

**“A PLACE FOR MEN?”**  
**A sermon by the Rev. Roger Bertschausen**  
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Call to Gather from “The Vanishing Male” by Kathleen Rolenz  
...Talking about gender differences...feels like walking through a mine field. You never know if you’re going to put your foot down on something that will trigger an explosive, emotional response.”<sup>1</sup>

Reading from Tom Owen-Towle  
One of America's burgeoning revolutions finds men meeting to share pieces of their deep hopes and hurts, as they unwrap their self-sufficient exteriors to exchange touch and thought with other men.

As one prominent advocate for men's rights and growth has put it:  
*We men have related to one another in two prime ways: (1) **Side-by-side** as work associates, committee members, and team players; or (2) **Back-to-back** as cohorts in the military or police force, where we cover for each other in life-dependent situations. Now we are finally learning to enjoy **face-to-face** encounters where we talk directly to one another as brothers in close, personal, trusting fashion.*

We join a larger movement of men to exchange notes, to hold and shove one another, to create tomorrows together. There aren't any Santa Clauses or theories or women or children or religions to account for what we do with who we are. We're ultimately responsible for ourselves.

There are many reasons, as women have long realized, for gender-based dialogues. First, there are male concerns that are properly and beneficially shared man to man. (For example, fathering and being the son of a father.)

Second, there is considerable healing to be achieved between men, because we have been pounding upon, even destroying one another, ever since Cain slew his brother Abel. We can learn respectful, loving ways to be brothers—not to be our brother's boss, keeper, or lackey, but to be our brother's brother.

Often we men build bonds with each other only to run into deeply ingrained homophobia about intimacy. Or we may feel comfortable being open and intimate with our buddies during a men's group, but then revert to negative, distancing patterns when back at work amid the "good old boy's network."

The best way for us to heal our wounds and befriend our fears is to spend time sharing aches and aspirations, telling our real stories, face-to-face, brother to brother, as peers in supportive, open places.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Kathleen Rolenz, “The Vanishing Male,” <http://www.uumen.org/sermonwinner01.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> [http://www.uumen.org/a\\_vision\\_unfolding.htm](http://www.uumen.org/a_vision_unfolding.htm).

## Sermon

One of the troubles with talking about gender is that there is a lot more ambiguity about gender differences than we used to think was the case. In days gone by, gender differences were understood in a way which many of us today would label as stereotypical. An important insight of this age is that gender differences are considerably murkier than we used to think.

My own gender story certainly illustrates this. I am a mixture of stereotypical male and female qualities. I've never used a power tool—well, maybe in Jr. High Shop class, but it wasn't willingly. Relationships are of paramount importance to me—that is why I use the word connectedness to describe my ultimate concern. I've never once made a fist and used it to hit someone; nor has anyone used a fist to hit me. I remember in elementary school the closest I came to a fight was when this really big kid was picking on me on the merry-go-round. This kid was seven-feet-tall by middle school! I certainly wasn't going to start a fight, but I had a sinking feeling he was working toward that eventuality. Thankfully for me, he somehow fell backwards off the merry-go-round and hit his head on the base of it. As he lay dazed on the ground, I jumped off and ran away quickly. I was most grateful for this sudden and unexpected miracle.

My natural stance toward life is fear and caution. I am not always the most courageous person. For example, the first time I gave blood—toward the end of high school—I passed out. The worker suggested I try again when I was more mature—she suggested the age of thirty or thirty-five. That's exactly what I did, and I found that the ensuing years made giving blood a little less traumatic. For several years now I have given blood every two months, and I haven't passed out.

But recently I agreed to give platelets—the procedure where they take the blood out, remove the platelets from it, and put the rest of the blood back in. Unfortunately the blood leaked a little on its way back in, and hurt like crazy. They quickly stopped the procedure and started on the other arm. This time it didn't hurt at all. But my mind was reeling by this point, and when I started to feel the blood going back in, I quickly lost consciousness. The next thing I knew, four or five workers were fanning me, unzipping my vest, putting ice behind my head, and generally trying to help ease me back into the world of the conscious. I have no idea how long I was out. They made me stay put for a long time to recover, which I didn't mind at all.

Eventually I got up and stumbled into the room where you can sit and eat and drink for awhile. As I sat there, completely drained by the experience, the worker said to the other guy sitting there, “Well, that's the 29<sup>th</sup> time you've given platelets!” I looked at him: he was completely calm and collected. Wearing a baseball cap, he somehow looked like a guy who could give platelets a thousand times and never have a problem, compared to me—a wimp who couldn't even make it through one time! He was lying down a few beds away from me during the procedure, so I knew he had witnessed my humiliation. I looked down at my juice and crackers in shame.

But the coward sitting in the blood donation place isn't the whole me. In college I spent half a year in Sri Lanka, including three weeks during which, with little hesitation, I ventured completely on my own into a war zone. I love back-packing, especially when it stretches me by challenging me to the edge of my abilities. Last fall I went on a 42-mile

hike in the U.P. that turned out to be far more challenging than I thought it would be. There was so much up-and-down that one national park official called it more rugged than any hike in the mountains out West. I had horrible blisters and by the end could hardly walk. It poured one day and completely soaked us. At one point on that rainy day, deep in the forest by some rocky formations, I thought I heard a low growl. I sped up to nearly a run on my aching feet so I could catch up with my hiking partner. This trip pushed me to—and beyond—my limits. In short, it was a great hike! I am anxious to do it again.

I also have a dream of through-hiking the Appalachian Trail. Why do I want to do go through the hell of last fall's hike multiplied by fifty? Well, partly because it's there. I suppose that would be a traditionally male, testosterone-laced answer. I also want to do it because Fellowship member Dennis Abraham did it, and I figure if Dennis could do it, so could I. Those could, of course, be famous last words. I have no doubt, though, that if I do attempt it, and make it, my competitive energy—traditionally seen as male—will be a major reason for my success. It will help keep me going in the bleak moments. Or it will be the reason that my attempt ends in utter disaster. That's the fun of tackling the Appalachian Trail: it would be interesting to find out which way it goes: success or disaster. Bears, snakes, lightning, aching feet: it all terrifies me. And it beckons me. So maybe I'm not completely a coward. It actually makes some sense to me that 5,000 men answered polar explorer Ernest Shackleton's famous want ad: "Men wanted for hazardous journey. Small wages. Bitter cold. Long months of complete darkness. Constant danger. Safe return doubtful. Honor and recognition in case of success."<sup>3</sup> Cool!

I guess all this is to say that for me at least, clear-cut gender differences don't make much sense. I suspect such differences have been greatly over-simplified and over-rated. At least that's the conclusion I draw from my gender story. So today I'm going to try to steer pretty clear of gender generalities and stereotypes, or at least acknowledge the ambiguity of them.

The seeds of this sermon lie in a sermon I did last Easter on the image of Jesus as brother. I began the sermon by quoting from an on-line column by Coach Dave Daubenmire entitled, "Wake up Pastor! Your Men are Bored!"<sup>4</sup> Basically Coach Daubenmire argued that men are bored in church because the church has tried to domesticate them, to transform them from lions into lambs. He encouraged men instead to bring their testosterone to their Christianity: get in the game, he suggested; go to war for Jesus. Not surprisingly, I voiced two basic problems with this approach: it is based on gender stereotypes, and a complete misreading of Jesus.

But the thing that intrigued and frankly troubled me about the sermon that weekend was a comment during the Congregational Response at one of the services. A woman shared that her husband found the Fellowship feminized and boring. As a result he has no interest whatsoever in coming to the Fellowship. Her sharing posed the question: How many feel the same way? In spite of visions of walking through a minefield that filled my mind, I promised to return to that question. Today I am making good on that promise.

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<sup>3</sup> Daniel O'Connell, "Bring a Man Sunday," <http://eliotchapel.org/sermonDocs/Bring-a-Man.php>, pp. 5-6.

<sup>4</sup> <http://newswithviews.com/Daubenmire/dave3.htm>.

Is this a place for a men as well as women? That is the question I am tackling today. If the answer is no, then do we need to do something to make the Fellowship more welcoming to men? And if the answer to this second question is yes, what should we do?

Let's take the first question first: Is this a place for men as well as women? Is this Fellowship as welcoming to men as it is to women? I want to start in the realm of documented fact as well as my own observations of reality here.

The logical place to start is with our membership. I have long wondered what the percentage of men and women is among our membership. On Friday I sat down with a current directory and counted. I hoped that the result would be in the neighborhood of 50/50 so that I could quickly and easily answer yes, men are obviously equally welcome here.

Unfortunately, I did not find anything near a 50/50 mix. Instead, I discovered that 38% of our membership is male, and 62% is female. Anyway you cut it that's a large disparity. It's hard to look at this number and conclude that we are as welcoming of men as we could or should be. Of course we can't pin all of this on the Fellowship: part of it no doubt reflects a society-wide trend for women to be more interested in spirituality than men. The Fellowship doesn't exist in a vacuum. Certainly many religious traditions in the United States have similarly skewed numbers. There was a time long ago, in the early days of this country, when religion was primarily a realm of men. That shifted, and religion became feminized. Not surprising given the patriarchy of our culture, religion also became marginalized as churches became more the realm of women than of men. For example, the pay and prestige of the ministry plunged relative to many other professions. The biggest challenge to evening out the mix of women and men here may be in getting men to walk through these doors the first time, to get them to venture into what is now often seen as a women's realm.

In looking at whether this is a place for men as well as women, there are other things to consider beyond the percentages of men and women. Perhaps significantly, unlike the majority of UU congregations today, our Fellowship has a male minister. That will soon change when we add a second, female minister—though the female minister will be the Assistant Minister and I'll become the Senior Minister. Like most UU congregations, the rest of our staff is predominantly female. In sixteen years the only males I have worked with are the couple men who have sometimes cleaned the building, and Dan Van Sickle. I'd say that in the area of staff, the picture is mixed: the senior minister is male, but just everybody else is female.

My experience is that we have more female than male teachers in our religious education program, although the ratio is much closer than in most churches. Rather than having only a handful of men, I would guess that the percentage of male teachers approximates the percentage of men in the Fellowship.

With a few exceptions, we generally have significantly more women than men participate in Adult Enrichment classes, small groups, and retreats. One notable exception is the Choir, which defies the church choir norm by consistently having as many or more men than women. The other notable exception is the Men's Group. Our Men's Group is a large and incredibly strong group. It has flourished consistently for all of my time here, and well before I came. This is very rare and remarkable: typically fellowship groups whether female or male or mixed wax and wane over time. Not our men's group: for two decades or more it has always been incredibly vibrant. And it has

done so in spite of—and in some ways because of—its commitment to remain open and welcoming to new men. The Men’s Group vibrancy has been a great gift to the Fellowship. Without it, among other things, I fear that the percentage of men here would be considerably lower than 38%.

Regarding our lay leadership, my observation is that over time we have had a pretty balanced mixture of male and female leaders. Right now our Board has five males and two females, but the President is a female, and most likely the next Board will be more evenly split. In my time here I’ve worked with six female and three male presidents. I think this has partly resulted from a desire to balance a male in the minister position with a female in the president position. It’s a different story in our lay ministry program: we have consistently had far more female than male lay ministers. Some have suggested this is because men don’t like to listen—and listening is the cornerstone of lay ministry. I simply don’t buy this.

I can share a few more observations to help fill out the gender picture at the Fellowship. One is that I have occasionally heard male-bashing here. While I acknowledge that many women as well as men have been damaged by men and by patriarchy, I don’t think male-bashing has a place here. It embodies categorical thinking—dissing or praising a whole category of people—and it overlooks the inherent dignity and worth of all people, including men.

A final observation is that we seem to be more comfortable with and more often use female imagery than male imagery for the divine. Certainly I think the commission which put our hymnal together (chaired by a male) was more comfortable with female images. No doubt this is at least partly because the previous hymnals were overwhelmingly dominated by male images of the divine; the new hymnal could be seen as beginning to balance centuries of imbalance.

Where does this picture of gender at the Fellowship leave us? I think all in all it leaves us out of balance. For a complex variety of reasons (much of which are beyond our control), the Fellowship like so many congregations seems to be more welcoming of women than men. Is this a problem? I believe it is a problem. It’s a problem primarily because I believe many men in the Fox Cities who aren’t here have a need for a spiritual community like this one. Many men need—sometimes desperately—a place to share their spiritual quests, a community to inspire them to be the best men they can be, and a place to work with others in figuring out good ways to build a better world. Spiritual community (and the bonding that it promotes) has a strong correlation to contented, meaningful, healthy lives.<sup>5</sup> I also believe that our Fellowship community would be richer and more diverse and more interesting if more men joined our ranks.

So what can we do? I don’t think the answer is to go back to a more patriarchal way of doing things. I think this sells men short: it says that men only want to be here if they can dominate. I don’t believe the answer is to repel women—you know, let’s lower the number of women and then we’ll have a more equal number. Reinstating the patriarchy would be a great way to repel large numbers of women (not to mention many men who value equality). So restoring patriarchy is not the answer—not for men, not for women, not for the Fellowship.

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<sup>5</sup> Robert D. Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000).

There are some things I think we can do. These are things which shouldn't make the Fellowship less attractive to women.

One obvious thing we can do is to refrain from engaging in or tolerating male-bashing. I know I haven't always spoken up when this has happened—I have tended to be more tolerant of blatantly anti-male comments than of similarly blatant anti-female comments. Today I vow to speak up more when I perceive male-bashing is happening.

Another thing we can do is support and promote our Men's Group. This is part of my purpose here today. I believe single-gender groups have an important place in the mix of our Fellowship programming; as the Reading suggested, both male-only and female-only groups are incredibly beneficial. If anything, such groups may be even more significant for men because we seem to have so few places to share in a deep and honest way with one another. I think as a congregation we already do a lot to support and promote the Men's Group, but I bet there is even more that we could do.

We also need to be mindful of both genders in our programming. In our services, Adult Enrichment programming, Religious Education programs, and Social Action efforts, we need to try to make sure both male and female energies are welcomed (acknowledging of course that both energies can be present in a single man or a single woman). No one should have to check their male energy at the door! One key way we can do this is by making sure our programming has a healthy balance of head, heart and hands.

A great example of how to do this is our Coming of Age program. This is the program that helps our fifteen- and sixteen-year-old youth go deeper in their own spiritual journeys as they begin the transition from childhood to adulthood. Much of the program mixes the genders together, but some key parts also focus on single-gender groups. For example, male youth are typically matched with adult mentors who are male, and female youth are matched with female mentors. And at the Vision Quest retreat, the culminating retreat of the program, the male youth join together with male mentors and members of the Men's Group to ritualize and celebrate the journey from boyhood and manhood. Female youth and mentors and members of our women's groups similarly ritualize and celebrate the journey from girlhood to womanhood. I think this is a very powerful part of the Coming of Age program.

We can also make sure that male imagery for the divine is welcome here—just as female imagery is welcome, and genderless imagery, and no imagery at all are all welcome. In this way we can be more truly pluralist.

And we can invite men we know to visit the Fellowship. My colleague the Rev. Daniel O'Connell has instituted a "Bring a Man Sunday" at his church in Missouri. By far the greatest source of visitors the Fellowship is word of mouth: an overwhelming majority of our first-time visitors heard about it from friends or family. Inviting fewer women is not an answer to the imbalance! But inviting more men is.

There is one final way we can make sure we are welcoming to men: we can lift up Unitarian Universalism as a faith that is actually dangerous. The Rev. Daniel O'Connell suggested this in his "Bring a Man Sunday" sermon last fall. Our tradition is steeped in heresy, and even today, even in a country that values religious freedom, there remains some danger in being heretical. He said in that sermon:

Our religion is not an insurance policy for the after-life. Our religion is a ticket to spiritual adventure. (It affords the danger that cherished notions will be called into question. That old religious wounds will be re-opened (to be cleaned and more fully healed). That routines will be replaced with adventures into the unknown.<sup>6</sup>

So, O'Connell seems to suggest, if you're a danger-seeking male (or female), you don't have to go face bears on the Appalachian Trail to find danger! You come right here, to 2600 E. Philip Lane, and embark on a wonderfully exciting and dangerous adventure of the spirit!

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<sup>6</sup> O'Connell, p. 6.