

O Brother, Where Art Thou?

An essay by the Reverend Kenneth S. Beldon

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The scene is by now familiar to me, although, even in the midst of joy, it is somewhat dispiriting. Another new member Sunday: our membership book is opened once more to receive the signatures of the new people who desire to join our liberal religious community. The names of the new members are read aloud. They come forward to the front of our sanctuary to sign their names and to receive a flower and a packet containing introductory information about our congregation. They are welcomed by both myself and representatives of the Board. After each person signs the book, they remain standing near the pulpit with the other new members. When all the names have been read, the congregation stands and reads together a covenant of welcome and affirmation to the new folks. The assembled worshippers applaud, and then, the ritual concluded, everyone takes their seats.



Glad tidings and good feelings abound on the day that we welcome newcomers to our congregation. We all partake in the excitement that comes from knowing that our faith is being shared among a greater number of souls. And yet, I can't help feeling that there's a pattern emerging during the several years that our new congregation has been welcoming new members: a subtle indication that our liberal religious community may not be reaching a group of people in need of the liberating message that Unitarian Universalism has to offer. When I look at our membership roster, when I try and track attendance and participation in our congregation, I arrive at this question: Where, I wonder, are all the men?

The relative scarcity of men in my congregation is evident not only on Sunday morning. It can be perceived when our committees gather, when religious education classes meet, when social events bring us together simply for the sake of shared time. When I examined the visitor's book for the last six months, women outnumbered men by a substantial margin. The concern for gender equity is preeminent when our nominating committee considers names for Board positions: are there enough men willing to serve so that there might be equal numbers of male and female?

Such issues are not limited to my congregation alone. A panel discussion at the General Assembly just passed in Cleveland wondered aloud about the status of men within our religious movement by asking the question, "Is There a Future for Men in Unitarian Universalism?" It was reported that nearly two thirds of new members in many of our congregations are women, and that congregations are often hard pressed in finding men to serve in positions of leadership. We also know that a clear majority of the people now in formational and seminary training for the ministry are women. Over half the ministers in our denomination are women. Women, it seems, are stepping up to the call to service in our congregations, while men, it appears, are stepping out. To say it plainly: we don't need fewer women, we do need more men.

The various feminist and women's rights movements in the history of our country have affected our association more profoundly than any other American denomination. This ought to be a cause for unequivocal celebration for men, not just for women. It would be an overstatement to say that there are as many varieties of feminism as there are women, but feminism cannot be seen as monolith, asserting only one ideology or view about the status of women. There are certainly varieties of feminist thought that diminish, if not demean, the experience of men, and doubtless some of these ideas are found in our churches, operating in such a way to make some men feel unwelcome and unwanted. But, as a man and a minister I can say that I have found male bashing to be extremely rare and it is usually bound up with other

issues regarding the use and abuse of power within our congregations.

The practical commitment to feminism I've most often witnessed in our churches is similar to how my ethics professor, a Catholic Sister of Mercy, in divinity school defined the word. She said that feminism was a belief in equality and mutuality between the sexes grounded primarily, but not exclusively, in women's experiences and was also committed to the flourishing of all human beings. The concern for the flourishing, the full development of the potentiality in all our lives, male and female, can be said to be rightfully the aim and goal of our liberal religious movement. At their best, our congregations aid in the cultivation of our gifts, our strengths, our healing, and our ministries. With its concern for wholeness and a commitment to standing against all those elements in our common existence that inhibit and destroy the fullness of lives, feminism provides us a vision of our communities as places wherein lives are transformed. Such a promise is not limited to women, but exists as a challenge to men to find fullness in our lives as well. Such an opportunity may be daunting to many men who are used to patterns of relationship that are circumscribed within the set patterns of "male experience." I fear that the men most in need of healing and supportive community in our congregations are the ones least able to communicate their needs about how congregational life can be relevant to their lives.

In the first year of my ministry, there was a young couple in the congregation that has since left the church. They were having financial difficulties, problems with chemical dependencies. Their marriage was failing and they would be splitting up in the near future and leaving the area, going their separate ways. I knew all this from the woman in the relationship. We talked regularly as she made her plans to leave. Although she knew that what she wanted was to get out, she also worried about her estranged husband, his lack of community, and social isolation. I resisted calling him for some time, figuring that he would call me when he was ready. Finally, just a few days before he was to leave town, I contacted him, and we met that afternoon.

When he arrived at my office, he was clearly on edge. His self-esteem was shaken. When he spoke he rarely looked at me, his eyes rimmed with the redness that came from consistent tears. He shared his story, punctuated with sobs. As I listened I realized that he and I shared some commonalities.

We were both the same age and both went to established northeastern prep schools, separated by less than a hundred miles. He was clearly a jock in high school, the kind of fellow student around whom I felt nakedly inferior, covetous of what I believed to be his self confidence, contemptuous of the apparent ease with which he roamed the campus and commanded attention while I nervously attempted not to be noticed.

Yet, here he was, barely a decade after prep school, weeping in my office about his failed career, poor financial choices, and his inability to save his marriage. He was no longer the young man whom I would have so arrogantly and enviously judged in high school. He was now just a broken man, shuffling about in the shattered pieces of his life. On the other hand, the woman, now his ex-wife, was able to reach out to me, to other people in the church, able to speak of her pain and also to start to plan her life as it would be after they split. He left town, his pain barely known to anyone in the congregation and barely communicated to me. I think of him often. I wonder what more the congregation could have offered him. I know that I could have offered him more of my time, more of my presence, but instead assumed he would take the initiative if he wanted to talk. How easily I fell into a conditioned response to engage in an emotional *laissez faire*. Our nascent men's group was not in existence at that time. In his silence, he suffered alone.

The social critic Stanley Aronowitz has written: "One point to be made is the extent to which men become victims of the emotional plague of always having to be in control; how much we are deprived of genuine recognition not only by our mates, but also by our children. Male power comes at the price of emotional isolation."

Aronowitz's message is that traditional ideas about masculinity construct the need for power and control over one's life and emotions by restraining the need for being close to others. Being in true relationship with another person, or to ourselves, means that we must be willing to risk, to let our guard down and venture into emotional

or relational terrain where asserting unilateral control can only be a bar to authentic self realization or disclosure. Under traditionally masculine terms, the extent to which one is vulnerable is seen as an index of inauthentic male experience. Because of this, many men, especially straight men, avoid being vulnerable, as we are not often rewarded and more than infrequently chided for such behavior. The primary male virtue has been traditionally regarded as strength, albeit an emotionally truncated, self-sufficient one, and the primary male vice has been perceived weakness or being "soft".

Although the incident occurred nearly three decades ago, we can remember Edmund Muskie crying on the campaign trail in 1972 as an example of a man who very publicly transgressed the norms of supposed real manhood. His perceived sin was that he sought psychological counseling. In both seeking support and then in his reaction to its being made public, Muskie violated two of the key rules without which traditional conceptions of masculinity stand: not being self sufficient enough to solve his problems on his own and then expressing his pain in plain sight through his tears because, of course, boys (and by extension, men) do not cry. But, of course, boys and men do cry and the question is whether our congregations are safe places for men to express the whole of themselves and the holes within themselves.

However we define that overused word, spirituality, it consists in part of our response to this question: how do we live in the presence of the unbidden in our lives, the grace or the sorrow that visits us not through the mechanism of our control or our strivings, but simply through our being alive? As our congregations become places where not only reason and rationality are enshrined as our birthright, men, who are more conditioned to focus on what we can control, are often left behind. We need a language of male relationship to self and other that speaks of our ability to receive from life, and from each other, without it be construed, or felt, as weakness or passivity.

Even as some aspects of patriarchy are no longer as powerful in our society, the cultural attitudes of many men still retain some of the traditional, sexist ideas concerning the proper role of men in relation to women, other men, and their own selves. Within the past decade we have seen religiously affiliated mass mobilizations of men in the form of the Promise Keepers and the Nation of Islam's Million Man March. Whatever the important differences between these groups are, their affinities are telling. With both groups the rhetoric of male responsibility is established as part of a response to what Barbara Ehrenreich calls the male "flight from women." To counter this flight, (which is perceived as a double departure from the traditional male roles of protector and provider), the man is urged to atone, (re)assume the role of the head of the household, and return to his position as guarantor of the well being of his "dependents."

Such language is highly problematic when examined from a perspective that seeks to posit equality and mutuality as the ideal in gender and sexual relations. Not only is such language deeply homophobic, for it presupposes heterosexuality as the absolute norm, but it assumes that male supremacy and a hierarchical ordering of gender relations are natural and inextricably embedded in nature or God's law. In the view of such traditionalists, men are not so much estranged from women as they are from their realization of the (divinely ordained) law. In this view, straight men occupy the top human rung of the great chain of being. Such was the language affirmed by the Southern Baptist Convention a few years back, when it called for wives to submit gracefully to their husbands.

Our Unitarian Universalist tradition calls men into a much more nuanced conversation about the meaning of being a man: one that wants to celebrate and affirm the varieties of men's experiences while also insisting that such valuing occur in the context of religious community that refuses to privilege male lives over female lives. Being a man in this environment is not always easy. Especially for men of a certain age or generation, men who may not have been raised by feminist moms or in homes where power and decision making was shared equally between the sexes, or who have worked in environments where men did one type of work and women another type, such men have seen many of the changes in broader society reflected, often more intensely, in the life of our churches.

In response, some men have retreated from the lives of their churches out of the misguided, but understandable, notion that the only way to share power with women was to hands over the reigns and step out of the way. While perhaps motivated by a desire not to impede progress, such steps can also be a simultaneously retreat from church life, a belief that "it's not really my church". Acts motivated by such thinking can only mean that there are more men who are less personally invested in the lives of their churches, giving less to them and getting far less from them. We are called to engage in the life our churches, even when we might be challenged, rather than slip quietly away from them.

There are other men who, seeing the various ways in which women's history and identity is celebrated in our congregations, feel as if they are being left out and desire men's experience to receive the same sort of validation. As I overheard a man once say at a UU conference, "If there's a women's history month, shouldn't we have a men's history month as well?" While such questions seem to aim at equality in form, they elide the very real history of male power and privilege, both in the religious and secular worlds. As UU men we need to be honest about the inequalities that are a part of our common inheritance and recognize the corrective differences that are undertaken to uncover and uplift aspects of our heritage that misogyny and sexism derided or helped to render invisible. The time when men's experiences were taken to be normative for all is a world well lost. We are called to a prophetic, not a reactionary, masculinity that does not begrudge women when their voices are sometimes heard louder than our own. We have more important work to do than feeling as if we are in constant competition to get our message, the value of our own lives, out there.

When I picture what men need more than anything else in our congregational life, I think of an exercise that some of our congregations use to help in the process of discerning individual gifts and ministries. A box is divided into four quadrants, on the vertical axis lies these words, one written on top of the other: like/don't like; on the horizontal axis lies these words: one written next to the other: good at/not good at. A person fills them in according to which box dictates which combination. With the idea that we all bring gifts to our religious communities, and also aspects of ourselves that we would like to have augmented, the boxes are a diagnostic tool. Often the most important box for people is the one that combines those skills that a person likes with the self perception that greater proficiency is desired in those areas. If what lies in there for many men is a greater need for self-revelation and authentic relationship with ourselves and others, then this box holds the beginnings of the map to wholeness. Only by being fully present to ourselves, even in understanding that what and who we love is often not within our control, then we might come to find ourselves and begin to make a home in our houses of worship.