

## **Why Men Hate Church**

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Well it is good to be back worshiping with you this morning. As many of you may know I have been set low with a nasty lung and sinus infection the past couple of weeks which was bad enough that it meant me missing Flower Communion. I was very sorry to have missed that Sunday, only the second time in my career that I have missed a Sunday morning due to illness. And I am very grateful to my friend and colleague Rev. Barbara for filling in at the last minute. On the up side, I already know what we will do for next year's Flower Communion!

You know it is no fun lying in bed all day having to watch bad television. Just sort of wrapped up waiting for my fever to break I had no choice but to wait it out. Even with all of the channels we have these days it still seems like there is nothing on. I think this is a conspiracy of bad television to ensure that we are not tempted to stay home, but to go out into the workforce. But you know, lying there in a heap, I started to gain a new sympathy for the zombies in the movie I was watching. I

found I identified with them in a odd sort of way; not quite human, shaking, and hungry.

For this was what I felt like when I would get up. What greeted me when I would emerge zombie like from my bedroom were two very healthy, very energetic little boys who hadn't seen Dad all day. They would run toward me, practically knocking me down. "Daddy Daddy Daddy! Let's wrestle!" Which is one of the games we normally play shortly after I arrive home. Something I do almost every day, wrestle with my little guys, I haven't been able to do for some time now.

One of the things I am most grateful for on Father's Day is just that: the enthusiasm my sons have for seeing me. They are of the age where stimulation is in constant demand, and by the late afternoon Mom is pretty well tapped out and needs a break. So when I get home round two begins. It is such a blessing to have someone be that happy about the fact of your arrival home. No matter how bad a day I may have had, there are at least two people glad to see me, and I didn't have to do anything to earn it.

Since today is Father's Day I thought it would be appropriate to expand the topic a bit and look at male spirituality more generally. Certainly women's spirituality is an area about which much is written, but a spiritual practice for men is relatively new even among Unitarian Universalists. One of the first observations commentators on male

spirituality make is: where the heck are the guys? This is not to say that I or anyone else don't appreciate women's participation in church life. It is vital. It is simply to point out that on the average Sunday, or in the average committee meeting, one will notice an obvious gender disparity. This morning I wish to merely raise the question, "Why is this so?" I might even venture an answer; although no one really knows the definitive answer.

Now of course this issue is not confined to our church or even our denomination. The Episcopal rector Fredric Dan Huntington wrote that "The church is composed chiefly of females and aged men." Interestingly, he made this observation slash lament in 1856. For me this places the issue in perspective. "Where are all the men?" is a question that points to a phenomenon not to a problem. A phenomenon, fewer men than women come to church, is something to be understood so that church can be for relevant and exciting for everyone. Where I part ways with David Murrow in his book that I read from this morning, is that he looks at that and sees it as a problem to be solved. Essentially his argument is that men hate church because it is not macho enough. It is too feminine; focused on relationships, sharing, and staying safe. Real guys like action movies, stuff that blows up, taking risks, having adventure, frank and open talk about sex, and probably serving red meat at coffee hour. The so-called men who like going to church of their own free will Murrow accuses of being the sort of guys who carry their wives

purses in the mall: henpecked, metro-sexual, and effeminate. As I was reading his book I kept waiting for him to use that classic term coined by Dana Carvey on Saturday Night Live: girlie men! And male clergy are the girlie men-in-chief.

One need only scratch the surface of Murrow's assessment to find the blatant and often sexist gender stereotypes inherent within it. He just paints with too broad a brush and doesn't account for the nuances of real life that don't work into his pre-established theory. Lest I fall into the same trap by painting him with the broad brush of calling him a sexist and discarding all his observations, I should point out that there are a few flecks of gold mixed in with the sand here. He does make some valid points here and there that are worth considering.

First I think church should strive to be relevant to the lives of people regardless of who they are—man or woman, old or young, gay or straight etc... One's gender identity, whatever it may be, is not something you are expected to forget and certainly not apologize for. At its best, being a man or a woman or transgender is part of the human experience we have and it should go into the mix of trying to make sense of our life in a meaningful way. As we teach our kids and adolescents in the sexuality curriculum Our Whole Lives, this includes being a sexual being. For better or worse of course—sex involves choices and making ethical and responsible choices regardless of one's sexual orientation. What is religion for if not to help us to make ethical and responsible

choices in life, and that includes sex as much as any other dimension of who we are.

Perhaps David Murrow had other things in mind when he suggested that sex be frankly tackled in the church. One of my old professors was a fellow by the name of Bob Moore who is an expert in Jungian archetypes and how they apply to male spirituality in particular. Bob Moore would call Murrow's definition of male spirituality the immature, or uninitiated version of what it means to be a man. Moore was fascinated by male rites of passage in native cultures. He noticed that there is a part of the male psyche that is adolescent; it hasn't experienced the "real world" of initiation and therefore is ruled mostly by fantasy of what it means to be a man. A mature male spirituality is able to reconcile ambiguities and tensions—guys who willingly go to church would be an example of one of Murrow's tensions or ambiguities. What if there was an authentic expression of male spirituality that included coming to church and actually was willing to enter into meaningful and deep relationships with other people?! Maybe that is what church is guiding, not only the men but everyone, toward having that deeper sense of community.

I saw this as a lay person when my friend John first joined the church in Ann Arbor. John was a single dad of adolescent daughter. Like many people it was his child who first brought him into the church. Her name was Mary, and when she was around twelve she started to

attend a number of her friends' bat mitzvah's. Eventually she began to ask her father what was perhaps the inevitable question, "When do I get my own bat mitzvah?" Well the problem was that neither John nor his daughter, nor his family for that matter, were Jewish and so it was not really possible for Mary to celebrate the Jewish coming of age tradition for girls. In fact John wasn't really anything. And so he began shopping around for something that seemed to fit.

John was, and probably still is, one of the most outdoorsy type guys I know. By the time I met him, he was one of the leaders of the young adult group in the Ann Arbor church and the one who would organize the big trips and events. We once went rock climbing in southern Ontario mostly with his equipment. He wasn't a jerk about it, but John was a guy's guy by anyone's definition.

So my friend John found the Unitarian Universalist church at first to find a spiritual home for his daughter. In the process he found a home for himself. He connected to a group of people who shared his interests and activities. Even when his daughter graduated he was still a part of the congregation. A few years ago, I heard that tragically that John's father passed away. This was a hard moment for him, as it is for anyone who loses a parent. The world seems a bit colder and lonelier when one of the two people in the world who loved you unconditionally leaves it. But you know what? John didn't hold that in; he let it out. At the monthly meetings of the young adult group they go around and share

what is going on in their lives. Pretty standard small group stuff really. John had an outlet for expressing his grief. He found a community of people who really cared for him and told him so. They were concerned for his emotional and spiritual well being. And you know what—he let them. He didn't shut them out, but rather was brave enough to be vulnerable in their presence and he let them into his pain. That is a key component of the beloved community that we affirm every week in our worship service.

As you might be able to guess from the way I am telling this story, John is someone I have liked and admired for a long time. His spiritual journey, and particularly his response to the death of his father, are an example of what Bob Moore would call the mature or initiated male spiritual energy. You see that adolescent machismo really masks a lot of fear and insecurity. It is a cover for not really knowing or understanding how the world truly works and what one's place is in it. A mature spirituality, of any gender, is able to let go of that fear and drop the masks of pretention and bravado. It's about being comfortable enough in your own skin so that you don't care that much about other people seeing you as a "manly" man or not. You can lay all that stuff down and just be your self—just express yourself in whatever you are thinking or feeling in an honest way. That to me is a hallmark of a mature spiritual life. It balances that proactive male energy that is at the heart of the adventurer's spirit with the feminine energy of connection and

relationship to others. In the end, a mature spiritual life is all about the balance between the male and the female archetypes that are within us all.

Which in an interesting sort of way, is what God was saying in Genesis 2. Yes, many a feminist critic has spilled a good amount of ink commenting on Adam's superior role over his wife, and how this is a biblical support for patriarchy. This is hard to deny, and I will not mount a defense of that passage here today. However what I want to look at is the part just before that. God says, "It is not good for the man to be alone. I will make a helper suitable for him." Why would God say this? What was behind that observation? I think it is an observation that the world was somehow out of balance with just one kind of human being in it. Men and women were needed not just for reproduction and population, but that what people like Murrow stereotypically call "man" and "woman" are in point of fact two sides of the same coin. They are simply different aspects of humanity that may be emphasized more in one gender than the other in a broad sense, but we cannot do without one or the other unless at their mutual expense.

I believe the role of the church, regardless of whether you are a man or a woman, is to help move us toward that mature spiritual life that is a balance of those energies. This is not an easy process, nor is it particularly fun all of the time. Growth experiences tend to be notoriously bothersome. When I missed a couple of Sunday's ago

because I was sick, I have to admit there was a part of me that resisted the notion. There is something in me, maybe it is machismo, maybe it is ministerial workaholism, or perhaps it is a performer's insistence that the "show must go on." Whatever it was, there was a part of me that was insistent that I was going to be in church two weeks ago. "If Dirk Nowitski can play in a NBA finals game with a 101 temperature, and win by the way, than I can go to church and talk for an hour." There was a point in the day when that line of reasoning made some sense to me. But as you might guess, as Sunday morning rolled around, such arguments began to lose their luster. I came to see that the body does send you messages, and only a fool ignores them when they are that obvious. A 102 temperature, which was what it crept up to by the time Sunday morning came, is such a message. It is an odd realization to awaken to. Most of the time we take it as a given that we are in control of our bodies—at least that much in life right? And yet sickness or a chronic condition can very quickly reveal that that control is a very fragile illusion. Figuring this out is does not make one less of a man, it makes you more of a human—aware of limitations and our finitude.

Perhaps guys just don't like admitting those limitations, and that is why church is unappealing. Perhaps I need to make more references to NASCAR or something during sermons. Whatever the reason I think the church should also strive to be more relevant and meaningful in everyone's life, men and women alike. There is hope for us I think if

you consider that old joke that says that Unitarian Universalism is the halfway house between the Methodist Church and the golf course. So if there are a lot of guys out there on the golf course, we are meeting them halfway.

As I wind up this morning I just want to say what a great year it has been this year, and to thank all of you, men, women, and children, for making it so. It continues to be a privilege to serve as your Senior Minister. It has been a hard year in some ways; it's not easy saying good bye to Rev. Barbara who is striking out on a new chapter in her ministry. But I have to say, I am excited for us because we too are striking out on a new chapter in our ministry together. Who knows where that journey will lead us? I will tell you that I am looking forward to it, and I look forward to starting it all over again with you this Fall. I will be in the office this summer off and on, but I will worship with you again on Ingathering; this year to be held on the tenth anniversary of 9/11. Until then, have a nice summer, and happy Father's Day. Amen  
Blessed Be.