UU Men’s Groups: A Vision Unfolding

By Tom Owen-Towle

“I'm a self-made man, but I think if I had it to do over again, I'd call in others.”

—Roland Young

A Reason

One of America's burgeoning revolutions finds men meeting to share pieces of their deep hopes and hurts, as they unwrap their self-sufficient exteriors to exchange touch and thought with other men. As one prominent advocate for men's rights and growth has put it:

We men have related to one another in two prime ways: (1) Side-by-side as work associates, committee members, and team players; or (2) Back-to-back as cohorts in the military or police force, where we cover for each other in life-dependent situations.

Now we are finally learning to enjoy face-to-face encounters where we talk directly to one another as brothers in close, personal, trusting fashion.

We join a larger movement of men to exchange notes, to hold and shove one another, to create tomorrows together. There aren't any Santa Clauses or theories or women or children or religions to account for what we do with who we are. We're ultimately responsible for ourselves.

There are many reasons, as women have long realized, for gender-based dialogues. First, there are male concerns that are properly and beneficially shared man to man. (For example, fathering and being the son of a father.)

Second, there is considerable healing to be achieved between men, because we have been pounding upon, even destroying one another, ever since Cain slew his brother Abel. We can learn respectful, loving ways to be brothers—not to be our brother's boss, keeper, or lackey, but to be our brother's brother.

Often we men build bonds with each other only to run into deeply ingrained homophobia about intimacy. Or we may feel comfortable being open and intimate with our buddies during a men's group, but then revert to negative, distancing patterns when back at work amid the "good old boy's network."

The best way for us to heal our wounds and befriend our fears is to spend time sharing aches and aspirations, telling our real stories, face-to-face, brother to brother, as peers in supportive, open places.

A Model

At First Unitarian Church in San Diego, our monthly men's discussion group was launched in 1978 and then blossomed into a robust, multi-faceted Men's Fellowship. We have found certain characteristics essential to maintaining a vital men's experience in our congregation and we pass these guiding aspirations on to our friends across the continent.

Be Visible: Any man coming into your UU community should know that there is an ongoing men's program available. Reach out to all brothers with ample publicity and genuine embrace.
Be Varied: Try to offer (in your overall congregational life) a range of men-only experiences from which men with different needs and interests can choose. These may include discussion, ritual and support groups, retreats, work/play projects, political action, and spiritual discipline. Men's events flourish when equal attention is paid to stretching bodies, awakening consciences, stirring souls, and comforting hearts.

Be Inclusive: Be intentionally affirmative and welcoming of those traditionally marginalized in religious communities: gay men, physically or emotionally challenged men, men of color, more conservative men, and others. To expand our witness and diversify our membership requires low-key yet persistent 'missionary work' among the men in our UU societies.

Be Intergenerational: UU men's groups tend to attract men especially in the 30's to 50's age range but often leave unaddressed younger and older men whose participation would enrich the overall experience. As appropriate, reach out to both groups—the elders and the adolescents—with play nights, initiation ceremonies, work parties and outdoor treks.

Be Bridge-Builders: In addition to sustaining separate gender-based groups, build bridges between the men and women of your congregation. The purpose of such dialogue is to address sexism and male privilege, share respective stories of hurt and hope, diminish distrust, and foster understanding on the road to gender justice and joy. (Our local Men's Fellowship has also started a working group on "Stopping Men's Violence" against other men, ourselves, and especially against women and children.)

Be Servants: A risk of enthusiastic men's programming is that it becomes insular and self-focused. Reach out beyond your own egos and activities and connect with other area and continental men's activities. Heed the call to participate in service projects or protests in your larger community.

Be Humble: If our masculine quest is to maintain equilibrium and be enduring, it will need perspective and humility (a word related to humor, humanness, humus). Growing, generative men are summoned to be husbands of the earth, stewards of soil and sky. Cultivate a sense of humility that enables you to be serious without being grim, playful without being foolish, proud without falling prey to arrogance.

Men's increasing spiritual awareness and ethical responsiveness, sustained by regular sessions with other men, will profoundly affect the women, children, plants, animals, and deities who share our common universe.

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