

2004 UUMEN Sermon Award winner:
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Beyond Beer, Sex, Sports, And Business

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It was about 24 years ago, about this time of the year, I sat cross legged on a bed facing a young high school teacher. His face was contorted with anger and fear as he cried steadily, tears streaming down his face. I held both his hands in loving support and looked with awareness into his eyes. I could feel his hands tremble as he choked out the words, "They threw me into the dumpster almost every day. They would slam the lid down on me and beat the dumpster with sticks and throw bricks at it. I was terrified, and feared for my life. The chorus would start; 'Fag!' –'Fag!' – 'Queer!' I dare not even look out until I was sure they were gone. There was no where I could go and no one I could tell, especially my Dad, and I was too ashamed to tell Mom."

Two weeks later in a little shed meant for migrant farm workers in a Lake County vineyard, I sat across from another young man, a bright student from Oberlin College. He began to tell me of his obsession for fondling young girls and how hard he had tried to combat the feelings. He too was sobbing with grief and shame. More than that, he smelled rancid from sweating and was shaking as he poured his heart out to me. I held him tight. Each time he slowed down a little, all I had to do was pull him in closer and say, "You really are a good person." The amount of crying, sweating, shaking would deepen again. I came to know this process as "discharge."

In order to put this in context and explain why I was listening to this intense sharing, I have to take you back Five years earlier. I was a new single parent with three little kids ages 2, 5, and 7, I was hanging on emotionally by a thread, and the desire to protect my children and create a meaningful life for them. As a family we had survived a mother's long losing battle against mental illness, one where the safety of the children was at stake. The marriage ended in rational divorce. The next journey for me was finding someone who could love me first and foremost and willingly accept the impossible responsibility of helping me raise the kids.

That story in itself would be a romantic comedy that would warm your hearts, but to stay with the topic of this day, I will simply say that a miracle happened right here in [this] Church. I met my wonderful wife of 28 years. We would marry and she would bring with her, a new son for me. That made 6 of us and what an adventure it was. Because of her last marriage experience, [she] said that I would have to make two commitments. The first one was that I would never use sarcasm. "Yeah, right!" At that time for me, it was as easy as not breathing.

The second commitment was that I would have to dedicate myself to continuous personal growth, or [she] said she wouldn't have much hope for the marriage. I said, "Yes, of course." followed by heavy swallowing and crossed fingers. What a big surprise when I discovered that my new wife was a personal growth nut and leader of a group called, "The Re-Evaluation Co-Counseling Community, hereafter referred to as RC." The community consisted of 260 people from the greater [city] area that met individually and in groups, and took turns listening to each other. RC is a worldwide organization with an estimate of around one hundred thousand participants. Originally for this talk I prepared a short summary of RC theory. It turned out to be - even in short form- too cumbersome.

Suffice to say that RC is a process whereby people of all ages, and backgrounds can learn how to exchange effective help with each other in order to free themselves from the effects of past distress experiences. In recovering two people (or more) take turns counseling and being counseled. The one acting as the counselor draws the other out, and permits, encourages, and assists emotional discharge. The one acting as client talks and discharges and re-evaluates. Then they switch jobs. With experience and trust in each other, the process works better and better with outstanding results. The participants however, are not giving each other advice and are not working as psychotherapists.

Well, back to that commitment about personal growth. Surprisingly, I took to this interesting process like a fish to water. I soon found myself with about 5 to 10 sessions a week, assisting classes and attending workshops all over the Midwest. In a couple of years I began teaching classes around [the city] and at [a nearby] college in the evening. Between [my wife] and myself our home had become a drop in center, with ongoing classes just about every other night. [She] began doing regional workshops and I got asked to do men's liberation workshops. Talk about a peripatetic life. This pace went on for about 6 years when of course, we burnt out. We found ourselves always counseling on the distress we had from counseling. Is there something wrong with this picture? Not throwing the baby out with the bath water, I continued on the fringe of this organization. I am still actively participating in Men's groups and assisting in the process of Gay liberation.

But, why all this? Because I need to explain to you, how I happened to spend hundreds of hours listening to men and their stories. I'd like to share with you some of my insights. Many of the things I discovered also apply to women, especially with our changing culture but, on this day, the focus is on men.

I'm convinced that most of our problems stem from our childhood. As boys, early on, we were verbally conditioned by well meaning people with statements like, "Don't be a scaredy cat" "be a man!" "it's a man's job to die for his country" "you're acting like a girl". Fathers jammed these cliches on us hoping that we would not look or be, as vulnerable and weak, in a tough world ---and frankly some of hem tried to prevent us from being Gay. Moms followed suit in some cases, well meaning but actually setting the stage for their own oppression. After all, if "acting as a girl" is inferior, then so are women. I think statements like these initially did us damage and set men up to unintelligently accept and perpetuate oppressions on others. In some parts of society the process of growing from boyhood to manhood is beset by deliberate discouragement, and suppression of our abilities to feel our own emotions, much less, safely discharge them.

Fear, grief and loneliness are often covered over with a pretense of "confidence." For many men, the isolation that results from early violence, and harsh expectations of "what it is to be a man," leaves them literally unable to recognize, admit and feel their feelings. It sets them up to play oppressive roles, be it to women, children, themselves or society as a whole. It is not uncommon for men to arrive in Men's groups with statements like, "I really don't understand what's going on here, I've never been afraid in my life" "Well you know how it is with women, they feel more than we do." When we ask them why they think that's true, a common answer is "because I've never had feelings like that." When asked to tell us something about themselves, they initially respond, by giving something like rank, serial number and job description. If we say, those things are wonderful, but who are you? They look back with a blank stare and say what do you mean? Are you single, married, what are your interests, hobbies, do

you have children, what are your beliefs, what do you do besides work? “Oh, those things, do you really want to know?”

For some of us, our feelings are so dead that we can't conceive of any man being interested in more than the title of this Sermon. Beer, Sports, Sex, and Business. (maybe politics) Strangely enough, they're also the only subject matters where we are allowed to get excited and show emotion. Here it is--- I believe if you are not safely able to deal with your feelings after you've been hurt, it sets up a compulsion to replay the original hurt, or act, sometimes, in the victim role, or sometimes as the perpetrator, as in the original event. I have found that we have also been hurt as boys by some additional commonly accepted myths like “boys don't need to be held and nurtured in the same way that girls do”, or “there's a goodness and innocence present in women that is absent in men.” Another is, “that it is good for boys to hurt and suffer so that they harden themselves in preparation for manhood.” I remember a man that later sobbed his heart out to us, initially saying, “I think I'm in the wrong group.”

“Yeah? Why is that?”

“You guys don't know what a real man is!”

“Give us your description of a real man.”

“A real man is someone who would jump on a hand grenade to save his brothers.”

“Do you anyone who did this?”

“Damn right I do!”

“Tell us about it”.

The rest is history.

As males we have been taught to act as if we can't get hurt. We are not to cry or be frightened. We are not to act like we care deeply. We are not to act “too” affectionately towards anyone, and certainly not other men. In general, we are not to appreciate the beauty in the arts or express our feelings artistically. Males who don't comply with these restrictions, especially Gay men, are subject to rejection, beatings and even murder.

As boys many of us endured fighting as a regular part of our daily existence just to maintain a respected position among peers, and to avoid being shunned as a sissy, or to prevent oneself from being the target for bullying. I doubt that there are many men here today that don't remember hiding or running from bullies. If you escaped that, you were lucky or maybe you were the bully. Some boys refused to fight. This can sound like a good pacifist strategy, but it carries a terrible toll of isolation from other boys and often leaves a burden of shame about not fighting back.

Then there's sexual myths. Men and adolescent boys are viewed as insatiably preoccupied with sex. Many times if a male doesn't act like this. He is suspected of being Gay or not male. Of course if he does act like this, he is also regarded with disdain, or fear, as a wild beast. One of the most literal ways boys are pressured to prove their manhood to other males is through sexual experience. Boys are made to feel that to be respected as “manly” requires sexual conquests. It is made clear that loving relationships are not the point and not valued. Acceptance as a sexual male by a female friend is made “rite of passage” or “trial by fire” for teenage boys. At least one female thinks he is male, now the other half of the battle is to prove himself to other males. Then there is another issue here. Many men have been sexually abused as boys. Yes we are aware of that now with what's going in the Catholic church but, it is not limited to that situation. I have listened to quite a few men that have been abused by their own mother or father. The amount of shame that goes with this is immense, and few men ever get safe enough to talk about these issues.

I've noticed a new burden that is coming to the front. We are expected to "do better than our parents did." In our present economy this is impossible for most people. Many men struggle with feelings of failure as men. It is not very exciting to know that you've just spent four years in college, got your degree, have student loans to pay and presently qualify for a job selling coffee at [a coffee shop] for \$8 an hour. People say what's wrong with men these days, they don't want to get married. I say, who wants to commit themselves to a life of hardship, guilt for not providing for your family, and the loss of self-respect that goes with it. There's the flip side. I felt extremely guilty when I began to make 4 or 5 times my Dad's income. Having been poor as a child, I was ashamed. All I could think of was how hard my Dad had worked for so little income. I remember one period where my dad worked nine consecutive years with just Christmas day off. He never complained.

There's more, but this is getting to sound like a sermon. One more important issue and I'll move on. I would like to talk about homophobia and how that has affected men's lives. Fear of closeness between men is enforced with viciousness and sometimes violence in our society. Men are raised to compete viciously with other men, to scorn men who are culturally different than the culturally enforced norm and to seek and accept closeness exclusively with women. This keeps men isolated from each other in vital ways. It discourages us from supporting each other in meaningful ways and lessening the burden on women. It's hard stuff to work on. I remember assigning the task to a group of men to just hold hands as we sat in a discussion circle. I can tell you that after just a few minutes everybody was uncomfortable and some couldn't do it for five minutes. I cannot give enough thanks to the men in the Gay community that have had a roll in helping straight men work through this. Early on when men were having so much difficulty in just touching each other, the Gay men in our group stepped forward and showed us there was nothing to fear. This took a lot of courage. As the hugs went around, there was a whole lot of shaking going on for both gay and straight men, but once it got done it was never as scary again.

If you think there isn't homophobia in the gay community, you are wrong. Remember we were all systematically taught to not get too close to other men. Imagine what that feels like when you discover you're Gay. I remember in my thirties having discovered that getting hugged by other men was first, well maybe ok, then not bad at all and finally incredible once the trust was built. To be held in a caring way by another man, while crying about the hurts I'd endured, is one of the most liberating experiences I've ever had. In fact, I passed it on to my Dad. A year before my Dad's death (which was sudden and not expected) I decided to share my new hugging skill with him. I walked in his house one-day and when he least expected it, I through my arms around him and gave him a kiss on the cheek. He promptly said, "What the hell's wrong with you, are you getting a little light in the loafers?" "I think you've been in that Unitarian Church a little too long". I listened carefully while he discharged. He looked at me like he wanted me to just go away. But he underestimated me. I stopped over 2 or 3 times a week and continued my ploy. First I would hug him and then I would say, I just came to hear you complain. For the first 3 months he acted disgusted, but Mom told me on the sly that when he heard my car in the driveway he would leap up and start for the door giggling, and saying, "Here [he] comes, guess he needs another hug". My father never told me he loved me in words, he couldn't. No man had done it to him, till me. But his hugs got longer and softer and occasionally his eyes would meet mine. They said it for him. And when he died a few months later I knew I had connected with him in a profound way.

Why did I choose Beer, sex, sports and business as a title for this Sermon? With the exception of politics, which I should have added, this is what men are allowed to talk about. You can talk to just about any man on these subjects and you'll be considered manly and safe. In fact, you can walk into any bar and start a conversation with a guy you've never met. Could you get into an argument? Yeah you could, but you probably will not have your manhood questioned.

In Men's groups that I have facilitated and the Sacred Men's group that I have been lucky to be a member of for the last several years, we have gone beyond the trivial and tackled the hard stuff. We have initially taken time to tell each other our life's story. We take as much time as needed. We move from there to where we think we've been hurt and our encouraged to talk about, feel it, and let the emotion flow. And in time as trust builds, it does flow. Careful, loving, listening, is the most healing thing one can do for another. This isn't all we do. We assist each other through current losses, we've dealt with deaths, divorces, illnesses, and in helped each other raising our kids, sexual concerns, spiritual quests, support in aging and freed ourselves from the over burdening of our spouses and partners, with sole support of our happiness and emotional needs. We mentor other men starting groups and help them get started.

The youngest man in our seven-man group is 36 and the oldest is 82. We are Catholics, Sufi's, Pagan's, UU's and others. In order to keep the closeness going, we meet weekly all year around. We also play together by hiking and sharing a couple of weekend retreats a year. Playing of course is important. It's a hard nut to crack too. Well, if you are talking about organized sports where we have all been funneled, it's easy. But most men have lost the ability, to just be silly by age 25, so we intentionally go back and reclaim it. It's a joy to see hardworking guys drop that rigid composure pattern that's been put on them for credibility purposes, and pretend we are a goose or play capture the flag or Monopoly or Risk. The goal is to act like you are 8 or 9 years old. About the last time we were able to be ourselves.

In closing, I would like to share and propose a Men's commitment that we have used in most of our groups. It is as follows:

'I promise that, from this moment on, I will be proud to be male, and will seek closeness and brotherhood with every other man of every age, race, nation, class and sexual orientation.'

I will permit no slandering or disrespect or blaming of any man, for the hurts which have been placed upon him and will seek to restore safety to all men to discharge these cruel hurts.

I will fight to end, and eliminate the burdening of men with over fatigue, over-responsibility, and when not desired, coercion into armed service in which we have been brutalized, and forced to kill or be killed.

I will cherish my birthright of being a good, intelligent, courageous, and powerful male human.