

2005 UUMEN Sermon Award Winner!

MEN'S RETREATS AND UU PRINCIPLES

By Rick Lamplugh

After three years of helping to organize and lead Unitarian Universalist Men's Retreats, I have seen how participating in a retreat helps men make positive personal or spiritual changes. While I have facilitated groups for 20 years, these were my first men's retreats. I have been surprised at how Fellowship men seem so ready to push themselves to risk and reveal. I wondered: Do our highly esteemed UU values and seven UU principles help us with activities at men's retreats? Today, I'd like to explore that question.

Creating a safe space

For each retreat, the first activity is creating a safe place. Here is how that happened one year:

We stood in the chilly night air in a circle holding hands on the deck outside the retreat center. A porch light threw a soft glow on the faces of men varying in age from 35-85. Some faces showed more wear than others. Some were smiling. Some were tight with apprehension. But all 30 of us had at least two things in common: we are all men and we had all chosen to be together at this men's retreat.

We formed a line by age, preparing to enter the main room, which we had earlier transformed into a "men's lodge." The elders took their place of honor at the head of the line and led us through a curtain of black cloth into the men's lodge. As each man entered, he was greeted by applause from those who had already entered. He then joined in, applauding other men for taking the time and making the effort to attend. Hoots and howls joined the applause. A rousing male energy filled the room.

Moments later the men sat in a circle as I spoke briefly about male symbols scattered about the men's lodge.

A sheathed ceremonial sword from World War 1 called to mind combat, something so horribly masculine.

Three handmade masks portrayed our feminine side, our connection with nature, our dreams. These masks reminded me of other male masks that we might wear. The workaholic mask, smiling as we work ourselves to death. The strong man mask, proclaiming we don't need anyone as we suffer in isolation.

A colorful wall tapestry portrayed six figures dancing around a fire beneath a star-lit sky. Though dancing together, each figure dances in its own way, reminding us that we will

each experience the retreat differently. Some of us will keep our inner man contained because that's how we dance. Some of us will cry or yell.

A foot-long turkey feather, like the ones used by Native Americans as talking sticks, reminded us that one man speaks while the rest listen. In this way we create a circle where each man can share and we can all learn about each other.

The ceremonial entrance and focus on male symbols helped us transition from the busy outer world to a quiet inner world. The retreat had begun. We had a weekend before us to live one of our seven UU principles: the free and responsible search for truth and meaning. We would experience a number of exercises to which we could bring caring, compassion and honesty, some of our most treasured UU values.

Breaking the Ice

At one retreat after creating a safe place, we moved to our first exercise, an icebreaker involving something UUs are intimately familiar with: asking questions. We broke into pairs, each man finding someone he did not know well. Each man asked the other two questions: Have you been to a men's retreat before? What do you want to take from this one? Each man then introduced his partner to the group by sharing his partner's answers.

Answers to the first question revealed that some men were at their first retreat, some have been to a couple and some have decades of retreat experience. At all three retreats the answers to the second question revealed similar goals: "I want a more intimate connection with other men." "I want to talk about some challenges in my life." "I want to make new friends."

After breaking the ice, we moved to a couple of questions to help us know each other more intimately: What is one thing you are proud of? What is one thing you fear? At that retreat I looked around and saw men who were strangers only moments ago now listening intently and sharing intimately. I saw in action two qualities that bring UUs together: a mutual respect for each other and an appreciation of our different religious, philosophical and spiritual paths.

Afterwards, one man said that as he listened to his partner's fear, he thought of how many men never reveal their fears, yet here we are sharing ours. Perhaps we were able to quickly reach this level of trust because of a shared belief in another of the seven UU principles: the acceptance of one another and encouragement to spiritual growth.

That session ended with us standing in a circle, holding hands and toning. Each man filled the room with his breath, his voice. The tone faded to silence yet we continued standing, hands and hearts touching, unwilling to break these connections.

The Sharing Circle

Another activity is one we call the sharing circle. The format is simple: We sit in a large circle, the facilitator explains the concept that our sharing will center upon and each man

has a set time to speak his heart. This sharing session is the most popular of all the activities we have come up with in three years. It still surprises me how much men really want to talk when given a safe environment.

I recall one retreat where, over the course of three hours, each man shared his story about a man who influenced his life. We heard about men that had a positive influence. We heard about men that scared or hurt the speaker. We heard about uncles, scout troop leaders, grandfathers, school counselors, colleagues, sons, spiritual teachers. And of course, the man mentioned most: father. Regardless of whether father was physically present and loving, present yet emotionally absent, or totally absent, his impact is profound.

These touching stories are proof of the UU belief that the good we each do, whether it's helping one person or fighting a social wrong, helps make the world a better place. These stories also left me in awe of the power of these moments when one man helps another. Whether it's a 35-year-old helping a 13-year-old come of age or an 85-year-old helping a 53-year-old come of age, there is nothing as sweet as an older man mentoring a younger man. I think of our UU chalice symbolizing wisdom, knowledge and spiritual insight. I see the older men at our retreat embodying these same qualities and helping to pass them on to the younger men.

Going Deeper

Later in a retreat, after warming to each other, we try to go deeper. While this is a great goal, it's not necessarily easy. I recall one activity that exemplifies this. The facilitator had explained that we would find a partner and spend time sharing our answers to these questions: What challenges do you face as a man in today's world? What is the legacy your father left you? What advice would you give a younger man?

He asked us to risk and reveal as we answered the questions. After having completed several activities together, we figured we were ready to do that. Then he added a twist: While talking with our partners, the man answering the questions would rest his hand on his partner's chest near his heart and look into his eyes as he speaks. When his partner answers the questions, he would touch the other man's chest and look into his eyes. There was a murmur of discomfort as the facilitator described the touching.

I remember the planning session when the facilitator first described that activity. One of the committee members at that session pushed his chair back from the table, crossed his arms over his chest and said, "I don't want to do that. I'm not comfortable with that!" We laughed, he joined in, and we moved on to the next agenda item, but his message had been delivered. Over the next three planning sessions, I brought up the touching activity so we could discuss our discomfort.

The activity stayed in the retreat agenda and all men participated. As we shared afterward, the committee member who months ago had said "I don't want to do that!" told the story of his earlier discomfort. Then he said, "I really enjoyed that exercise. I

found that I could actually hear the person better because I could feel his heart beating under my hand.” Like our religion challenges each of us to find our own answers, this exercise challenged each of us to find our own comfort level with male intimacy.

These challenges can bring discomfort as well as growth. In fact, the committee member I have described happily gave me permission to share his story because it so clearly reflects the growth he is working hard to achieve as a man.

Time for fun

Of course, all work and no play makes for dull men and play is where Saturday night comes in. My favorite Saturday night involved a history book, trivia questions, a karaoke machine, and a willingness to stand in front of a roomful of men with other members of your team and make a fool of yourself. While this may sound a little unclear, trust me, it was great fun. It was also alcohol-free as is each retreat.

All too soon the pre-prepared trivia game ended, but the men would not let the karaoke end. Groups of men rushed to three boxes of costumes, threw on wigs, hats, glasses, jackets and more and sang along to their heart’s content with songs they loved. Finally the karaoke disc jockey, that was me, began to tire. I said, “How about if we make this the last song?”

“No way!” the men roared.

I dug through the CDs and came up with another request. Three songs later I tried again to kill the beast.

“Not yet,” came a weaker reply.

More men, more costumes, more singing.

Eventually, some men drifted off to the poker room. A few went outside for fresh air. And I was able to start packing the electronics. Turning down the karaoke machine, I heard a rhythm from a couple of wood blocks and a drum. To my right I saw three men smiling and starting to jam. Someone else picked up a shaker and added his rhythm. Another man grabbed the mike and added vocal percussion. Then a soprano sax started wailing from the back of the room. Someone cut the overhead lights, giving the room a cave-like feel. A spontaneous rhythm session was off and running for the next hour.

Sunday morning I talked with some men about the rhythm session and realized that something magical had happened. The trivia game and karaoke had primed the pump, as had other activities on Friday and Saturday. Without planning to, we had reverted to centuries-old male behavior. We were members of a tribe, in a cave, celebrating our existence with the simplest of instruments and the grandest of tools: togetherness. We had come for a retreat and retreated centuries into our ancestral past.

Sunday Service

Each retreat has a Sunday morning service. My favorite is the one in which two facilitators led us in an exercise to honor men no longer with us. We passed around a large piece of foam board, some small colored squares of paper, tape and a pen. Each

man wrote the name of a man that he wished might be here today but was not due to a parting of ways or a passing away. He then taped that square of paper to the foam board and passed all on to the next man. When every man had added a name, we placed the foam board covered with colorful squares in the center of the room. With words and silence we honored the lives, memories and void left by these men. Staring at the board, I cried softly for the loss of the two men I named. And I cried as I really understood how much we men can matter to one another, a powerful reminder of another of our seven principles, the inherent worth and dignity of every person.

After Sunday service, there's just time for one more activity before we have to return to the real world. The most powerful of these final sessions I recall began with talking. Within minutes I felt a restlessness growing in the circle. Then one of the men suggested that he could lead us in a simple dance called a "Dance of Universal Peace." We quickly agreed to stop talking and start dancing. We formed two circles, one inside the other. The dance leader taught us a simple song. We faced the man standing in the circle opposite, joined hands, and sang to one another as we danced. When the song ended, we switched partners, repeating the dance until returning to our first partner.

When the dance ended we spontaneously closed the two circles in on each other in a great "smoosh." Embraced by 29 other men I stood pleased and shocked at how we had again overcome fear and discomfort and broken another barrier to male closeness.

Afterwards

For each retreat we arrive a mix of strangers, acquaintances, and friends. We come to connect and share. Our UU values and principles helped us climb out of our comfort zones. We lean into discomfort and find new friends and new parts of ourselves.

I recall last year going to sleep at home on Sunday night with a huge smile on my face, thinking about meaningful moments with men representing three generations and spanning 50 years of age. I awoke on Monday morning and giggled, recalling other moments. And I recalled something more, something I'm not yet sure how to describe. But these retreats have shown me that there is a yearning we UU men share for connecting and community. A desire to join in a circle of men. To see how we are alike and how we differ. To hear the wisdom of our elders and the hopes of those younger. To feel and affirm, as UUs so often do, the power of the human mind and spirit.

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