

SAVE THE MALES!

My evolution started back in 1972 when I was going through a major life-struggle—a divorce to be specific—and looking for support. Up to that time I had essentially been a female-identified man like the bulk of American males. Yet, at this crisis point in my journey, I realized that I could sure use some direct emotional assistance from my own gender. Lamentably, too many men still avoid seeking help, unless they're desperately trapped by a lost job, a broken relationship, a shattered dream. Even then, all too often men choose to lick our wounds in solitude.

Back in 1972, we men were pioneers, or should I say “guinea pigs,” because we were clumsily navigating the beginnings of a radical transition in male consciousness and conduct. We started male-specific circles, as women had done a couple decades earlier, affinity groups where we could exchange notes about our male-based (not male-biased) hungers, hurts, and hopes. It was Southern California to be sure, but male-bonding was still a scary, bold endeavor. We called our group M.A.L.E., an acronym that stood for *Men's Awareness Liberation Effort* ...noble words per se, even if a bit pompous sounding. Nonetheless, we adult men were on our way to a new land of emotional release and soulful growth, a locale from which I and countless others have never returned. Indeed, a remnant of that embryonic Unitarian Universalist men's bunch in Pasadena, California still gathers. Clearly, what we introduced in 1972 was neither faddish nor foolish.

We men were primarily concerned about changing the male reality **internally**, in terms of society's suppressive male stereotypes and **externally**, in terms of our oppressive male behavior toward men, women, and children. We wanted to become more emotionally expressive and ethically worthy men. However, substantive change doesn't come easily, for, as they say, only

wet babies willingly change. The rest of us hanker to have our nagging pain go away without having to alter anything.

Some of us have been relentlessly committed to self-change, because we truly envision that when men, society's prime power-brokers, change, the world will radically change as well. When men risk a more mature masculinity, such as I will outline today, everyone benefits: for starters, men live healthier and longer lives, and our relationships with children and women are more respectful and rewarding. And the earth cries out for true husbandry; plus even the gods and goddesses are waiting for men to shed their impenetrable macho skins and don a new way of being—fierce for equity, robust with laughter, open to grieving.

I bet my life on that vision and try to behave accordingly. Saving the males has been a central, governing mission of my life journey!

I've seen salvational change happen, with my own eyes, to hundreds of men; yea, it's happened frequently to my own crusty, gnarled soul as well. I've seen men whose lives have turned outside-in, then inside-out again—men who have become gentler yet stronger males at home. Men who have dared to quit their secure jobs, because the posts became too confining or incongruent with their values. Men who have left all sorts of closets for closer encounters with life. Men who have dumped much fear for much love. Men who have marched for causes they wouldn't even write checks for in earlier days. Men, who have left unhealthy bonds, wobbled, whined, and wept for awhile, then stood tall and moved ahead. Men who have agonizingly matured, right in front of us, into a more suitable sexual orientation.

I've seen men massage men's backs, using their hands, for the first time, to touch another man for healing, not hurt. And, afterwards, pledging never to do harm with their own hands ever again...to anyone, anything. I've seen men, who've been emotionally constipated most of their days, never stop crying for an entire weekend, their tears wetting, then cultivating, the very ground upon which they stand.

Can you feel the earth shake a bit and the heavens sing when imagining such kinds of stories of salvation?

I've seen men finally "get" the ravaging reality of racism, often when unavoidably facing a burdensome condition of their own. I've seen men emerge from prison life to tell sagas of agony in our safe, saving circles...then other men, converted by these brave confessions, stirred to go forth and work in brothering other men behind bars.

I could go on and on. And we will; we must never run out of opportunities for men—starting with the very ones in our own household—to boldly unravel sagas of bone-deep hurt and spirit-soaring hope in sacred circles that gladly harbor their hearts.

And that, my friends, is why we have congregations, that is why we need men's groups to enable more and more men to become brothers—for that's how males are truly saved...brother by brother by brother in safe circles of trust.

Now, by talking about saving the males, I'm not trying to be precious or exclusionary. We've got to save the females, the whales, the males, and more. The whole universe, what Kurt Vonnegut called "The Great Big Everything"! In truth, we Unitarian Universalists claim that all reality is utterly interdependent. So, saving one portion of existence banks on saving the rest of it. But I'm a man who's chosen to remain a man; hence my homework starts with my own gender and identity. I've got to clean up my side of the street first, as they say!

. As Unitarian Universalists we're a covenantal not a creedal faith and as such based not on right beliefs but on enduring promises. We're unabashedly a vow-making religion. Yet, in our tradition, being liberal has too frequently been mistaken for being foot-loose and fancy-free—committed only so long as we feel like it. But the truth is that we Unitarian Universalists must choose neither bondage nor bondlessness but healthy, holy bonds, in all areas of our existence.

So, if I were to list the seven key promises, pledges, vows that we liberal religious men need to make and keep in order to grow into mature brothers, these are the seven I'd offer.

The first and foundational vow is for men to create and sustain a brotherhood, a fellowship of men. Brothering is a pledge to live life *relationally* not independently, as lone rangers. We're men by birth; but we become brothers through an intentional effort to relate caringly and justly to other living entities, starting with other men, often the toughest relational challenge of all for males to navigate.

We men are socialized to lead solitary lives, but as a brother in our San Diego Men's Fellowship once remarked: "I'm a self-made man, but if I had to do it over again, I would call in others." All is no longer lost for Raymond, for he's now fortified by the transformative embrace of caring men in one of our dozen brothering support circles at First Church.

I challenge us men to risk being brothers with other men, that is, sharing our hearts openly and humbly with them, trading in debilitating patterns of aloofness, alienation, and abuse for bonds of affirmation and affection.

Hence, our first vow is not merely to occasion an annual men's day or event but to establish a permanent, brothering community. We aren't only calling for a few good men; we're pressing for a multitude of good brothering communities, throughout the land.

Second, we must pledge to be *responsible* men. Being responsible means neither playing dumb nor inadequate, but utilizing whatever power we have to alter the world. Being responsible means repenting of our wrongs rather than ignoring or wallowing in them. Repent literally means to "turn around," to change, to be transformed. We must vow to approach another man, woman, or child and apologize for how we may have treated them: to make amends, to reconstitute, if possible, any outstanding tormented or devastated bonds.

I ask you men, my fellow-brothers, to stand up and accountable for what we've done or failed to do as individual men. Repent, reconcile, be responsible. Let's quit blaming other men or women, and let's quit banking on outside agencies or even deities to accomplish what we must and can do ourselves. Let us heed Gandhi's words: "You must be the change you wish to see in the world!"

Third, we men must pledge to *rejoice* in our own gender but never at the expense of the other gender. Rejoicing is not equivalent to basking in self-glorification. Rejoicing refers to authentic, earned pride not arrogance. Whatever social travesties men perpetrate, ours can become a healthy and honorable estate. The history of men is amply filled with both delivering and receiving wounds, but we're never exhaustively described by those wounds.

Therefore, we do not tolerate the bashing of women, gays, lesbians, bisexuals or persons of color, and we refuse as well to scorn or humiliate men qua men. Mature men want our gender and individual ourselves to be brought to account, to be measured by justice, to be challenged without being trivialized.

As radical black feminist bell hooks urges:

So many people have expressed this real hard-core sense that men are never going to change. And I have thought, can you imagine the despair of black people under slavery had we felt that there was nothing about that system that was going to change that there was nothing about white people as a group or as individuals, that would change? One of my favorite statements that I say a lot is the whole notion that 'what we can't imagine, can't come to be.' So we've got to believe that men can change.

I've seen men change; I've been one.

Fourth, I invite men to be *recreative* of body.

Essential to our re-creation is becoming playful creatures: playful not for competitive triumph but primarily playful for the sake of bouncing and sweating, moving and leaping, chanting and drumming—being the animals we truly are. We need to engage in frisky, gleeful

activities where we recreate not for reward but for renewal. As Robert Fulghum reminds us: "To be a useful Hopi is to be one who has a quiet heart and takes part in all the dances." Dancing has never hurt either the ground or anyone else, and we men need to learn how to touch others and the earth for pleasure not for pain.

Upon returning from their solitary exploits, the 12th century Knights Templars would seek communion not through talk, though there were many spirited tales to be told—but through dance. With their arms clasped in a circle and their bodies moving in unison on the Earth, they received one another through dance. No wonder we're called a men's *movement*, not a men's system!

Fifth, for men to shape an evolving humanity, we must pledge to *release* our psyches from emotional miserliness. It's no secret that men are socialized to live emotionally constricted, physically shortened, spiritually stuffed lives. Conversely, mature men are both pale-blooded (reflective and sweet) **and** red-blooded (fiery and assertive) and can demonstrate such expansive emotionality on a daily basis. Mature men exhibit testosterone-with-heart.

One of the most prevalent yet almost completely disregarded disorders in modern society is male depression. It remains unmanly and shameful for men to admit their despondency, let alone seek help. Yet the high price we men pay for withholding our feelings of hurt and anger results in sleeping disorders, irritability, indecisiveness, a sense of worthlessness or recurrent thoughts of death or clinical depression. Alas, too many men truly lead lives of "quiet desperation" to use Thoreau's classic phrase.

It's been my experience that when men dare to risk sharing feelings of rage, torment, and mourning, when we open themselves up emotionally in trustworthy intimacy with men, we will never be able to close up again. Mature men are finally starting to recognize that the best antidote to depression is not medication, important as that can be, but rather verbal revelation and tearful release.

Tears of joy, tears of sadness, tears of gratitude are often the most profound barometer of a man becoming a brother. As novelist Pat Conroy put it:

I could feel the tears within me, undiscovered and untouched in their inland sea. Those tears had been with me always. I thought that, at birth, American men are allotted just as many tears as American women. But because we are forbidden to shed them, we die long before women do, our hearts exploding or our blood pressure rising or our livers eaten away by alcohol because that lake of grief inside us has no outlet. We men die because our faces are not watered enough.

Sixth, we men will change ourselves and revolutionize the world when we **restore** our beleaguered, thin souls with intentional times of sabbath and self-care. We spend the bulk of our days climbing over our fellow-human beings or up all sorts of mountains yet forget to recharge our batteries via proper honoring of regular quietude and rest. We're driven to **do** and **have** but have forgotten to **be** and **become**. Yet in order to be mature male beings, we must practice the unaccompanied arts of reflection and sauntering, being still without having to produce, acquire, or achieve anything. Men testify that when they spend even 15 minutes a day in restorative quietude, they become less frenzied men, more serene and centered.

Seventh, we must vow to build the bridge called **respectfulness** with the entire universe, starting with our human sisters and brothers, pledging to disarm our hearts in their presence, to share our truths with growing trust. **Right relations** is the phrase the Buddhists use to describe being in just and caring connection with all living reality. It entails relentlessly pursuing intergender understanding and equity, living with children in compassionate ways, being stewards (husbandmen) of the earth's resources, being in reverential communion with the Great Spirit.

Thirty-seven years ago, I began a path upon which I have been and will continue to be all my life—the pathway of being a brother, a mature masculine presence. And more than that, I have devoted my life to creating brothering communities in order to support and nudge other men to take and keep the seven vows of mature masculinity: to live **relationally**, to be a **responsible** man, to **rejoice** in your identity but never at the expense of anyone else, to **recreate** your body, to

release your emotions, to **restore** your soul, and, finally, all the days and nights of your journey, to treat this one precious and holy existence **respectfully**.

I invite you men, I urge all men, to join us in the brothering venture. Your life and those of other fellow-travelers banks on it. Your life will be transformed, even saved, if you vow to be a mature man and pledge to do real men's work! Enlist now, join here!

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