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Men's Night Out: 20 Years of Benefiting UU Men & Their Congregation

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## **Part I -- General Information about the "Men's Night Out " Group**

### **I.A Introduction**

When several members of the "Men's Night Out" (MNO) Men's Group at River Road Unitarian Church in Bethesda, MD noted that its 20th Anniversary was approaching, they suggested that the occasion should be appropriately celebrated. After considering several alternatives, it was agreed that the most appropriate way was to write up our experiences and to share them with other Unitarian Universalists.

This article is organized into two main parts. Part One (I) contains six items of general information about the first 20 years (1986-2006) of MNO. Part Two (II) contains personal statements by (or about) the 16 men who have belonged to this Group. The remainder of this Introduction provides brief descriptions of the general information items and summarizes the major insights that appear in the Personal Statements.

In Part I.B, Jack Edmondson tells how the group got its name and describes the first meeting of our Group at his home on December 13, 1986.

In Part I.C, Don Bunis describes the typical format of our 172 meetings to date (December 31, 2006). It should be added, incidentally, that our wives were invited to attend 6 of our meetings; and that for the past 15 years, these meetings have included annual weekend retreats.

In Part I.D, John Kelly provides a summary of the approximately 150 different topics that have been discussed to date. He notes that these topics fall in six main categories : Male Issues, Family, Personal Development, Spirituality, Life in the World, and Miscellaneous.

In Part I.E, David Schindel notes the diversity of our group and reminds us that it has included war veterans, divorcees, cancer survivors, research pioneers, artists, businessmen, engineers, diplomats, and devoted fathers all, including several with children in crisis. He also notes that our ages have been so diverse that the Group has included members of "the Greatest Generation", Baby Boomers, and Thirty-Somethings with pre-schoolers at home.

In Part I.F, Mike Lotze provides us with a biological basis for the major differences between men and women and reminds us that men need other men as mentors, allies, and as ultimate bullshit detectors.

In Part I.G, Dwight Cramer reports that in the 20 years since the founding of MNO, five additional Men's Groups have been formed at River Road Unitarian Church. Although some of these Groups have used somewhat different formats (e.g. meeting at the church rather than at members' homes), all of these Groups seem to have provided similar benefits to their members.

In Part I.H., Dave Johnson summarizes the many significant contributions that MNO members have made to River Road Unitarian Church and speculates about why they were motivated by the group to do so.

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In Part II of this article (the personal statements about changes in the members' lives and how MNO has helped them cope with these changes), the following insights are particularly noteworthy:

- Observation that the random formation of MNO was almost an occurrence of "Fate."
- Recognition that much of the success of the group can be attributed to all of the members sharing similar UU values and to many of them already knowing and trusting each other.
- Recognition that much of the success of the group can also be attributed to the fact that several of the members had previously taken "Peer Counseling" classes at the church that had taught them how to take turns, listen deeply, and respect confidentiality.
- Observation that MNO provided one man with his first significant role models since the early death of his highly respected father.
- Appreciation of the fact that MNO has validated one's values and way of life.
- Awareness that MNO shifted one business executive's view of most men being dangerous and untrustworthy competitors to most men being potential trusted friends.
- Appreciation of how MNO helped many of us in time of need - including serious illnesses of ourselves and our loved ones.
- Appreciation of the benefits of having members whose ages have ranged from the 30s to the 80s.

- Appreciation of the internet allowing MNO members who have moved temporarily or permanently to other countries (Australia, France, Israel, and Scotland) and to other states (California, Florida, Massachusetts, and Pennsylvania) to continue with their “Check-Ins” and their comments on the night’s “Topics.”
- Appreciation of the fact that the MNO members who have moved away from DC still make a special effort to schedule their occasional trips to DC so they can attend MNO meetings. The hosts of these meetings have also been very flexible in shifting dates if necessary.
- Recognition of the “primal joy” of connecting with other men at a deep, honest emotional level.
- Observation that what started as a one-time “Men’s Night Out” had developed for many of the members of the Group into a “lifetime commitment” to their new “brothers.”
- Observation that, with only one or two exceptions, MNO members have become increasingly active over the past 20 years as leaders in our congregation and in the world at large.

### I.B How the MNO Group got started

Written by Jack Edmondson with help from Dave Johnson

It all began at a Talents and Services auction in 1986 at the River Road Unitarian Church in Bethesda, MD. There were 25 or 30 tempting offerings publicized over several Sundays and one was titled “A Gourmet Men’s Dinner for Eight” sponsored by Jack Edmondson and Ed Marshall. At \$25 per plate, we were oversubscribed and accepted more than eight purchasers. We met on Dec.13,1986.

It was an extraordinary event at the Edmondsons’ place, where the hosts offered a full barrage of appetizers, wines, plus dips followed by a five-pound roasted striped bass, assorted vegetables, a salad, and dessert. The subject Ed and I chose for that first meeting was “Describe your most embarrassing moment.” It was a kind of “loosen up” session that produced an avalanche of memorable short stories. It even found two participants rolling on the floor with uncontained laughter. Ed and I had to push the guys out the door at 11:30 pm because my wife and kids were knocking at the front door.

Before the evening ended, however, someone suggested that we meet one more time. Don Dittberner volunteered to host it at his house on February 21, 1987. The topic we chose to discuss was "How we are like and unlike our fathers." That session went so well, that the group decided to continue meeting indefinitely.

We needed total privacy and our spouses and children honored that over the years. This plus the strict rule of total confidentiality of our meetings was the glue that kept the group together and enabled us to delve deeper into our emotions, old hurts, early childhood memories, depressions, parenting, self-appreciation, aging, and much more.

### I.C. Typical Format of MNO Evening Meetings

By Don Bunis

Meetings are held on Friday nights at intervals of five or six weeks. The typical format for a MNO meeting is for all members to gather in the early evening at the home of a designated host (hosting duties rotate). In advance of a meeting, the host will have organized food contributions that will accompany the main course prepared by the host, and the host will have announced a discussion topic for the evening. Topics are chosen for the relevance to issues that affect men personally and are intended to prompt introspection as well as self revelation. Members are asked to mull over the topic during the days leading up to the meeting and develop some ideas of how they will contribute to the discussion.

As members gather, there is a period of light conversation over hors d'oeuvres and wine. Approximately 45-minutes before the main meal is served, the host calls the group to order and asks members to "check in." Check-ins are brief reports of significant events in the life of each member and are generally limited to five minutes per member, unless someone has a major personal issue to bring up, in which case that person is granted additional time. By common agreement, only the member checking in is supposed to speak during his allotted time. Follow-up questions may follow a check-in as needed for clarification.

During the meal, the host begins the discussion of the topic for the evening and invites each member in turn to participate. It is the responsibility of the host to keep the conversation moving so that each member of the group participates but the conversation ends by 11:00 p.m.

### I.D -- MNO Topics Summary

By John Kelly

Since MNO started in 1986 there have been 172 meetings, covering a huge variety of topics. During this 20-year span, a number of topics have been chosen for repeat runs, naturally enough, and for a handful of meetings when issues being faced by one or more members dominated proceedings necessitating longer time for check-ins, the chosen topic has been skipped altogether and postponed to a later meeting. Even so, the number of different topics discussed by us over the years probably numbers about 150.

A survey of the topics covered reveals that they can be broken into six broad categories: Male Issues, Family, Personal Development, Spirituality, Life in the World, and Miscellaneous. A sampling of just some of the topics from each of these categories is included below.

Male Issues: male friendships, physical appearance and manhood, midlife crises, fatherhood, male as aggressor, self-appreciation as a man, what men really want, male mentors, sex and sexuality, and changes over time, attitudes and feelings about homosexuality, my most cherished feminine characteristic, communicating about sex with my partner.

Family: how we are like and unlike our fathers, our mothers, grandparents, our relationships with sons, fathers and daughters, creativity versus family responsibilities.

Personal Development: goals for the coming year, my Achilles heel, road not traveled -- looking back on decisions made, turning points in our lives, hopes and dreams, my best attribute and my worst, greatest fears, problems we have overcome, what keeps us going, our deep driving desires, vulnerabilities and insecurities, my three proudest professional accomplishments.

Spirituality: reflections on spiritual growth, important truths or rules we live by, why Unitarian Universalist?

Life in the World: coping with stress. how we handle anger. from where do we get solace. coping with change. aging. death and dying. medical crises.

Miscellaneous: most embarrassing experience, favorite work of art and why, importance of music in our lives, hobbies and fitness.

What stands out when reviewing these topics is both how enriching for us all these topics have been, and how rarely men talk with each other about them –

they're not the usual topic of conversation in the bar or while watching "the game!"

### I.E -- A Diverse Band of Brothers

By David Schindel

The food and wine have varied widely over 20 years of MNO meetings, but the real diversity is among the diners, not the dinners. The host for my first MNO dinner served a fine rib roast, but what really overwhelmed me was the series of personal histories that the members recounted as they introduced themselves. War veterans. Divorcees. Cancer survivors. Research pioneers. Artists and Businessmen. Engineers and Diplomats. Devoted fathers all, and several with children in crisis. Aging parents and aging bodies. Coming to grips with the limitations of their marriages, rediscovering the love they have for their spouses. We span The Greatest Generation, Baby Boomers, and Thirty-Somethings with pre-schoolers at home. Our perspectives on the world are different, but not our regard for each other and our commitment to the group.

At breakfast the next day, my wife asked me about my first MNO dinner. I said, "It's all private, and I can't say anything specific, but these are high-mileage guys. They've seen a lot of the world. I hope I have something to contribute to the group."

Each of the ensuing meetings has been like a twist of a kaleidoscope, showing new patterns, new colors, and new angles. Our stories continue to unfold, one meal at a time. We have come to know each other very well, but we continue to surprise each other with new revelations, new confessions, and new levels of intimacy. No matter how many layers of the onion we peel.

### I.F - What it Means To Be A Man - Male Agonistes\*

By Mike Lotze

This comes from our natural and not supernatural senses. We have been there for each other, as men have been since our proto-morality emerged with our ape ancestors. Men are biologically different and have different needs in bonding and mirroring than women. We are driven to achieve and have our achievements mirrored and appreciated, often by women, indeed often best by other men. Our narcissism consists of our desire to be reflected by others, listened to, and validated with our life experience helping define our individual quest and need for accomplishment and self-actualization.

As likely apparent, to be a man is singular and quite unlike women with their intrinsic balance, poise, binocular vision, social sense, and duality. This eternal feminine that captivates us is enabled by their double X chromosome and state of cellular chimerism as well as their ability to produce, nourish, and nurture children. Single, unprotected X in men finds us uniquely vulnerable but also capable of going very far, sometimes in the wrong direction but, with support and orientation, true and original and protean.

Men need other men, as mentors, as allies, as ultimate bullshit detectors, and as opponents enabling a base to push against as well as to hug. Our homes viewed as castles, our work as self-defining, our families as both comforting and, on vacation, oxymoronically challenging. The emergence of a struggling company of men, working together, eating together, and sometimes fighting together is indeed in our nature. Our moral being, appreciating justice, love, and compassion, is part of our essence and is hardened in the hearth of bonded experience. Good food, great conversation, and in vino veritas, each thanksgiving and reflection provides safer harbor, substance, orientation, and greater security during our lives' journeys.

\*The word Agonistes, found as an epithet following a person's name, means 'the struggler' or 'the combatant'. It is most often an allusion to John Milton's 1671 verse tragedy "Samson Agonistes," which recounts the end of Samson's life, when he is a blind captive of the Philistines (famous line: "Eyeless in Gaza at the mill with slaves"). The struggle that "Samson Agonistes" centers upon is the effort of Samson to renew his faith in God's support [Wikipedia].

### I.G - Other Men's Groups at RRUC

By Dwight Cramer

The Men's Night Out (MNO) Group, the first men's group at River Road Unitarian Church, was formed in 1986 as described elsewhere. The benefits of belonging to a men's group drew more interest as time passed.

A second group was organized in 1991 and by November of 2005 four more groups had been formed for a total of six groups and a combined membership of about 65.

From time to time, additional members of the church express interest in joining a men's group. One member of a group registers this interest and refers requests to one of the groups where the fit seems most likely to succeed.

## I.H -- MNO Contributions to RRUC

By Dave Johnson

Throughout this article are indications of the significant contributions that the 16 MNO members have made to River Road Unitarian Church. Several have chaired the Board of Trustees, the annual fund drives, the Social Justice Council, and the Endowment Committee. Others have initiated the annual All-Church Retreat, the Racial Justice Task Force and the lay-led Service Committee. Still others have served on search committees for new ministerial staff.

Many MNO members have also taught in the religious education program, led courses in the Adult Enrichment Program, and sung in the choir. Although the amount of financial giving (as at most UU churches) is confidential, it is common knowledge that MNO members have also been among the most generous donors to both our Operating Fund and our Social Outreach budgets.

I believe that much of this significant contribution by MNO members to our church was due to the examples that were set by our fellow members. It reminded me of the good example that had been set for me by some of my four older biological brothers. The major difference between the examples set by my biological and MNO brothers was that the former were "unspoken" while the latter were "verbalized." For our MNO meetings included such topics as "Our Mentors," "Why we are Unitarians," "What I Do or Don't Get from RRUC," and "My Role Models, Personal and Professional."

I still remember with pride that two MNO members (Don Bunis and Jack Edmondson) said at one of these meetings that I had been one of their most important "role models." Those kind words encouraged me to at least maintain - - and sometimes increase -- my financial and leadership contributions to River Road.

### **Part Two (II) - Personal Statements by (or about) Members of the "Men's Night Out" Group**

#### II.1 Statement by Larry Brandt

Born in San Diego to a lifelong Navy man (Dick) who achieved the unusual feat of rising from seaman first class to lieutenant commander. Mother Helen kept house and mediated between her husband and her children - we just did not salute often enough for him. Both parents have died in the last 5 years; with my father, the relationship never got to the level of friendship unfortunately.

After traveling the country, we settled in San Diego in 1963. I went to school there at San Diego State U. -- the easiest thing at the time since I had no particular academic drive and no notion of what to major in. I did moderately well in most things, was stellar in nothing and failing in nothing. Took a semester off to work and hitchhike around Europe and graduated in Anthropology in 1974.

Graduate school did not appeal to me so I took a federal entrance exam and went to work at the Social Security office in a poor part of San Diego. I was the guy that explained why your check had not arrived - a human complaint dept. Not appealing as a career, so I took the federal entrance exam again. Got lucky this time and was offered a job as a management intern at the National Science Foundation in DC. Moved to DC and had a series of one-month assignments in various admin offices and wound up in grants and contracts. Lots of office politics, which I found deadly, plus it was boring. One thing that made it more palatable was my two-week visit to Antarctica in 1982.

I had gone to night school to get a degree in video production, thinking I'd like to make science documentaries. Before I got up the gumption to leave, I was offered a chance to join a new office in advanced computing. I'd always wanted to work on the science side of NSF so I took the job (22 years later I'm now managing a research program in computer science called Digital Gov't.) Soon I found out how lacking I was in technical areas of computing. What with prerequisites, it took me 17 classes to finish a masters degree in computer science at Johns Hopkins. At the same time I was rebuilding a trash heap of a house on weekends as well as being a father to two youngsters - stressful to say the least.

I was a late bloomer socially and only started dating in my early 20s. Dated several people for various lengths of time and was thinking I'd never find the right person (or just as plausibly had gotten used to my own company and grown too set in my ways). Along about age 35 I began playing in a folk music dance band - guitar, mandolin and tenor banjo - which put me in touch with a great crowd of folks. Through the music scene I met my wife Susan when I was around 38 - we married a year and a half later. She's very bright, outgoing (to match my introversion), and a very talented flute player. The kids came along and are like she is, except they play the violin. Music has been an important part of our lives. The kids are great and I dearly love them - I think lots about being a good model for them and getting them started right in life. Susan also introduced me to Unitarianism for which I thank her. It filled a gap in my life I had not known was there.

Also recently I was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. I'm trying to figure out how to deal with that.

## II.2 - Statement by Don Bunis

I had not quite reached the half-century mark when I joined MNO. I felt I was at the peak of my professional and organizational powers having just emerged from a period of frantic activity that had seen my chairing several committees and serving a three-year term on the Board of Trustees at church, serving two terms as president of my neighborhood association, and simultaneously serving as a vice president of a professional association, all the while holding down the demanding position of registrar at American University. To say that I was badly in need of grounding is an understatement.

It seems I was re-living a life I had seen my father live until he had a near fatal heart attack at age 48 and died of heart failure 11 years later. He died before I had made my mark in the world and it was pretty obvious that, years after his death, I was still trying to prove I was up to the high standard he had set through his own example. There had been no significant men in my life in the 20 years since his death. Then, thanks to MNO, suddenly there were a dozen super guys with whom I could let my hair down and find total acceptance. What a godsend!

Until my wife and I retired and moved to Scotland in the fall of 2003, the MNO group was a calming influence on me, helping me through any number of crises at work, the serious illness of one daughter, and the transitions into grandfatherhood and retirement. Most important, the group often dealt with family issues of various members that helped me put the issues in my own family into perspective. I cannot imagine there would have been any other opportunity to do this, except possibly through a therapist. How much more pleasant to do so with highly-respected peers over good food and wine!

I have missed the regular contact with the group since moving away from the area. However, e-mail has proved a way of at least keeping in touch and I have managed to coordinate trips to the USA with MNO meetings at least once a year. It's not the same as seeing one another casually at church and then meeting every five or six weeks to share intimately on important topics that affect us all. And, of course, I miss the hugs.

## II.3 Statement about Jeff Butvinik (by Mike Lotze & Scott Alexander)

Mike's Comments -- It was our great luck that Jeff was brought into MNO after 9/11 along with Carl Skoogland. An environmental lawyer and father, amateur author, singer in the choir, and financially savvy individual, Jeff had similar issues to each of us in MNO but found that the timing, the venue, and the

interactions did not serve him well and he exited in 2005. In many ways, this illustrates that MNO wasn't for everyone and that it was resilient and able to both embrace new individuals and let go.

Scott's Comments (from "The Spirituality of Luck", a January 27, 2002 sermon by RRUC's Senior Minister Rev. Scott W. Alexander). Jeff Butvinik is a lucky man and he knows it. On September 11th of last year (that terrible day none of our hearts will ever, ever forget), Jeff (who is the Finance Chair and a stalwart member of our choir) of the congregation I serve flew out of Dulles Airport on a 7:00 a.m. flight bound on a business trip for Los Angeles. Jeff almost changed his tickets to the 8:30 L.A. flight, American Flight 77, which would have been considerably more convenient for him, but finally decided AT THE VERY LAST MINUTE to not bother with the change. That decision, which I am sure felt utterly inconsequential at the time, kept Jeff off the plane that smashed into the Pentagon later that morning. Luck is so curious and mercurial... Jeff knows how close to death he came... and surely he will never look at his life and at his loved ones the same again.

Editorial Note -- Jeff was a member of MNO for approximately 2 1/2 years (from January 12, 2001 to mid-2004).

#### II.4 Statement by Ken Button

That evening in 1986, as I placed my bid in the church silent auction for one of the ten spots for a "Men's Night Out" dinner, little did I appreciate that this random selection of RRUC guys would become the core group of my best friends during the following 20 years. With time-consuming business demands, very challenging family commitments, and squeezing in a fitness program, I faced the dilemma of finding time to create and to enjoy a circle of male friends.

The regular MNO dinners have provided a deeply important safety net for my frayed psyche by making sure that I stayed linked with friends, despite the ever expanding list of priority obligations that seemed to demand my attention elsewhere. For its emotional payback, an MNO evening cannot be beat. There is time for relaxed camaraderie, a "check-in" opportunity to get off your chest the concerns built up since the last meeting, and a more organized topic discussion which may simply be abandoned if any one needs the extra time to vent or to seek advice.

In short, the MNO group has been a wonderfully effective means of forcing me to keep in touch with the inner tumult and to regain the balance that comes from sharing with guys whom I know I can trust.

### II.5 Statement by Jeremiah Cohen (after only 9 months as a member of MNO)

My Poker Group used to be my de facto Men's Group. The guys in my poker group spent a lot of time with each other and became friends over the years. But the poker guys were not exactly the hugging types. Discussion of anything close to an MNO topic like "my most cherished feminine characteristic" or "my greatest fears" or "death and dying" would have been met with laughter and derision. Despite having an inherent need and desire to talk about these things with friends, I would have been laughed out of the room. I would have been torn to pieces. But then MNO came along.

In MNO, I like getting to know the older guys and having a sense of generations and history and men who are comfortable hugging each other and talking about things. It is a remarkably rich and satisfying experience given the combined life experiences of this diverse group of men. I like to just sit there and take it all in. I've discovered so much about myself --and the challenges that face me --by just listening to this wonderful group of men. At age 39, and only nine months into it, I have so much to look forward to and gain from MNO.

### II.6 Statement by Dwight Cramer

I was fortunate to be one of the original MNO participants after Davis recruited me at the auction in the spring of 1986. I have been impressed by the experience and achievements of those in the group. The meetings have always been fascinating and informative. This is a support and focus group beyond any I could imagine.

MNO meetings have provided a wonderful occasion for direct, honest discussion of personal problems and activities. Some of the most meaningful events in my life have occurred with this group of men. The breadth of knowledge among the members has inspired me and discussions of current events provided meaningful and useful information. The group has validated my values and way of life.

### II.7 - Statement by Don Dittberner

The Men's Night Out activity has, for me, provided a much needed means of achieving intimacy and achieving a level of Trust - as well as admiration for other men. Too often in the business world I have viewed other men not only as rivals, but also as dangerous competitors to be disparaged and scorned!

The opportunity to hear the life stories – and the current fears, worries and concerns – of my peers has been a marvelous means of healing the distrust, disdain, and antagonism that had largely been my social experience in a business environment. This attitude clearly spilled over into my private life with isolating consequences.

Further, I found that my level of admiration for the other members of our Group grew with each meeting – allowing me to finally reduce my ego involvement in outcomes, and to just enjoy the interaction!

Finally, I found that my own self worth grew as I discovered that others were interested in my successes and failures – and were willing to provide support and guidance when it was obvious that I needed it.

Looking back, my belief is that not only have I come to accept myself more fully – just as I am – but also I have vastly improved the manner in which I interact with others.

Thank God for the MENS NIGHT OUT group!

#### II.8 Statement by Jack Edmondson

The MNO for me has been help in time of need. In the summer of 2000 I was recovering ever too slowly from open heart surgery plus an inflamed prostate. The two propelled me into a deep depression combined with physical distress of unspeakable proportion. I was utterly miserable and my wife could barely cope.

We had scheduled a MNO evening in Berkeley Springs, W.V. – a two-hour haul. My guys gave me the better part of 90 minutes that night, listening intently to my physical and emotional woes, and there were plenty. I asked for help and they responded with alacrity, using experienced counseling, TLC and affirming my inherent worth.

After a couple of months I recovered my equilibrium thanks to these wise guys and their follow-up.

#### II.9 -- Statement about Gary Harper

Gary Harper was a founding member of MNO and organized our Retreats of 1996, 1998, 2000, and 2002.

#### II.10 Statement by Dave Johnson

In 1986, I was the oldest person (age 68) to join the River Road Unitarian Church (RRUC) Men's Night Out (MNO) Men's Group. At our first meeting I was impressed with how well most of the men shared their "Most Embarrassing Moments," listened carefully to others etc. As a psychologist, I attributed this partly to the fact that most of us already knew and trusted each other as members of the same church. Also, several of us had attended courses at our church on how to be a "Peer Counselor."

The first major benefit I received from membership in the group was related to a physician's recommendation that I have major surgery on my right shoulder. When I expressed my concern to the group, Dr. Mike Lotze encouraged me to get a second opinion. It resulted in my just doing shoulder exercises instead of undergoing surgery.

In 1990, the group supported Mike in submitting documents to the Joseph Priestley District that resulted in my being named that year's JPD "Unsung UU" (mainly for my work in racial justice). Similarly, the group supported my starting a Mentoring Program at Beacon House in Washington, D.C. Brother Bunis was particularly supportive in his role as a fellow member of the RRUC Task Force on Racial Justice; and Brother Schindel provided significant help with the computer work that led to our receiving a \$100,000 grant from a local foundation.

In 1997, I served on the Search Committee that brought Rev. Scott Alexander to RRUC. MNO member John Kelly was also on this committee and we supported each other in recommending this wonderful openly gay person to become our senior minister.

In 1999, my wife and I sold our home of 30 years in Bethesda, MD and moved to the North Hill Retirement Community in Needham, Mass. Partly because I failed in my attempt to start a Men's Group at North Hill, I suffered a fairly severe clinical depression. Jack Edmondson and other MNO members helped me recover. I was also helped to regain my mental health by joining the UU Society of Wellesley Hills (UUSWH).

In 2001, I was diagnosed with prostate cancer. Mike Lotze helped me decide between surgery and radiology and I received 42 effective radiation treatments at Mass. General Hospital.

In 2006, at age 88, I was able to use my 20 years of experience with MNO to help plan UUSWH's very successful first Men's Retreat. Finally, Mike Lotze helped me cope this year with the hospitalization of our youngest daughter for serious health problems.

My life in general has been greatly enriched by being a member of this Men's Group - and it has helped me cope with several major challenges related to my health and my aging. I encourage UU men of all ages to consider starting and/or joining similar groups.

#### II.11 Statement by John Kelly

My group of male buddies, the MNO gang, have been a critical support for me in a couple of instances of personal crisis over the last 20 years - in particular, through the extended period of time I was going through heart-wrenching difficulties with my ex-wife over child-custody issues. This support was not so much through any sage advice that was offered, though that was there, but more through fundamental emotional support and simple affirmation and reality checking. And at the same time, through the emotional needs of others during the various hurdles and obstructions that life invariably offers, MNO has given me many opportunities for the development of my own nurturing capabilities and consequent personal growth.

However, perhaps even more important than the group's role in assisting each other through major life events and problems, has been the simple fact of male friendship that the group has provided. Over the years I've had numerous work colleagues, tennis buddies, and so on, but extremely rarely would these friendships provide opportunities for exploring personal issues in any depth. Where else but in a group of trusted brothers like MNO could one share with another male one's deepest fears, fondest hopes, difficult problems, and so on - where one could say anything and know that one was accepted and that everything said was strictly confidential. For all that, I am deeply grateful!

#### II.12 Statement by Mike Lotze

There have been many life changes and challenges in my 20 years in the MNO that emerged from River Road and its auction. Support and appreciation for the efforts I made there with Greeting; Coffee, Conversation, and Controversy; the Board and the first Retreat were much valued. Secondly, and most defining, my emancipation from the NIH to create a new cancer center and program here in Pittsburgh 16 1/2 years ago tested me greatly.

Knowing that there was a group that supported and reflected my life changes, and even made the trip *en masse* to our home for a weekend here provided the kind of community I needed and wanted without really even understanding at the time how precious and important it was. Having the ability to access others'

insights and professional capabilities and provide my own has and continues to be quite a grounding and satisfying experience. Finding a home away from home with the Kelly's on my way in and out of Bethesda; having MNO members at Joan's and my 50th birthdays, and retreating to St. Michael's, Rehobeth, and Coolfont were remarkable and satisfying.

Absence was also part of the group experience. This, initiated with Jack Edmondson to Jerusalem, extended with Dave Schindel and the Parisian period, Dave Johnson retiring to Massachusetts, Don Bunis to Scotland, Gary Harper to the arboreal heavens of California and Florida, John Kelly to Australia, and me to Pennsylvania. No matter the move, the group persisted and reinvented itself. Indeed MNO was, is, and I suspect always will be about change.

New members were brought in with much careful consideration for their values and ability to be supported and to contribute to the group; and the result was strengthening and still engaging for those who moved beyond Bethesda and returned.

When I transitioned in and out of the pharmaceutical industry several years ago and often as not found myself in foreign ports in Asia and Europe, the grounding bonhomie, warmth, and understanding in the group allowed orientation, in an otherwise disorienting movement and exuviation and reinvention of myself.

Now with incipient empty-nesting, recognizing at some primal level that Olympic athleticism and Nobel accomplishments are out of reach, I find myself comforted and challenged by the group to do the hard work of refining and reevaluating myself, my marriage to Joan, and our family's ever-changing lives. The organicity and primal joy of reconnecting with the group has allowed me some solid sense of community in what would otherwise be a nuclear and existential anomie.

### II.13 Statement by John Richardson

As the next to the oldest member of MNO, I, at age 65 in 1986 when the Group was started, found it to be of great help in meeting the challenges of growing older and of writing my memoirs. That book, entitled "A New Vision for America: Toward Human Solidarity Through Global Democracy: A Memoir," was finally published in 2006. On page 131 of these memoirs, I say that "More than 15 years of membership in a male support group called 'Men's Night Out,' launched by fellow members of the River Road Unitarian Church of Bethesda, Maryland" helped me deal with some significant personal challenges.

Incidentally, I also noted on that page that I had included the Seven UU principles in the book's Appendix. Finally, I have written recently that MNO has been "My most influential, illuminating, and constructive non-family adult association."

#### II.14 Statement by David Schindel

We moved to Bethesda in 1986 and I poured myself into my new job, a new (unfinished, in fact) house, two small children and what I hoped would be a new and improved period in my marriage (it has). We looked around for a religious community and joined the local UU church, and I poured myself into church activities as well, teaching in the RE program and a making a huge effort on the annual pledge drive.

I had never heard of Men's Night Out before getting a call one evening from Dave, one of the church's most respected members. He told me about MNO and that they were inviting me to join. He said they were making a lifetime commitment to me - a lifetime commitment being offered by a circle of men, most of whom I'd never met. The group had been in existence for several years, and Don Bunis and I were the first "expansion teams" - invited to join to counteract the departure of two members. What would it be like? Would we fit in? Would we be accepted into an already established group?

MNO was, and has continued to be, an island refuge for me. When we meet to check in with each other, it's also the time I check in with myself. What's going on in my life? Am I making good judgments, and am I living the life I intend to live? As I listen to my brothers do the same, we learn from each other, challenge each other, and continue to surprise each other.

We've added new members twice since I joined MNO. Only two members have really left the group - others have moved away but we stay in touch and break bread together when they come to Washington. I was the expatriate member of the group during six years in Paris, and I rejoined the group when I got back.

Each time we add a new member, we sort of reset the clock. We introduce ourselves to the new members, but in the process we reintroduce ourselves to each other. We always learn something new about each other. The new guys probably don't appreciate the jolt of life their arrival adds to MNO. But we've made a lifetime commitment to them and each other, and that's been a great source of comfort and pride to me since that phone call almost 20 years ago.

#### II.15 Statement by Carl Skooglund

As one of the youngest members of MNO (a mere pup at 43 years old) I have the great benefit of being privy to the life experiences of my senior brothers. The elders in the group don't just share their "war stories." They open their hearts and share their deepest joys and sorrows. While this is not so uncommon with men of my own generation, I understand that this is a truly remarkable thing for men of their generation.

Besides getting a window into the lives of older men, it means a great deal to me - it changed my notion of myself - to have them share their lives with me in a way that indicates that I am their equal, and that I am worthy of their trust and respect.

### II.16 Statement by Peter Wilson

I find that the fact that our collective experience over the last two decades started out as a RRUC auction event is the perfect example of "kismet" or fate. For me, I treasure this happy accident. What emerged was a genuine collective experience that has become for me a central element of my identity.

I have to give credit to Jack and Davis, the founders of the group, for keeping us true to the intent that our meetings would systematically focus on the "real world" and not just on superficial chatter. A key feature of the group was the concept of regularly "breaking bread," a concept central to our collective success. Through good food and good and bad times, I believe that we have explored very personal events and details of our lives and that has been vital to our bonding. That bonding has led to a degree of trust in each other that I have only with my wife, Candy, and no more than two very long-term friends outside of the group.

Another very powerful feature of our group has been its diversity if only across the spectrum of age and personal circumstance. With deepening trust and closeness between all of us, I believe that we have created an emotional lifeboat which a number of us have used when the seas have become very stormy. Out of all of this experience, I believe that this group of men has redefined what is possible on an emotional plane that can only be described as a powerful fellowship, if not love.

Finally, I think that our group will endure, even after my departure. I am more confident about that prospect after experiencing how the group responded when others left. recently seeing some of our we went through another challenging passage of seeing some of our dear friends leave the group, if only in space and time, and gaining new members. Although difficult. that process is one of

genuine renewal. Naturally, I do not plan to leave emotionally or physically any time soon, but I do like the idea that the group has a life of its own and beyond my own.

I am a member of the MNO. Lucky me! Peter

THE END!