

## LECTURE IV

# MEN AND MIGHT

## WIELDING AND DISTRIBUTING POWER IN RESPONSIBLE WAYS

Delivered Sunday, February 3, 2003, in Berkeley, CA

*The planet needs warriors and men of conscience. In the current state of affairs we have too many powerful men without ethics and ethical men without power. We need to teach the powerful to have ethics. And the ethical men must learn how to become powerful.*

Aaron Kipnis

### Introduction

If you heard lecture II where I divulge my proclivity to faintheartedness, you're probably wondering why this sweet, agreeable guy is tackling such nerve-racking and politically-charged topics such as men and power, followed by men and violence, then men and aging. I'm wondering myself.

Yet in truth, I know why. Basically, I'm just trying to be morally braver during my homestretch. I'm set on pushing my given gender to greater accountability. If we're ever going to approximate a more mature liberal religious masculinity in the 21st century, men can't just massage our navels and purge our souls. We can't merely feel good; we've got to try to be and do good, and that requires full engagement with the most difficult and demanding of ethical quandaries.

Look at brother Jacob in Hebrew lore who wrestled ferociously with the mightiest of beings yet emerged not only with his humanity intact, but also sporting a new name, "the one who strives with God," along with an attendant limp...both marks of deepening masculinity. Following in Jacob's footsteps I invite men to grapple boldly with our power, violence, and aging.

### The Basic Meaning of Power

*Power is the formative factor directing our daily lives, more so than love, deep dreams and passions of the soul, or the advances of technology.*

James Hillman

The essential, rather innocent, definition of power is the agency to act, coming from the Latin *posse* meaning "to be able." Some modicum of power comes with the territory of being alive. Power, per se, is amoral. It can be used, as can physical energy and nuclear force, for good or bad ends. It may be rational or irrational, constructive or destructive in its consequences.

When Nietzsche proclaimed: "Wherever I found the living, there I found the will to power," he was implying that we fulfill ourselves through demonstrating our able-ness, through wielding the might with which we've been blessed. That some humans have been robbed of our bedrock dignity or that others of us have squandered our strength, doesn't diminish the fact that being powerful is an original blessing shared in common.

Power is the application of mind and courage to force. When unreleased or squashed, power dissipates and human beings wither. To actualize our god-given power, then, is the basic charge delivered at birth. As Emerson said: "Do the thing and you shall have the power. But they who do not the thing, have not the power." Consequently, the gravest human tragedy is not that we die, but that we fail to employ our full capacity while we're alive.

We earthlings fabricate all sorts of reasons for not using our power: we are cursed by defective genes or a dysfunctional upbringing or bedeviled by an avalanche of adult crises or ravaged by outright oppression. But accurate explanations don't produce adequate excuses. The fact remains that numerous sisters and brothers who have suffered deep and wide gashes, not of their own making, are still stirred to live as empowered and empowering human beings.

### Men Are Powerful According to All Social Indicators

Yet matters complexify when we view the existential situation of modern men who appear ensnared amidst a contradiction. On the one hand, men possess considerable societal power yet, much of the time, feel personally powerless. How come? This dilemma needs to be addressed.

All economic, social, and political indicators verify that men hold more power than women. Despite complaints of reverse discrimination, according to the data, white males account for 32.9% of the population but 82.5% of the Forbes 400, 70% of tenured college faculty, and after the 1994 elections, 79% of Congress.

Money plays a major role in power disparities in our culture. As James Hillman describes: "The Economy determines who is included and who is marginalized, distributes the rewards and punishments of wealth and poverty, advantage and disadvantage." Economic power is thus linked with political power which is built on physical power which is ultimately the power of violence or its threat. And whammers (white heterosexual, anglo-saxon, middle-class, middle-aged males) clearly enjoy the bulk of material wealth in the world.

Indeed, economic privilege is among the subtlest and most damaging of the whamm factors. That's why UUA President Bill Sinkford perceptively notes: "We're about to embark on a concerted effort to address issues of justice, of class. To be honest, I expect this will be our most difficult work, the work we want to avoid."

I know that's true for me. Here are but a couple disturbing truths, stirred by Mary Elizabeth Hobgood's incisive chapter, "An Ethical Agenda For Elites," in her book entitled *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability*. First, although I often self-identify as "middle-class," our family income, certainly prior to semi-retirement, compared to most American wage earners, is anything but middle.

Second, my family, like that of so many other Unitarian Universalists, continues to unconsciously derive unearned benefits and advantages from the lower tier of the working class. As Hobgood puts it: "You and I are supported by whole armies of subordinate groups in so-called private homes and workplaces. These subordinates usually make and clean the clothes of the dominant groups; pick, package, and cook our food; clean up our messes; take care of our children, service our cars, planes, appliances, hospitals, and schools; and collect and process our garbage."

A Unitarian Universalist colleague recounts a routine of black comic, Chris Rock, relevant to the issue of economic privilege. Rock talks about how angry white men are whining these days that they're losing everything. "We're losing everything! We're losing everything!" "Like what?" Rock asks. He goes on, "Not even the white usher in this theatre would change places with me—and **I'm rich**. That's how good it is to be white!"

The *whamm* constituency unquestionably holds the lion's share of public power in this land. As men's activist, Paul Kivel, puts it: "If as a man, you don't notice the culture of power, it's because you're inside it!" Our very language favors men with such proverbial phrases as power plays, power brokers, power lunches, power tools, power trips. Nonetheless, to be sure, men pay a price for our privilege and power. Being on top costs. As Steve Smith rightly notes: "On average in the United States, men are less successful than women in meeting our fundamental needs of life, health, safety, shelter, and love...Men are powerful yet lonely, vulnerable, sick, homeless and dead."

Yet male power remains real, despite the genuine misery it dumps on the doorsteps of men. The bottom line: most children, youth, and female adults, if pressed, would choose the estate of manhood over that of womanhood in terms of its privileges and entitlements.

Anthony Astrachan asserts that men have conventionally brandished four kinds of power: (1) the power to name; (2) the power to mobilize destructive aggression; (3) the power to organize societal, economic, and political life; and (4) the power to direct others' uses of skills. And, furthermore, these forms of power are traditionally handed down to men by society or learned from their fathers, and the temptation is to use them to overpower women and other men.

I recently saw a full-page power ad in a mainline magazine that pictured a sexy woman in a bathing suit next to a bottle of Chivas Regal (Premium Scotch Whisky) with two simple phrases bridging the body and the bottle: "Yes, God is a man. When you know...Chivas Regal." The implications are obvious: men are in the know; men hold the power; men can get any women they desire; and men are even identifiable with God itself! A fabricated case of full-blown omnipotence, if you will.

Power in American culture, as defined by the men who conventionally wield it, is essentially reducible to dominance: power over. This "might makes right" attitude is evidenced, even as we speak, as our own land prepares to initiate war against Iraq. Machismo braided with arrogance, greed and vengeance is a deadly combination.

Such hypermasculinity invariably creates a toxic condition that devalues differentness, moreover, equates weakness with femininity, then with gayness. In this warped scenario "real" men can't afford to appear unsure, conciliatory, or afraid, lest they be ridiculed as sissies. Consequently,

such males grow hell-bent on overpowering, to the point of wanton destruction, any person or land that poses a threat to their shaky egos. The irony is that such male bullies are profoundly insecure, operating from fear—their inner coward.

Terry Jones in *The Elder Within: The Source of Mature Masculinity* rightly concludes that degrading masculinity produces "the man who abuses his children, the politician who takes advantage of his constituency, the minister who hates homosexuals, the gang-banger who inflicts pain, the absent father and the tyrant boss...who all have one thing in common. They're all boys-in-men's bodies."

To worsen matters, the world mistakes these emotionally-stunted and morally-wayward boys for mature men and all too frequently rewards them with the power to run our very governments.

### **Yet Men Also Experience Powerlessness**

Even so, despite the definite power-base of males in contemporary life, there exist ample illustrations of men who exude powerlessness in their daily journeys. Let me share but two examples: one from the world of a whammer; the other from the non-whammer perspective. The first story, from Pat Conroy's novel, *The Prince of Tides*, portrays the mushrooming predicament of fellow-whammers. The lead character, Tom Wingo, is a former high-school quarterback who grows up in South Carolina, well-schooled in the patterns of racism. He's considered "wicked and wrong", then changes himself and gets involved in civil rights.

Then Wingo is involved in an exclusively male ROTC program and is vilified by those offended by the uniform. He changes for a second time and partakes in the demonstrations. Then when he feels that he's evolved to higher moral ground, the women's liberation movement "bushwhacks" him, and he finds himself on the wrong side of the "barricades" yet again. Wingo laments, "This hasn't been an easy century to endure...I seem to embody everything that's wrong with the twentieth century..." In essence, Wingo simply feels downright powerless.

The second story of powerlessness arrives from a different place and perspective. It depicts the quiet yet insistent dignity of African-American agitators wrangling with the life-long, debilitating effects of racism.

In an auditorium in Jackson, Mississippi, several decades ago, comedian-activist Dick Gregory heard an older black man give a speech about how he'd been involved in a voter registration campaign and had been jailed for killing someone sent to burn his house in reprisal.

This man said: "I didn't mind going to jail for freedom, no I wouldn't even mind being killed for freedom. But my wife and I was married for a long time, and well, you know I ain't ever spent a night away from home. And while I was in jail, my wife died." And he broke down weeping.

Gregory recalls how he felt listening to his elder:

*His story destroyed me. This man, my brave brother, bucked and rose up and fought the system for me, and he went to jail for me, and he lost his wife for me. He had gone out on the battle lines and demonstrated for a tomorrow he wouldn't ever see, for jobs and rights he might not even be qualified to benefit from. An elderly man from a country town who never spent a night away from his wife in his married life. And he went to jail for me and being away killed her.*

Here are but two stories of persons who embody the same gender yet different races, both seeking freedom from perceived or actual oppression. And as we can see, disempowerment of any kind, whatever its origin, diminishes self and others. Whereas imperious power corrupts, persistent powerlessness corrupts absolutely as the saying goes!

### **Men Must Claim our Power from *Within***

So, how do men escape this destructive power-powerlessness stalemate? Well, some never do. And others would bluntly suggest that men should abandon power altogether and start over from scratch. But this seems a foolish, even cruel, suggestion for men struggling on the margins of existence—burdened by oppressive, unfair treatment. If anything, genuinely disempowered males need to be able to both receive and create fresh fonts of real clout and sway.

And what about those men (predominantly the whammers among us) who are situated in seats of ostensible power? Well, for starters, we'd be sage to relinquish, then redistribute, some of our might in pursuit of greater justice for all, in addition to risking new sources of strength within our own souls. I offer two illustrations of whammers who have done just that: one displaying moral bravery in the political arena, the other, incarnating a spiritual breakthrough in his family—both accessing afresh their inner power.

The first story is quite startling—an example of high moral courage coming from an unlikely

source. George Ryan, a conservative Republican governor of Illinois, during the final days of his office, recently emptied death row in a sweeping order that spared 167 convicted murderers: 163 men and 4 women, who have served a collective 2,000 years for the murders of more than 250 people.

Condemning the capital punishment system as fundamentally flawed, Governor Ryan commuted all Illinois death sentences to prison terms of life or less, the largest such emptying of death row in history. His move was seen by many as the most significant statement questioning capital punishment since the Supreme Court struck down states' old death penalty laws in 1972. Ryan's judgment unflinchingly challenges other states to engage in serious review of their equally inadequate processes of justice.

What makes this deed all the more remarkable is that Ryan's gubernatorial tenure had been generally marked by moral mediocrity, and now, even as his legacy is secured as a leading critic of state-sponsored execution, Ryan faces possible indictment in a previous corruption scandal that stopped him from seeking re-election.

Like most political leaders in places of privileged decision-making, Ryan's has been a checkered career, but on this particular issue he showed gutsy, principled behavior. George Ryan blended high ethics with high power. Using the immense, perhaps even overweening, clout granted him as Governor, Ryan chose to use it constructively and compassionately. To be sure, he possessed sizable *external* power, but he claimed, then employed, it from an *internal* source.

As Ryan put it: "The legislature couldn't reform the capital punishment system. Lawmakers won't repeal it. But I won't stand for it." Wherever you stand on the institution of the death penalty, few of us would question that our country needs intrepid leadership in reforming the criminal justice system. And, moreover, I think you'd have to agree that George Ryan displayed mature masculinity in wielding his power in what he deemed a responsible way: researching the issues diligently, listening to all sides reasonably, probing his conscience relentlessly.

This was an inordinately difficult and unpopular decision to render. While Ryan will be applauded by a progressive minority in this land, his verdict will draw scorn from the bulk of Americans. Even his wife, Lura Lynn, was angry and disappointed at her husband's decision. But as Ryan ultimately framed it on January 11, 2003: "Even if the exercise of my power becomes my burden, I'll bear it, because our Constitution compels it. I've lost a lot of sleep along the way, but tonight I'm going to sleep well, knowing in my heart I made the right decision."

While being Governor granted Ryan the power to effect this decision, it was truly born of inner spiritual wellsprings. Ryan's office didn't deliver this verdict; his conscience did. Ryan's example should impel men everywhere, whatever privilege we possess or position we occupy, to claim our true strength from deep within, venturing daily decisions that marry ethics and power.

My second example is familial not political. It relates how one economically secure, outwardly powerful man, made a courageous move to garner some long-lasting integrity in his personal life. A leader in our San Diego Men's Fellowship, Eduardo describes his evolving odyssey. Eduardo accomplished in the private realm what Ryan performed in the public. Both were activated by conscience power, emboldened from within.

Here's his personal testimony of empowerment.

*My concept of personal power used to focus on professional and financial success. It took a painful breakup in a relationship to allow me to see how disjointed my true inner power was from outward appearances of success.*

*The really difficult issues—reconciling my spiritual beliefs with my sexual life, learning how to interact in a healthy way with family members, interacting with other men without fear—were daunting. It took courage to venture into a group of men willing to speak openly about these issues. It was the best step I ever took.*

*I learned that I was not alone. I could share my hopes and fears with other men. Slowly, with support and encouragement from my newfound brothers, I began the journey into the inner reaches of myself that I had avoided for so long. The journey isn't over, but I'm grateful for the company of other courageous men to share the ride.*

*Like my chosen faith, our San Diego Unitarian Universalist Men's Fellowship calls me to be a more alive and whole person. The power of sharing at a personal and often intimate level with other men reaches me in a way that other forms of spiritual practice simply don't. Our Men's Fellowship is, for me, our Unitarian Universalist faith put into practice at a very personal level.*

*My soul-deep struggle has been how to live a healthy personal life as a gay man. For years, my Mexican Catholic upbringing led me to deny my sexuality or to express it in ultimately unfulfilling ways. Coming into a circle of caring, respectful men has inspired me to begin, and continue, the process of integrating my sexual being with a spiritually fulfilling personal life. It has changed my life.*

Eduardo has dared to access much-needed healing and vitalizing strength that come not from the economy or politics or societal endorsement but from deep, deep within. From a spiritual place.

In actuality, whether men are powerful or powerless, we expend too much effort scrambling for temporary forms of strength or control from transient sources. Mature liberal religious masculinity dares men to claim power from a spiritual locus rather than one of heredity, materiality, or status. It arrives from an interior source—whether one calls it inner or higher power.

Morally evolving men would heed the empowering examples of brothers like George and Eduardo.

### **Diversifying Our Power Usage**

It's my measured experience that power is like love—the more it expands, the larger everyone's portion grows. Once we ground our primary power source in the innermost realm, as did George and Bert, then we're progressively freed to diversify our means of wielding power. And, in so doing, we move us closer toward mature liberal religious masculinity.

One caveat. Clearly, my chosen categories of exerting power possess cross-gender application. But, remember, I'm a man addressing issues of men in these Minns Lectures. I'm laboring on my own gender's homework assignments and challenges—not those of women. Naturally, women are welcome, nay encouraged, to listen in and pluck lessons for their own sojourns.

### **Leaders: Power AHEAD**

No matter how immobilized our situation may appear, you and I possess the capacity to advance. Unless we're comatose, we can alter our lives, even if gradually, inch by inch. Visionary men are those who dare to keep moving forward, especially when fellow travelers tend to lose their bearings.

It's my measured opinion that there exists a dearth of empowered and empowering male leaders in our Unitarian Universalist culture today, both in our seminaries and congregations. We're losing men to ministry, in part, because those guys who hanker to be potentates realize that's no longer a viable option in a movement that aspires to be more inclusive and egalitarian.

But I sense an additional explanation. Men who have yet to discover, let alone unleash, their inner might or who are prone to bouts of spinelessness are deterred as well, for ministry requires immense spiritual fortitude and strength. Given the gender power shifts and confusions in contemporary culture, one can no longer assume that young adult men are natural leaders. Many are outright passive and reactive, spongy and weak.

The current numbers of males in our UU seminaries range roughly from 15% to 30%. I believe figures will grow if men are encouraged to claim, then embody, their profoundest desires and voices of authority. Probably the best way to lure stronger males into ministry is by cultivating healthy empowerment in our young boys. We must groom youngsters to become emotionally resilient and morally resolute. We need to assist in the formation of boys into men, finally into brothers.

Our culture is clamoring for male figures who are willing to step out, move forward, and power ahead: simply lead. Authority is related to *augment*: the capacity to make something grow, increase, and expand. But if men are shrinking, it's hard to make something else swell. To be an authority means to author from our deepest and dearest down places. Men must reconnect with our passionate drives, so we'll become dependable authority figures rather than volatile authoritarian ones.

Our liberal religious movement hankers for stouthearted men who are willing, when the moment's right, to take charge, to be assertive, to stand accountable. In short, to be caring, mature kings. Robert Frost has a long poem with a long title called: "How Hard It Is To Keep From Being King When It's In You And In The Situation." Times assuredly exist when we know (and so does everyone else) that being the king lies in us and in the situation. And men refuse such leadership at great cost to our souls and to the welfare of the larger community. Henry Ford put it bluntly: "The question, who ought to be boss, is like asking "Who ought to be

the tenor in the quartet? Obviously, the person who can sing tenor!" The empowering man is one who willingly strides forward and fulfills a leadership task, flourishing in the role, neither shunning nor abusing it.

African-American law professor and activist Derrick Bell has stood tall for his principles on various occasions, even at the price of being fired from Harvard University. Bell, in supporting women and other minorities in his unswerving commitment to inclusion, consistently leads from an internally-based authority, born of a highly-sensitized conscience. In his latest book entitled *Ethical Ambition* Bell avers that one can be both ambitious and ethical while sparring for full-force equality.

The traditional West African song captures the proper moral balance in the pursuit of being a leader with character:

*Do not seek too much fame,  
but do not seek obscurity.  
Be proud.  
But do not remind the world of your deeds.  
Excel when you must,  
but do not excel the world.  
Many heroes are not yet born.  
Many have already died,  
To be alive to hear this song is a victory.*

James Hillman, in his book entitled *Kinds of Power: A Guide to Its Intelligent Uses*, relates that John Adams, our second American President and erstwhile Unitarian, a capable though somewhat modest and stubborn man, admitted to a "passion for distinction." Healthy male leaders know our unique gifts without gloating about them. We pursue honor and achieve stature without subverting others. We exemplify a "passion for distinction," yet know when to step off stage and operate in the background.

One of the early leaders of our UUMeN Steering Council was a man who knew himself well, especially the excesses of his own virtues. Consequently, right off the bat, Max cautioned our Council with these words: "I like to control the chalk, so I ask you brothers to help keep me in check. Feel free to tell me when to back off, step down, or simply get out of the way!" In truth, every one in this select batch of male leaders would need, in due course, help in harnessing his high-powered talents for benefit of the common enterprise.

## **Being Healthy Kings**

*When a man is not in touch with his inner King, he will tend to project that onto another man. But men make very bad kings. The only true King is the King that man meets in the deepest parts of his soul.*

Robert Moore

I'd like to share what seem timely observations from my earlier book *O. Eugene Pickett: Borne on a Wintry Wind*. It depicts the odyssey of an unpretentious man from a Maryland farm who rose to become the improbable leader of our free faith. His story provides an instructive evolution for Unitarian Universalist men to observe as budding leaders.

Although not an image that Gene would choose for himself, the Jungian archetype of the king certainly contains features that resemble Pickett's mode of ministerial leadership. The good king, neither dictator nor weakling, is a generative man who orders the entire realm, blessing and being blessed by the inhabitants, enlivening the people to serve transcendent ideals they hold in common.

The description by Robert Moore and Douglas Gillette, in *The King Within*, paints a suitable portrait of Pickett's leadership:

*The king provides a safe, containing space where the people around him can flourish. He offers encouragement by taking care to really see others. In beholding his fellows he mirrors and affirms them. He confirms their individuality and the reality of their suffering and their joy. He blesses their lives by sanctifying the fruits of their inner*

*and outer labors.*

Jungian therapists sagely observe that in dysfunctional families like Gene's, in which there exists an immature, weak, or absent father and the king energy is inadequately available, the tribal unit is usually given over to disorder and chaos. Some children of such family systems never fully survive the traumatic, tenacious stranglehold. Others, like Gene Pickett, although suffering deep and permanent wounds, are able, through grit and grace, to convert their blighted childhood into a triumphant adulthood. Michael Meade in speaking of kingly power describes the transformation as follows in his book, *Men and the Water of Life*:

*The King has blessed the same place that the father cursed. The father bit the son's head off; the king anoints his head. Where the father can't help but open a wound, the king is able to place a blessing. One source of the word bless comes from the French, **blessure**, which means wound. One of the responsibilities of those who would rule, lead, or mentor becomes learning to see into the wounded area of others and spot the blessed streak that suffered the wound.*

Again, it comes back to claiming our fundamental power from deep within, from the divine fountain that dwells internally and eternally. That holds true for both the responsible kings in history as well as those rather ordinary men occupying leadership at home, society, work, and church.

## **Delegators: Power TO**

Mature men know how and when to delegate power, that is, to relinquish and pass it on to just the right person. Alas, men are prone to hoard might, once we garner some. Indeed in the social realm, power often has to be wrested from whammers. Frederick Douglass minced no words in the 19th century when addressing racial inequities:

*This struggle may be a moral one or it may be both moral and physical; but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand; it never did and it never will. Find out what people will submit to, and you have found out the exact amount of injustice which will be imposed upon them. The limits of tyrants are prescribed by the endurance of those whom they oppress.*

Douglass goes right to the heart of what it means to be the oppressed and the oppressor and how hardened are the chains that imprison both. The relevance of his words obtain today.

Back to Gene Pickett's story. As time progressed, Pickett couldn't sustain the kingly presence he'd established in Atlanta. The realm was thriving, indeed it was the largest Unitarian Universalist congregation in the country, but the king was faltering. Gene was never a tyrant, even a benevolent one, but he was the governor of his church domain and was reluctant to let power out of his hands. Pickett acknowledges that this need to maintain control finally overwhelmed him and damaged his family. He was driven to prove himself, hopeful that his work ethic could dismantle the impostor syndrome that gnawed away at his psyche. It was a fruitless quest. He had become a desperate workaholic. In effect, powerless.

There are many interlocking dimensions in this brother's tormented life, but one dominant factor was the stubborn need to be in charge. I understand that craving: I'm also a man with a high need to control my self, my environment, and, consequently, often the moves of those around me, especially my dearest companions. It's partially an attempt to keep from being "out of control." But while such control may give me momentary security, it can drive others crazy. In truth, it's a disguised form of power over others.

Being a control-freak doesn't empower anyone; it invariably disempowers. This is how Hillman sees it: "Perhaps the most common word today associated with power is 'control.' To be in control. To take control. Yet control derives from an idea that essentially limits power, in fact puts brakes to power like a control switch or the control panel that governs an installation so that it cannot overheat or short-circuit."

The strange key to staying empowered as a delegator is that we retain agency; for in useful relinquishment, we give a task away to another or we step aside so that someone else, who's been waiting in the wings, might rise to the forefront. We say, in effect: "It's your turn now. You have the capacity to assume the helm. I charge and bless you, my brother/my sister, with this

hallowed task."

Delegation is a religious act, for it pushes us off our high horse. It divests us of power we never "owned" anyway. Furthermore, delegating is a humbling reminder that while we may be irreplaceable, everyone is, we aren't indispensable, no one is.

Delegation means that we realize our importance without succumbing to *hubris*. There are other qualified people who can handle a job as adroitly as we can, sometimes more so. Or as a member of whamm, we've been the undeserved beneficiary of the longest affirmative action program in history; now it's our turn to move back, turn over control, surrender some power.

But oh, that's hard. Can you empathize with how agonizingly difficult, yet how crucial, it is for men who bask in power, hoard power, cling to power even beyond the grave (through wills and the like)...finally to delegate power, to pass it on?

Here's a painful yet instructive example. A couple decades ago, radical feminist theologian Mary Daly was speaking at our General Assembly on her book *Beyond God the Father* which was a revolutionary volume back then, still is. After an unsettling address that was particularly hard for men to swallow, up popped a slew of male hands, desperate to state the first questions, but moreover, to set the record straight by rebutting this outspoken feminist. But Mary Daly held the mike and made the first move by firmly setting boundaries: "The first several questions will be offered by those who seldom get the first word during public discourse, let alone possess the guts to speak outloud...namely, the women in the room. We may get to you guys later on, if there's time."

As the controlling presence in the room, Daly was delegating power to women, actually reallocating it in a fresh, albeit disconcerting, fashion, especially for card-carriers of "the old boy's club." That evening signaled men stepping aside so women could step ahead—another version of affirmative action or getting power into the hands of those with less of it.

Another illustration. In our final year of lengthy ministry in San Diego one of my closing chores as a co-minister was to cease clinging tightly to "my church". It was time to pass on tasks, to let go of results, to remind myself and others that this particular male leader was leaving and that they were staying. It was amazing how many things I had been controlling, lots without my even realizing it. I bet my partner in life and ministry, Carolyn, would echo my sentiments.

Yet as Andre Gide declared: "Great art is never completed, only surrendered." The same holds true with ministerial matches; they're never finished, only surrendered into the next set of hands. Frankly, I see delegation as a sacred warm-up for the time when we relinquish whatever power we still possess at time of death. It's necessary practice for ultimately releasing all our life-outcomes into the grasp of the creative unknown, mystery, divine companionship, if you will.

## Caregivers: Power *FOR*

Related to the art of delegating power is learning how to function appropriately as a caregiver. The song "He Ain't Heavy, He's My Brother" comes to mind. For, in every brothering adventure, there are times when we're charged to carry another person, not just a child but an adult, not just a woman but a man, not just physically but emotionally, maybe financially or spiritually as well.

Men in history have known how to protect other men, even provide for them, but directly transporting or nursing them—being a caring brother upclose and personal—is unexplored territory for most of us. Moreover, to carry or be carried is viewed more as a badge of weakness than of strength in our macho world.

This caregiving dimension of male empowerment can only be appreciated if we've already endorsed the underlying assumptions of these lectures. First, I'm a man by birth, but I become a brother by choice. Second, all men are my brothers. Third, this bedrock brothering attitude enables me to relate respectfully to myself, other men, women, children, all living entities.

Once we've understood the full-fledged charge and responsibility of brothering, we're able to carry one another, out of deep duty married to deep joy. I think of the men in our UUMF who've energetically practiced the power of caregiving with respect to other men.

One man has made regular telephone calls to men in the fellowship inquiring, in Quaker fashion, of their well-being: "How goes it with thy spirit?" He doesn't phone to make a request or garner a recruit. Antonio calls because he cares. Another guy, Eldrick, has considered his sole Sunday mission, after worship, to greet men he's never seen before in church. A third man, Dean,



has been making occasional housecalls, in particular, to men who are physically sick, socially isolated, or emotionally distraught.

Another man, along with his partner and another couple, essentially overhauled the existence of one of our senior men, who lived pretty much as a recluse and was quickly going down hill. This caregiving crew cleaned out his messy home, revitalized Jack's spirit, transported him hither and yon, even accompanied him to an out-of-state college reunion. They kept caring in critical ways until the day he died. Jack had never been so lovingly cared for, or carried, in the previous seven decades of his life than by this male-inspired brigade. Resultingly, a \$100,000 gift was donated by this lonely elder to our church specifically earmarked for a caregiving program. Jack wanted the gift of caring to be extended to others like himself.

Of course, the key is to walk the fine line between caregiving and caretaking, between lifting another brother when he needs it and lugging him when we need it.

There are times in my own brothering encounters when it would have been better if I'd shed the ministerial role and related simply man-to-man. If power comes with your job, boundaries must be crystal clear not leaky. Furthermore, adult males must be vigilant not to transgress the power-differential between boys or teenage youth and ourselves.

Yet we can't abandon the caregiving mode of power because of its potential misuse. Genuinely caring brothers choose to touch all whom they engage in appropriate ways, physically and emotionally. A church's job is to create safe havens for everyone's spiritual growth, from cradle to grave.

Christian philosopher Beatrice Bruteau reminds us that the greatest revolution in human history occurred on Maundy Thursday when Jesus washed the feet of his disciples. Until that moment the basic human mission had been for someone, invariably a man, to get ahead—climbing over and contending against rather than caringly treating another person as your equal.

## **Collaborators: Power ALONGSIDE**

*Don't walk in front of me—I may not follow. Don't walk behind me—I may not lead. Walk beside me and just be my friend.*

Albert Camus

Men of true strength willingly share power as delegators, as caregivers, and as collaborators. Consider the resources of a jazz combo as an harmonious, creative alliance of soloists. A thoughtful teammate is neither jealous nor frightened to divide burdens and multiply the glory.

I reflect upon Senator Paul Wellstone, the Democratic Senator from Minnesota who was killed last Fall in a tragic plane crash. Wellstone, as the only vulnerable incumbent to vote against the resolution that would give President Bush war powers, bravely told the Senate: "Acting now on our own might be a sign of our power, but acting sensibly and in a measured way in concert with our allies...would be sign of our strength."

Wellstone was pinpointing the crucial difference between unilateral and relational power, a distinction that power-hoarders simply choose to ignore.

Our primary direction as men has been to *ascend* to stature, or, as is currently the custom practiced among mythopoetic men, to *descend* into ashes. Ascending and descending, as this essay avers, are both necessary, even noble, routes for men to take, but there's another bearing for brothers to assume as well. It's illustrated in Camus' words, namely, to saunter neither ahead nor behind, but alongside other human beings—to move in the world as respectful allies. John Stoltenberg puts it baldly: "The core of one's being must love justice more than manhood! Justice-building is acting not in one's self-interest but acting in the interest of one's own best self!" Such a ringing mandate regularly requires power-sharing, working as colleagues—literally "leagued together" in pursuit of a common purpose.

Let me close this segment with a poignant story, told by Rabbi David Wolpe in *Teaching Your Children About God*, surely germane to our brothering quest.

A boy and his father were walking along a road when they came across a large stone. The boy said to his father, "Do you think if I use all my strength, I can move this rock?" His father answered, "If you use all your strength, I'm sure you can do it." The boy began to push the rock.

Exerting himself as much as he could, he pushed and pushed. The rock didn't move. Discouraged, he said to his father, "You were wrong. I can't do it." His father placed his arm around the boy's shoulder and said, "No, son. You didn't use all your strength—you didn't ask *me* to help."

Brothers call in others.

### **Resisters and Reconcilers: Power *AGAINST* and *ACROSS***

*Holding each other close across differences, beyond conflict, through change, is an act of resistance.*

bell hooks

*We Unitarian Universalists are very good at calling the evil to account. We must never stop doing that. But what we need to understand as well is that sometimes in the heat of the whirlwind, in the midst of the burning bush, the truly radical, truly courageous position is that of the mediator, the intercessor, the healer, the lover.*

Bill Schulz

Men must be versatile enough to negotiate what I call the R-and-R plan of resistance or powering *against* a wrong and reconciliation or powering *across* chasms toward a mutually satisfying result. In mature liberal religious masculinity, resistance and reconciliation function as yin-yang allies.

A few words about each.

First, **resistance**. There exists a live, contentious struggle between theocracy and democracy in our free land. The radical religious right is gaining political power in America and poses a real threat to our constitutional freedoms, where only those people with the "proper" religious viewpoint will be considered first-class citizens.

This state of affairs is hardly news to Unitarian Universalists, yet it's easy to be lulled into inactivity, which disempowers, rather than staying awake, which empowers us.

Therefore, progressive religious men who are ardent supporters of religious liberty and pluralism must make concerted efforts to reclaim American history, register and mobilize voters, and, most importantly, create inclusive and diverse brothering communities where we worship. In short, liberative men must resist demonizing, resist hate-crimes, resist dogmatism and intolerance wherever they rear their ugly heads. As Unitarian Universalist professor, Sharon Welch, witnesses: "To stop resisting, even when success is unimaginable, is to die."

Liberal men can too readily succumb to wishy-washiness. Poet Robert Frost tenders a biting critique of "religious liberals", which we've simply got to outgrow: "A liberal is one often too broadminded to even take their own side in a quarrel." On the contrary, responsible liberal men show spine, take stands, resist vehemently. As Coretta Scott King says, "it's vitally important that we endorse zero tolerance for bigotry."

Assuming the mantle of shameless resistance not only makes a difference in society but emboldens the wielders as nothing else can. Men who are persistent protesters of injustice are indisputably among the most vital guys you'll ever meet.

The companion virtue to resistance is **reconciliation**. Grown-up liberal religious men are committed to employing these empowering postures in tandem.

I belong to a small local band of peace-makers called the Fellowship of Reconciliation—an international, interfaith organization founded in 1914. I assume it wasn't christened the Fellowship of Peace, Justice or Mercy because the founders wanted to challenge us, and they did. Reconciliation is the most difficult of life's encounters, since it entails the coming together with some measure of harmony among those individuals who have been sundered, sometimes grievously so. No tougher religious art or skill exists, assuredly for men, than the pursuit of reconciliation, be it between sparring partners or warring nations.

To illustrate my point, I reference a disturbing phrase nestled in the familiar, comforting 23rd Psalm that reminds us of the ever-present call to be reconcilers and reconciled: "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies." Now, setting a table before family or friends hardly poses a religious challenge for men, unless, of course, we're at odds with our own kin. But

being charged by Yahweh to share company with our foes, literally, to break bread with our enemies, constitutes the consummate demand of mighty love.

Reconciliation is the process of powering across gulfs toward workable connections and caring communion. It takes every ounce as much strength as being a leader, a delegator, a caregiver, a collaborator, and a resister.

Let me close this segment with a male-dominated story where resistance and reconciliation are faithfully, even successfully, braided.

It's the ongoing story, in my hometown of San Diego, of the Tariq Khamisa Foundation—committed to breaking the escalating cycle of youth violence and planting seeds of hope for our children's future.

While delivering pizza on a cool San Diego night in January of 1995, a shot rang out and young Tariq Khamisa fell mortally wounded. At the other end of the gun was a 14 year-old gang member.

From the beginning, Azim Khamisa, the dead boy's father, saw "victims at both ends of the gun." And so he reached out, across culture and religion, to the shooter's family. Azim embraced the boy's grandfather, Ples Felix, and asked him to join forces against youth violence. Out of their remarkable union was born the **Tariq Khamisa Foundation** whose sole purpose is to stop children from killing children.

TKF brings its message of peace and nonviolent choices to school children through its innovative *Violence Impact Forum* program, a lively, multi-media presentation. The Forum has been presented to over 10,000 children in the fourth through ninth grades, with the resultant reduction in attitudes and behaviors that lead to gangs, revenge, and violence.

The senseless shooting of Tariq Khamisa has sparked the creation of a powerful violence prevention program that works. As Azim puts it:

*I will mourn Tariq's death for the rest of my life. Now, however, my grief has been transformed into a powerful commitment to change. Change is urgently needed in a society where children kill children.*

The Tariq Khamisa Foundation constitutes a saving story launched by one brave man aching in quest of healing power drawn from his inner being. It depicts an impressive recovery bridging three generations of men. While it's likely more dramatic than what you or I may encounter first-hand in our own journeys, we can still identify with its power at some visceral, soul-deep level. Why? Because there's already been, or will surely come, a time in our life-travels where we too must be united with our opposition, and the unifying cement requires our utmost respect and brave compromise amidst shared inconsolable pain.

Perhaps it's an agonizing divorce, or a seemingly irretrievable break with a child, or a devastating loss at work—any wrenching situation where everyone involved leaps not in victory but slumps in inexpressible anguish.

So, during our lifetimes, we men and women undergo, in common, the realities of massive sorrow and inexplicable joy, and more than that, we also share the gift of earth and the challenge of dying. All these experiences alone should make us committed to doing our part to resist and to reconcile, to stop the cycle of violence, to affirm the full dignity of every traveler we meet along the path.

## **Followers: Power *UNDER***

Following is frequently judged to be a disguised form of subservience or powerlessness. That couldn't prove farther from the truth. Followers are servants; and, as such, embody power in one of its richest and most resourceful expressions.

Empowered and empowering men are versatile: leading, delegating, caregiving, collaborating, resisting, reconciling, and, yes, following. A modest phrase from the political philosopher John Locke has come to assume considerable importance in my understanding of might. He said: "Power is the ability to cause or receive change." Conventionally, men are depicted as change-agents but seldom portrayed as pilgrims brave enough to *receive* change. Yet, in point of fact, an evolved man is ambidextrous: willing both to catalyze **and** undergo change.

An unthreatened wielder of power is one who's able to reside under the rule (not thumb) of

others rather than always holding sway at the mountain-top. The good leader can be a good follower. If you wish, another word for follower is servant, not so much a suffering as a cheerful one.

I always get a kick out of the quote attributed to political governor Benjamin Disraeli (1804-1881): "Hey, I must follow the people, for I am their leader!" Isn't it startling, if not disturbing, to recognize that there have been thousands of books written on leadership and none on the art of followership? I've heard plenty of college Presidents tell their student bodies that schools are meant to train leaders. I've yet to hear anyone profess to train followers. But that just may be one of the most important, if toilsome, imperatives for men.

Alas, too few of the dominant men in our modern world truly know how to be humble and responsive followers, yet authentic empowerment is marked by rhythm: men knowing when to be out front, when to take up the rear, and when to walk hand-in-hand. It's precisely this kind of flexibility that will pry men loose from the power-powerlessness vise.

There's a delightful reminiscence of Ralph Waldo Emerson as a child. He was watching a lumberjack sawing up some wood. The task was beyond young Waldo's strength, but finally he perceived a way to be useful. "May I," Emerson asked, "do some grunting for you?" Well, empowering men are never loathe to do grunt work, to play minor roles or perform menial chores, to assist in the background.

Two more examples of empowering male servants, one from literature (Leo) the other from real life (Martin).

In Herman Hesse's story "Journey to the East" we behold a band of people on a mythical journey, probably Hesse's own spiritual quest. The central figure of this story is Leo who accompanies the party as the servant who does their scut work, but who also imbues them with his spirit and song. He's a person of extraordinary presence. All goes well until Leo disappears. Then the group falls into disarray, and the journey is abandoned. They can't make it without the servant Leo.

The narrator, one of the party, after some years of wandering finds Leo and is taken into the Order that had sponsored the journey. There he discovers that Leo, whom he had known first as servant, was in fact the titular head of the order, its guiding spirit, a great and noble leader. A classic example of man as empowering leader-servant.

And remember the words of one of our 20th century moral guides, Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., from his very final sermon:

*If any of you are around when I have to meet my day, I don't want a long funeral. And if you get somebody to deliver the eulogy, tell them not to talk too long. Tell them not to mention that I have a Nobel Peace Prize. That isn't important. Tell them not to mention that I have 300 or 400 hundred other awards. That's not important.*

*I'd like someone to mention that day that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to give his life serving others. I'd like for somebody to say that Martin Luther King, Jr. tried to love somebody.*

*I want you to be able to say that day that I did try to feed the hungry. I want you to be able to say that I did try in my life to clothe the naked. I want you to say on that day that I did try in my life to visit those who were in prison, and I want you to say that I tried to love and serve humanity.*

## **Epilogue**

This lecture on "men and might" has outlined manifold ways of men powering toward greater justice and joy for our gender and all whom we touch. A broad smorgasbord of power-options is desirable precisely in an era when men are perceived to be ultra-strong yet oft-experience themselves as burdened or inadequate.

Our liberal religious church should be a refuge from the storm as well as a house of enlightenment or embrace, but, moreover, it must fundamentally become a place of empowerment. Yes, our progressive tribes demand stout-souled men who are willing to be ambidextrous and responsible wielders of power.

May we occasion brothering circles in our local congregations where a man (whether decorated with might or downtrodden with oppression or a wild blend of the two) can join our

ranks and hear words like these:

*Dear Brother,*

*May you be emboldened in our midst to open your heart to love, surrender your soul to anguish, expand your mind to wisdom, lift your spirit in aspiration, treat your body as a wondrous gift, nudge your conscience to change society...release your burdens and be freed.*

*For you are indeed a worthy man. You are capable. You are lovable. You are singular and precious. You are a powerful being. And, in our beloved community, we will comfort and challenge you to employ your full power in pursuit of the good, the true, and the beautiful.*

*Starting here, starting now!*

Tom Owen-Towle  
February 9, 2003