

I'M IN! FOCUSED RETREATS AMONG MEN

By John Burke, Marty Arnold and David Gerlach



The Fox Valley UU Men's Group, called the Peaceful Warriors, has been holding annual winter retreats since 1992. Our initial thought was that a weekend long retreat would provide the participants with an opportunity to delve deeply into a focused topic and build a stronger bond among the men, who had attended the group's regular monthly meetings.

The format for the retreat was proposed by our first volunteer planners: Bob Fresen, Dave Gerlach and Doug Marsh. It proved to be so successful that we have maintained that basic structure ever since. We meet at a camp in mid-winter on a Friday night. After a ritualistic smudge, the planners review the theme and the schedule for the weekend, and address the ground rules which the attendees are asked to follow. That is usually followed by a check-in in an attempt to leave behind cares of the everyday world and be present for the retreat experience. We then begin the process of exploring the weekend theme developed by the planners.

Our meetings involve a circle of men, preferably set in a room with a fireplace. Although the planners prepare topical readings and questions for each session, the group is officially leaderless in that there is no designated person(s) "in charge". In reality, many men share the leadership responsibilities in a variety of subtle and not so subtle ways. Although some members have training in the mental health professions, the volunteer planners have varied every year and have been predominately laymen. The theme for each retreat has emerged from discussions among the attendees at the group's regularly scheduled meetings in the fall. The activities, techniques and strategies which have been used in our retreats have been drawn from the lifelong learning experiences of the members drawn from various training sessions and literature.

So that each man can more fully share, we've agreed to a few basic ground rules. We abstain from alcohol and street drug use. We do not discuss professional sports. (We made an exception for one member who actually was a former professional football player.) This represents a significant change from many male conversations in Northeast Wisconsin where drinking beer and talking about the Green Bay Packers is tantamount to a religion. We also agree to avoid talking about members of the group who are absent. Our last rule involves confidentiality. By keeping information shared within the group private, men feel more at ease verbalizing their inner thoughts, feelings and experiences. But, there are a couple of exceptions here as well. Several group members are "mandated reporters" due to their jobs so the group is forewarned that information shared about child abuse may have to be passed on to the proper authorities. In addition, the courts have ruled that information shared in a group with regard to criminal activity is not privileged. Fortunately, the percentage of time our members engaged in criminal activity is insignificant enough to still allow for open dialogue!

Rather than having a free for all discussion in which the most aggressive people dominate the discussion, we have opted for a formal process of taking turns. We initially passed a feather around to give each man a chance to speak, but there were significant disparities in the amount of time each man held the floor. Two men subsequently volunteered to make some timers which are set for two or five minutes respectively according to the question or issue at hand. Most men appreciate having a few moments when one's peers are attentively listening. Indeed many of the speakers conclude their statement with a resounding "I'm in!" to which many respond "Aho!" meaning "You have been heard". Some men are eager to receive feedback from the group. Other men seem content just to have had the chance to express their thoughts and feelings.

Our attendance has fluctuated over the years and that has affected the structure of the retreats. Our initial retreat included approximately 12 men. Our maximum attendance was about 28. When our numbers exceeded 15, it was impractical to have only one group and so we divided into two. This raised a new issue. If we maintained two consistent groupings, then some men never had the opportunity to bond with those in the other section. Some of the planners chose to address that by subdividing the two groups into four rotating ones. That enabled each man to spend every

session with a few members and have some limited time with everyone else. Other planners chose to avoid rotations to provide better continuity and trust development within each group.

Our program schedule has usually involved an initial meeting time of 8PM Friday. Following the initial review of the planned agenda, the guidelines and check-in, we usually have our initial thematic discussion for one to two hours. Our Saturday morning session runs from 9AM to noon. We have set aside recreation time on Saturday afternoon to allow us a chance to know one another in other venues. We have many enthusiastic cross country skiers in the group. Unfortunately, the snowfall in Northeast Wisconsin has been inconsistent over the years and that activity was not always an option. So, many men have gone hiking when the snowfall was minimal. Other men have chosen to stay in camp during their free time and participate in various activities including drumming and other forms of music, playing board or card games, or simply continuing to dialogue with other men. A small group has consistently gotten up and headed out before dawn, even when the temperatures were well below zero, in an all too futile search to watch the sun rise, which is a rare occurrence in Wisconsin at the end of January. For several years, we had a group member who led a Yoga experience after dinner, allowing everyone a chance to stretch and relax and laugh about their struggles to perform various body contortions. Following that, the Saturday evening topical discussions have lasted until about 1030PM. At our previous camp, there was a sauna where many men met and carried on those discussions well into the night. The current camp does not have a sauna but a sweat lodge has been proposed and will hopefully be built within the next year. After breakfast on Sunday, we have occasionally had an informal service followed by our final discussions and/or designated activities until we conclude the program at noon.

Specific Retreat Topics:

During our first retreat in 1992, the group shared their thoughts about the positive aspects of being a man in the opening session. Then each man was asked to present a symbol of himself to the group. Each man interpreted that in his own way and the objects that were shared varied greatly including a Swiss Army knife, a dissertation and a rock. That evening we addressed the issues of what it was like to be a father (for the dads present) or what it was like to be sons for those who did not have children. The closing session included listening and discussing a tape from Robert Moore, who authored several important books on the men's movement.

In 1994, the theme was Male Friendships. We addressed the quality of our current friendships and the barriers that stand in the way of developing deeper ones. Each man was invited to share or perform and discuss the importance of a favorite piece of music with the group. Many men put a lot of effort into that decision and it appeared to be a meaningful experience for the majority. We then spent a session discussing our past male friendships in terms of whether those experiences are helpful or harmful to us today in terms of our relationships with other men. Our Sunday morning service involved readings of men's stories about their struggles to develop and maintain male friendships in adulthood. At the conclusion of the weekend, individuals who were receptive received feedback from the group.

Our theme in 1997 was Love. After reviewing everyone's expectations for the weekend, we began by addressing the question "What does love mean to you?" In our subsequent meetings, the men responded to topics such as "Barriers to love", "Challenges of maintaining current loving relationships or establishing new ones", "Parenting or dealing with your own parents in a loving way", "Facing the expectations of others e.g. If you really loved me, you would be doing X, Y and Z", as well as "Infatuation, Romantic and Sexual Love". Each person was also given a chance to share a meaningful reading or piece of music related to love. The final session involved a group technique called "positive bombardment" in which a person sits in the middle of the circle and endures several minutes of personal compliments from the other members without getting a chance to refute or discount them. Since too many men devalue themselves, this technique helps them acknowledge their positive traits. This is important to help develop loving rather than dependent relationships.

Male sexuality was the topic in 1998. We began by addressing our expectations and fears that were elicited by the topic. We then addressed some of the common myths of sex, e.g. "Size matters", which were drawn from some materials on sex education. In order to increase our comfort discussing sex, we brainstormed different names of body parts and sex acts. We shared the highs and lows of our initial sexual experiences and discussed our sexual wounds including lost

loves, rejections and failures. Another session focused on positive sexual experiences and what we need to feel sexually satisfied. Finally, we addressed how we can communicate our sexual needs to a partner and attend to our partner's needs.

The topic in 2001 was focused on aging and facing loss. We spent time addressing our personal experiences with death that involved friends and family. On Saturday morning, we watched the Robert Redford film "Ordinary People" which is centered on a family's adaptation to the death of the favored son. The members had some very powerful emotional responses which were discussed immediately afterward. The evening session addressed the question of "What is the same or different about your life today as opposed to when you were one-half your current age?" People were specifically asked about differences in their family roles, careers, and sense of independence versus interdependence or dependence. Finally, on Sunday morning, each person was asked to write his eulogy assuming he had just one hour left to live. The specific questions that each man was encouraged to address were "Who was I? What was my life really like? What do I believe? How do I wish to be remembered? What are my continuing wishes and dreams?" Each man was then given a chance to share his eulogy with the group.

In 2003, the group's focused topic was Brothering. This was defined as caring deeply about one another, helping others through difficult transitions, relating respectfully and intimately to peers. An initial activity involved a hand-to-elbow circle, which symbolized each man's support for one another. We asked the men to think about and share how each has been "brothered". We shared experiences of being there for another and how it felt to help another man along his path. We discussed barriers to Brothering and the price men pay from such barriers like "the boy code", i.e. never show pain, gain power through accomplishment, and never display or acknowledge weakness. The weekend culminated with each man developing personal goals related to brothering.

Other annual retreat topics have included: "Developing Intimacy", "Our Shadow Side", "Our Warrior Side", "Significant Relationships", "Men at Work", "Your Money or Your Life", and "Change". Most of our retreats were considered open to any male member or friend of our UU Fellowship. But we have limited our invitations to men we knew during years when we anticipated especially powerful emotional impacts such as when we addressed the topic of "Anger Management".

Summary:

By centering our retreats on a single topic, our group has been able to explore particular men's issues in depth. This has proved to be a popular and successful approach among the many men who have attended year after year. In fact, two men have attended every retreat since 1992. These focused weekends have enabled the participants to learn better ways of facing life's struggles. When we have returned home, we felt that we were better equipped to handle all of our roles including partner, father and son. Indeed, many men have been encouraged by their partners to "go away" with the guys due to the positive changes that have been observed following other retreats. There is little doubt that our focused retreats have accomplished the original goal of deepening the bonds among the participants. As member Mark Walker has noted, the retreats have enabled us "to make friends for life!"