, the knots on the underside of the carpet.

And my mind raced on to Nils Bohr's trenchant insight: "The opposite of a fact is a falsehood, but the opposite of a profound truth is yet another profound truth." And I knew that inside my younger brother Bruce, there was an heroic struggle occurring between profound truths—the call to be a warrior **and** the call to be a peacemaker or was it, in fact, the cloudy, muddled summons to be some kind of peaceful warrior or militant guardian. It's never simple, is it, when our spirit writhes in torment, be we 19 years old in the Marines or 51 years of age in the ministry?

So I sat down and composed a lengthy letter from my heart to Bruce's, from minister to Marine, regarding the valiant human effort to harness the warrior and peacemaker energies circulating in our souls in ways both truthful to ourselves and compassionate to others.

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Dear Bruce,

Until the next time we talk face-to-face or over the phone, I want you to know that our hour-long conversation on February 8th was a memorable and powerful one for me. Consequently, I can't help but share some of my own nervous, unfinished wrestlings with the warrior-and-pacifist archetypes. The creative tension in my current life isn't as fresh or consequential as your struggle, but my conscience is strangely restless these days, and I hanker to reveal some of my own pesky paradoxes. So, I hope you'll bear with the Reverend. Here goes, Bruce.

From a young age forward I was motored by a peaceful, accommodating personality. Cops and robbers never held much fascination for me. I can't ever remember desiring a Red Ryder rifle for Christmas, although there was a period in my life when I was enthralled with water pistols. And the only time I ever handled or shot a real gun was in a Boy Scout drill during a camp-out. I not only flunked the exercise physically, but emotionally as well. I came away from that excursion fearful that shooting at tin cans might be a warm-up exercise for shooting at animals or humans. I remember feeling weird because other scouts seemed to get a real "bang" out of firing guns.

Even when I played sports, which I did with both fervor and excellence (I'm reminded, Bruce, of your passion for wrestling and weight-lifting), my prime drawback was lack of aggressiveness at "crunchtime." My natural meekness would fade into a kind of unwanted passivity. In a nutshell, I was basically "too gentle to live among the wolves," let alone run with them.

Oh, by the way, none of my close male relatives were war veterans, and due to age and academic status, I always managed to avert conscription. I was too immature, perhaps cowardly as well, to obtain conscientious objector status, although that was clearly what I believed and who I was. No wonder I was such a devoted C.O. counselor during the Vietnam War, helping braver ones than I pursue what my conscience had sidestepped.

Peace activist and author, Walter Wink, describes himself thusly: “I don’t see myself as a pacifist. I see myself rather as a violent person trying to become nonviolent.” On the contrary, I see myself as a cowardly type on the road toward becoming nonviolent as well. Wink and I dwell at different spots on the continuum; nonetheless, both of us require more creative aggression to reach our mutual destination of forceful nonviolence.

There’s so much more to tell you Bruce about my avoidance of situations resembling either machismo or the military. But suffice it to say, I’ve successfully stuffed the hostile and demonic urges in my own netherworld which, except for occasional, inappropriate virulent outbursts, has resulted in an all too sanitized pacifism. In short, I’ve never really faced the crisis-of-conscience bedeviling you now in the Marine Corps. In my decades of ministry, I’ve probably preached a dozen times on peacemaking themes, but I’ve rarely been this self-disclosing—invariably bypassing the sinister complexities grinding away in my interior kingdom. Thanks, Bruce, for pushing me into deeper waters, for inciting this letter.

Bruce, let me begin my reflections upon what I might call “mature liberal religious masculinity” by declaring that your resistance to taking another person’s life is at the core of non-violence. By refusing to kill human beings you’re proclaiming the supreme worth of every single individual, not only your compatriots but also your foes as well. To kill is perhaps the height of arrogance. For it means playing God, who alone gives life, and who entrusts it to us to cherish and develop, as a gift received with grateful love. Like those trees you’ve been talking about. As Thich Nhat Hanh, the Vietnamese Buddhist said: “If we kill humans, with whom are we to live?”

As a Unitarian you and I believe in the sacred dignity of every human *unit*. As Universalists we contend that transformation is *universally* accessible to everyone or to no one. The only salvation worth having includes all brothers and sisters, known and foreign, pleasant or unruly,

buddies or foes. Our faith says that the welcome table on judgment day will divulge some real surprises: lots of folks will be present whom we wouldn't dare invite to the banquet.

Nonviolence is a philosophy Bruce, which, although infrequently heralded or honored in America, is as old as history itself. From ancient times to the present, people have renounced violence as a means of resolving disputes. They've opted instead for aggressive negotiation, mediation, and reconciliation, resisting violence with an uncompromising respect for the integrity of all human beings, friends and enemies alike.

Examples abound of successful nonviolent action, both here and abroad. Some are well-known, others not. Naturally, there's Gandhi's struggle against the British for East Indian self-determination as well as the successful nonviolent campaign which won independence for the West African nation of Ghana in 1958. During the Second World War, nonviolent resistance to the Nazis took such forms as the refusal of Norwegian teachers to follow Nazi edicts and the smuggling of Jews from occupied Europe by peacemakers including our own Unitarians whose bravery launched the work of the Unitarian Universalist Service Committee. And currently in Eastern Europe many of the remarkable revolutionary changes have been accomplished nonviolently.

Bruce, this isn't the way our predominantly blood-and-guts history books read, but if these facts are unknown or obscured, it's only because we've seen fit to interpret the flow of human events largely in terms of the clash of arms. As one unwilling to kill another human being, I want you to know, Bruce, that you don't stand alone; you stand in a long and proud tradition—the heritage of nonviolence. And you aren't the first nor will you be the last man to wrestle passionately and painfully with your conscience as a Marine.

Whenever journalist Colman McCarthy teaches courses in the theory and practice of nonviolence, he begins with a spot quiz. He asks American students to identify the following: Robert E. Lee, Sojourner Truth, Ulysses S. Grant, A. J. Muste, Napoleon, Adin Ballou, Caesar, John Woolman, Dwight Eisenhower, and Dorothy Day. Most students, whether in high school or college, know only five names on the list: the generals. Who can't identify Lee, Grant, Napoleon, Caesar, and Eisenhower? The other five are unknowns. Truth, Muste, Ballou (a Universalist by the way who along with Unitarian Henry David Thoreau directly influenced the

nonviolent philosophy of Leo Tolstoy and Martin Luther King, Jr.), Woolman, and Day have been card-carrying advocates of nonviolence.

Each has taken personal risks by acting on the belief that the force of nonviolence is more effective, moral, and enduring than the force of violence. So, Bruce, American students including you and I have been cheated in our education. Our minds from childhood on are stuffed with prettified myths of Davy Crockett, Daniel Boone, and other frontier gunslingers. The cult of violence is taught as if fists, guns, armies, and nukes were sacred liturgies of our one and only American creed.

Yet our culture is hungry to learn peace through nonviolence. A course on alternatives to violence isn't only about ending war or making life difficult for Caesar. It's about how to use what Gandhi called "satyagraha" which roughly translates as "soul or truth force." The operative word, Bruce, *force*, has been a word which yours truly, frequently hiding out in sweetness or chickenheartedness, has been loathe to claim. But being a resolute, unbending, forceful presence is precisely what is necessary to being truly nonviolent. Our souls and minds must be sufficiently brave to evolve, then practice, a philosophy of force.

Every conflict or problem, whether among family or friends, between communities or governments, will be addressed ultimately either through violent or nonviolent force. Those who choose nonviolent force—courageous risk-takers like those peacemakers in the aforementioned quiz—opt for the force of justice, the force of love, the force of redistributing power and privilege, the force of noncooperation, the force of relentless resistance to evil, the force of imaginative, revolutionary ideas. The vibrant strength of such forces comprises the essence of nonviolence.

Unitarian Universalist, Charles Walton, from Los Gatos, California puts the distinction compellingly:

Distinguishing between violence and force may resolve the dilemma faced by persons wishing to practice nonviolence but concerned about failure to halt or fight terrorism. Violence is unthinking, harmful behavior, traumatic, and is uncaring about collateral damage. It kills what others love. Violence strikes at the tender center.

On the other hand, force is used by a wise policeman, with regret, to halt fighting, or to arrest a criminal, or to disarm an offender, or to restrain the arm of the offender. Force can be used in a loving, sensitive, thoughtful manner by a parent against a child to halt fighting between siblings or to save a child from injury.

To disarm a violent offending nation, or restrain its blows, use arrest and arraignment and subsequent trial of the individual leaders. Limited use of pinpoint lethal force may be necessary for self-defense and a quick humane arrest.

But force is always applied in a loving way, with regret, whereas violence is applied in a haughty, hateful way.

Pacifism has nothing in common with passivity or indifference, submission or acquiescence, or even polite compliance. Being tranquil by temperament and conciliatory by conviction, I've had considerable spiritual difficulty, Bruce, in becoming a more tough-minded, stouthearted peacemaker.

In extricating myself from situations of uncomfortable, nasty strife, whether interpersonal, communal, or global, I can all too easily become a smug, self-righteous ideologue—serenely mouthing peaceful platitudes, far removed from the raging battles of reality. Sometimes my resistance to burgeoning, obstinate evils has been so passive that no one has noticed I was resisting, because I wasn't. I was wearing cowardice in disguise. But, Bruce, know well that authentic nonviolence requires active opposition to injustice rather than noble posturing and grand theories. It means active, relentless support of those values and expressions that foster human solidarity. Nonviolence demands daily practice.

Nonviolence and resistance are partners in the pursuit of justice and peace. In the Christian scriptures, Jesus always recommended resisting rather than succumbing to evil. That's the path he modeled for would-be followers. As Walter Wink insightfully observes:

The correct translation of Matthew 5:38 is 'Don't react violently against the one who is evil.' The meaning is clear: don't react in kind, don't mirror your enemy, don't turn into the very thing you hate. Jesus is not telling us not to resist evil, but

only not to resist it violently...then he goes on to give examples that are more than nonresistance. They are gutsy, courageous and aggressive...I have long distinguished between force and violence, arguing that force, rightly exercised, is the legitimate use of restraint to prevent some from doing harm to others.

While we're at it, Bruce, let's briefly explore another difficult concept. The term "warrior" is sullied, perhaps irredeemable, what with its history of paid soldiers whose sole mission is to find and destroy opposition. Indeed, usually in our modern world, when the word "warrior" is spoken into existence, war is spoken into existence as well.

Joe Dolce laments warriorhood being poeticized into acceptance:

There is a romantic notion of the honorable warrior, the gentle defender (always male) with ethics who only fights when provoked. Yet the Oxford dictionary defines 'warrior as one who engages in war,' plain and simple. The warrior is one who makes war, not one who makes peace or who makes war in order to make peace, or one who pursues 'spiritual' goals and whose warfare is actually on another plane. What says that fierceness is synonymous with warrior? Purpose, commitment, even passion, exist in all fields. But let the concept and reality of the warrior fade away, once and for all.

Yet there's another side to the dispute. In current women's and men's sacred literature, a compelling interpretation of the warrior archetype denotes those individuals who are fiercely compassionate, protectors of righteousness, bold adventurers, boundary setters, guardians of goodness. For example, *Greenpeace*, the activist coalition of environmentalists, insistently promotes its mission of Rainbow Warriors.

Warrior energy, at its healthiest, aggressively protects, builds, and pushes toward humane possibilities. Yet if disconnected from compassion, the warrior can surely become the tool of either a sadist or a masochist and be driven by a passion for cruelty. Its shadow side is exemplified in any governmental, religious, business, or military warlords who use their power to abuse and destroy.

Therefore, on the one hand, I remain ready to retire the concept of warrior until we've shown a willingness, for example, to dismantle nuclear weapons worldwide, yet on the other hand, I know Bruce, that in my efforts to approximate justice and combat wrongs I need greater determination, more aggressiveness. As Jungian analyst and theologian Robert Moore says:

If we are accessing the Warrior archetype appropriately, we will be energetic, decisive, courageous, enduring, persevering and loyal to some greater good beyond our own personal gain...we will fight good fights in order to make the world a better and more fulfilling place for everyone and everything.

Our war-making will be for the creation of the new, the just, and the free. The warrior is often a destroyer. But the positive warrior energy destroys only what needs to be destroyed in order for something new and fresh, more alive and more virtuous to appear. Many things in our world need destroying—corruption, tyranny, oppression, injustice...

When you spoke to me Bruce about the adamant desire to reach your two future goals, I sensed within you an intense, powerful soul activated by what Moore would call mature warrior strength. Your rigorous goal-setting temperament has assisted as well in your developing an affirmative, healthy flow of aggression. It has also helped immeasurably that your parents are such strong, loving forces in your support-circle.

But lest I place all the good guys in the non-military camp, I want you know that in your own heritage of Unitarian Universalism, there have been “warriors” or brave champions within our American military establishment. Jaco Ten Hove is currently researching the beginnings of the Unitarian Laymen’s League, the precursor of today’s UUMeN. He reminds us that the League (started in 1919) was a post-World War I organization that directly enabled our liberal religious brothers to grieve the anguish of the war as well as “perpetuate the deeper lessons and the nobler sentiments of the war time,” in the words of the deliverer of the League’s inaugural address, William Wallace Fenn.

Furthermore, Bruce, in an issue of the *World*, our continental Unitarian Universalist magazine, there was an incisive yet sobering, (certainly for anti-war liberals of my ilk) interview with Elliot

Richardson who was born into a distinguished New England Unitarian family and has maintained affectional ties with our faith ever since.

Richardson tells of completing a long career of service under four Presidents, in four cabinet posts, more than any American has held before or since. The title of his well-received book *Reflections of a Radical Moderate* should remind all patriots of the markedly distinct philosophical and political perspectives honorably held in Unitarian Universalism, lest some of us devolve into smug anti-war protesters.

And did you know Bruce that the Secretary of Defense under President Bill Clinton, Republican Bill Cohen from Maine is an active Unitarian Universalist layman? Cohen happens to be a very introspective man who writes poetry, and yes, has been working to master the mysteries of the Pentagon. Cohen reminds me of the fact that in Chinese and Vietnamese culture, their generals and warriors, as well as Presidents, were often poets.

What I'm driving at, Bruce, is that it's too simplistic to stereotype military leaders as being violence-mongers. Some are and some aren't. And to complicate matters, I've known my share of public pacifists who were physically abusive at home.

I find it revealing that even Gandhi, the consummate proponent of nonviolence, declared that "cowardice is the least attractive alternative of all. If we can't triumph by nonviolence, then we must choose coercion over cowardice to protect our cherished values." Or as William Sloane Coffin put it: "Somehow we have to combine a quality of openness with a quality of determination. We have to become twice as militant and twice as nonviolent, twice as tough and twice as tender, as only the truly strong can be tender." Again I confess, my friend, that truth is increasingly complex, yet I beckon us to dwell in its messy midst, as we valiantly sculpt compassionate lives of holy aggression.

Bruce, I perceive there to be three general responses to evil: passivity, violent opposition, and nonviolence. And if nonviolence doesn't immediately change the heart of the oppressor, it does change the heart of the oppressed, granting, as Martin Luther King, Jr. attested, new self-respect to the beleaguered. The carrier of nonviolence is also blessed in the process. Nonviolence is the third way, the alternative of Jesus, and it invariably demands that we be imaginative of heart—facing conflicts faithfully rather than fighting or fleeing.

“Nonviolence” said farm-worker activist, Cesar Chavez, “forces one to be creative. When people are involved in something constructive, trying to bring about change, they tend to be less violent than those who are not engaged in rebuilding or in anything creative.” Aggressive nonviolence, I’m convinced, Bruce, is simply more revolutionary than reactive violence, because it draws upon the deepest wellsprings of our human imagination and compassion.

Nonviolence invites us to find inventive alternatives beyond violence, to seize the moral initiative, to assert our own humanity and dignity as a person, to discover inner resources of power we didn’t know we had, to break the cycle of humiliation with ridicule or humor, to refuse to submit or to accept the inferior position, to expose the injustice of the dominator system, to stand our ground, to be willing to suffer rather than retaliate, to force the oppressor to see us in a new light, to be willing to undergo the penalty of breaking unjust laws. Nothing soft or feeble about those actions!

But truth is increasingly complex, and Bruce, if you pursue the nonviolent path, you’ll inevitably run into those who articulate “but what if...” scenarios. Arguments against nonviolence are often about impossible situations where violence wouldn’t work either. There is considerable irony in the presumed compassion of those who are so concerned about the potential rape of a single grandmother, when the same questioner accepts war, where the rape of grandmothers, wives, daughters, and children is so routine that many soldiers have regarded it as one of the compensations of warfare.

What if your parent or partner was attacked by a mugger, Bruce? You might yell for help, or you might try to call the police, or you might try to disarm the assailant physically, or you might attempt to appeal to the mugger’s higher self, or you might even find a surprising way to grasp the initiative and change the attacker’s mind. But surely every one of us would attempt, if possible, to intervene. Every one of us would show force. Again, Jesus did not forbid self-defense. He taught not nonresistance but nonviolence. The truth is that no one knows how he or she would react to such a situation.

Yet as Walter Wink reminds us:

Using violent resistance to resolve the situation is limiting oneself to the rules of the game as laid down by the assailant...the burden of proof must always be on

the proponent of violence to explain why violence or war is preferable to nonviolence, especially when nonviolence has usually not even been tried.

The truth is, nonviolence generally works where violence would work, and where it fails, violence too would fail. Neither might have been effective in Stalin's Russia. The declining postwar British empire would have lost India to either violence or nonviolence, but the choice of the latter meant a loss of only 8000 lives instead of hundreds of thousands or even millions.

But nonviolence also works where violence would fail, as in most of the nonviolent revolutions of recent years. Violence fails as often as it succeeds. If one side prevails using violence, the other must lose. Not so with nonviolence. When it succeeds, there's a sense in which both sides win.

And Bruce, yes there are situations that are crushingly tragic, where nothing we can conceivably do will help. Holding hands and singing "Give peace a chance" sometimes doesn't stop warlords from stealing food from starving babies. There are woeful binds when the violent and the nonviolent alike are forced to suffer the agony of irrelevance and may themselves reside among the victims. This is happening even as I write you, throughout the world, in places such as Ireland and the Middle East.

Furthermore, there is nothing magical about nonviolence. It requires courage and hard work, strategizing, self-discipline, and a well-integrated spirituality. It requires willingness to learn from our enemies. It demands the ability to desire their safety as well as our own, to love the opponent in them, even while we refuse to cooperate with it.

And here's another reminder of truth's confounding complexity. We are humane beasts, both noble and brutal beings. Violence, as well as compassion, is woven into the cosmos and our genes. We are all violent, be we Marines or ministers, warriors or pacifists. Pious rejections will never make us innocent. Without full embrace of the shadow and demons in our own psyches we are doomed to act out what we appall.

No matter how nonviolent we purport to be in theory or practice we can never envision evil as if it were something arising outside ourselves. We must confess our complicity in the very evils we

abhor. So, beware, Bruce, of self-righteousness, as you struggle with your conscience to stay in or leave the Marines.

Let me bring this letter to a close, before I wear us both out.

Just remember, Bruce, that nonviolence starts at home. All our philosophizing, important as it is, means nothing unless you and I dare to be peacemakers, first and foremost, within our own hearts and within our own households. As Pat Farren wrote: “Nonviolence is a love story that must be told in our homes before it’s going to take hold across our planet. I cannot credibly recommend international harmony when my own heart is in chaos, nor express real solidarity with the oppressed when I am blocked from love with my immediate family.”

Peacemaking isn’t a remote endeavor or an elective course; it’s a way of being where the ends and the means of living are fundamentally one and where our values must be embodied daily with those near and dear as well as the stranger and foe. As Thich Nhat Hanh reminds us: “Peace is every step...because without being peace, we cannot do anything for peace.”

So, in conclusion, Bruce, I urge you to make sufficient, not perfect, peace with your own **conscience**. As Unitarian Universalist prophet Stephen Fritchman used to say:

Today’s surgeons can transplant hearts, kidneys, and other human organs; but no man or woman in the health sciences can yet transplant a conscience. Feed and care for your conscience as you do your brain; neither can be replaced.

Bruce, your final allegiance must be paid not to the Marines or to our shared religious heritage or even to your parents, but to an innermost voice that stays truthful to yourself and loving to the greater universe. And, above all, my friend, be patient with and kind to yourself, knowing there’s no decision that you can make, however honest, brave, and compassionate, that will prove pure or stress-free.

I remain your brother in the common struggle to be peaceful warriors, to be carriers of “truth-force” all our days on this one and precious Earth.

Tom

Tom Owen-Towle
Minns Lecture V
May 5, 2003