

MEN IN MOTION — by Jaco B. ten Hove

— First presented at Paint Branch UU Church on Feb. 20, 2005, and numerous other locations since.

[Sermon follows performance of Fred Small's song "Everything Possible," chorus:]

*You can be anybody you want to be; you can love whomever you will.
You can travel any country where your heart leads, and know I will love you still.
You can live by yourself; you can gather friends around; you can choose one special one.
And the only measure of your words and your deeds
Will be the love you leave behind when you're done.*

The "measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind." Nice message, right? Love is what matters. Composer Fred Small is a UU minister now, but even the infamous Secretary of Defense during the Vietnam War, Robert McNamara, makes this point near the end of an intensely revealing video portrait of him and his times, called *The Fog of War*. It's love that matters, he says. Robert McNamara. That got my attention.

But I have to wonder how many males get this message loud and clear during their early, formative years. If other boyhoods were at all like mine, we learned lots of *other* lessons about what's really important, all of which could be lumped into one demanding beacon of a word: "success." Maybe *success* is actually what really matters, sentimental advice notwithstanding.

And success usually involves action, because men are supposed to be in motion. I think "men in motion" is an evocative image for our time, reaching into almost all our lives, of all genders. One could even speculate that the growing number of clinically hyperactive boys in our midst is a reflection of this cultural stereotype gone wild.

But males are *supposed* to be in motion, always accomplishing something that proves their worth. And if we don't—if we should fail, or dare to walk a counter-culture path or otherwise resist the dominant stereotypes—well, then our masculine identity is likely to be questioned, one way or another—if not by those around us, then by our own well-conditioned psyche.

Unfortunately, life is full of our failures, which shouldn't be a surprise to anyone with any age at all under their belt. If we are alive, we will taste failure. And hey, I never resist a chance to dust off a classic baseball nugget such as this: a *successful* batter in baseball *fails* seven out of ten times. Yes, we fail all the time, perhaps in small, quiet ways; hopefully only occasionally with a large thud. It rarely feels good, so I expect most everyone would *rather* succeed, at least at something, which seems like a reasonable enough ambition.

But boys learn in subtle and not-so-subtle ways that they'll grow up and have to compete in a world where success is what *really* matters. So as boys turn into men, we usually learn to internalize our failures and either beat ourselves up for them or blame others; we resolve to try harder and get it right the next time, to perfect the right kind of motion—"the right stuff"—so we can eventually succeed and fit in.

This drive for success usually obscures the specter of vulnerability. "I'd rather be a hammer than a nail," as one old pop song put it, tellingly. And along the way, ethics may matter less than results. Boys learn early on how to avoid being oppressed by joining the oppressors.

Some of us have tried to resist the pressures of stereotyping, which means we get to swim upstream against a torrent of messages and momentum. It can really wear you out, even at a young age. I remember vividly how my own teenage and young adult counter-culture path led me into some mild despair that at one thankfully brief moment in my 20s even included considering suicide as an escape from internal angst at my failure to fit in.

In those days I was seriously in motion, literally—hitch-hiking all over the country even during high school on weekends. I did well enough, academically, in my hometown, during which era, not coincidentally, I led a strong Liberal Religious Youth group (LRY) at my local UU church. But I was also president of my Jersey Area Federation of LRY and I traveled to youth conferences far and wide.

So I got a taste for moving across the landscape and then quickly dropped out of college after one semester—very restless, itching to travel. Even when I did one more year at another college, the second semester was for all independent study credits on a cross-country road trip with some friends.

I would hit the highway at a moment's notice, for the slightest reason, looking for... well, I wasn't sure what. I was on no particular career path, that was clear, and even as I insisted on staying out of various "traps" of the mainstream, I judged myself harshly for not having any focus. For the first four years after high school, I never spent more than three months in any one place. I was not an undiagnosed Attention Deficit patient; I was just untethered and philosophically disinterested in most stereotypical male pursuits. But I was still very male, so I did more of what I must have thought men were generally supposed to do: move.

Seeking the geographic solution, I was a young man addicted to external motion, out of balance, eager mostly for action and abstractions. My thoughts of suicide were because I couldn't avoid the conclusion that I just didn't fit in anywhere anymore, especially in a

fractured, competitive adult working world. I had internalized the message that if I couldn't specialize, I couldn't succeed.

Meanwhile, I watched many of my peers go through school, get decent jobs, families, houses, etc., and I tried not to be envious. But there I was almost 30, with virtually nothing to show for myself except lots of road maps and a big box of tools. I finally realized that I needed a trade of some sort, so I made myself into a Volkswagen mechanic—about the most counter-culture of traditional male occupations I could find. But I hated the way my hands were grimy all the time, so I moved on again, eventually back to college and finally into the generalist field of ministry, which also gave me a greater sense of belonging to and fitting in with my own rich religious heritage of Unitarian Universalism.

Over the years, I think I have managed to balance that peripatetic young energy with a more centered inner awareness, but even *that* feels like counter-culture work, since such a quest for such a balance is not what American males are usually taught to pursue. Ministry offers an important and cherished impetus for reflection, but mostly the rewards and inspirations for men in this culture are *out there*. What seems to matter is *out there*. We men are trained to focus our gaze and activity *out there*. And we have to be in motion to get to it, *out there*.

And when distress grabs us—which it always will, at least occasionally—we are taught to locate it, well, *out there*, external to us. It grabs us from out there, of course, and we must fight it back, push it away, like good soldiers. We usually don't have the tools to truly understand, let alone accept our own part in the distress, whatever it may be. Nor do we usually have enough of a relationship with our inner self to even engage in that kind of deeper reflection.

So we often just blame various forces *out there* that supposedly victimize us. This allows us to avoid responsibility and implications, which sometimes have roots in our boyhood traumas, which we'd just as soon keep buried and unexamined, thank you. No, *success* is what matters, and success is measured *out there*.

But then I run into Robert McNamara, of all people—and others, too, of course—suggesting that *love* is what really matters. Personally, I'd rather believe in that, because I *know* that men can have rich interior lives that give us a loving foundation for all manner of healthy, productive pursuits. I *know* love grows as we deepen our inner resources, which then expands our capacity to love ourselves, love those closest to us, *and* love the rest of the world with whom we share this planet and this short time of being alive. *Any* man can grow like this.

I know, for instance, that love grows in the embrace of regular, intentional men's groups that meet to allow brothers to speak their truth to each other, healing and bonding in substantial

ways that the mainstream culture just doesn't encourage otherwise. My first such men's group experience began in 1985, and it put me in a whole 'nother mode of motion. Men's groups in many UU congregations can similarly impact participants' lives. We men need to have and *be* new models of a conscious masculinity that puts us in motion toward what really matters. We *can* defy stereotypes, build bridges, deepen relationships—and a lot of that happens in today's men's groups, I'm happy to say.

In or out of such groups, any of us might notice when we are in the presence of men whose interior motion is like a balanced gyroscope, centering them in what really matters. I have some very important mentors who, while certainly imperfect and very human, still seem to move through the world with a nicely humming gyroscope at their core. They are beautifully encouraging to be around.

We also all, probably every day, run into men in frantic motion, in precarious balance, who propel themselves through life as if it were a race and all the trophies were *out there* somewhere, to be acquired before someone else does. All too often this style of life is what we men are conditioned for and socialized into. We know we are rewarded for performance, acquisition and success—all measured *out there*—and our self-esteem depends on this.

Ah, self-esteem. This may be the crux of the whole matter. It is an honorable cliché that in order to truly love others, in order to share and spread love, we must first love ourselves—not a narcissistic self-preoccupation, just a healthy self-esteem, which should be inherent and sustained regardless of our specific performance, regardless of any judgments by others.

Well, this sounds great, but in reality it is a supreme challenge—to stay that lovingly centered amid all the materialistic stimulation and frantic motion that spins around us every day. After all, “He who dies with the most toys wins.”

In contrast, a true sense of self-worth means that we matter to others in ways relational more than material, that we become *worthy of intimacy*. The dominant stereotype portrays a stoic, independent, self-sufficient male hero, but actually, healthy males need and benefit from social connections as much as anyone. When will *interdependence* become heroic?

After college, men often seem to sacrifice or jettison or miss out on social connections, such as having good friends beyond our spouse. I know this first hand, since I've been working in the DC area for some years now with a wonderful partner, but I have yet to establish a single new, abiding friendship on my own—numerous fine collegial connections notwithstanding.

But I feel pretty good about myself, even like I'm succeeding at parish ministry! So maybe my self-esteem is indeed performance-based more than inherent. I have had to earn it—and if

I didn't, well, shame on me. Social connections are maybe just for feeding that drive for success, anyway.

This is the water American males swim in, including me. And *I* was raised Unitarian Universalist, which affirms, at the top of our list of principles, “the inherent worth and dignity of every person.” I know how to give good lip service to this noble value, which is nonetheless severely at odds with the traditional conditioning of most men. This hidden conflict may explain, partially at least, why there are usually comparatively few males in our churches.

Follow me here. We men are socialized to believe that our “worth and dignity” is conditional on our performance, our degree of success. So we can't really take seriously, can we, a religious value—“*inherent* worth and dignity”—that directly contradicts what has been drummed into us by the rest of the culture every day since we were young? It could create a harsh dissonance in our soul, and perhaps some men subconsciously resist settings where they have to pit noble ideals against their unexamined but dominant conditioning.

Meanwhile, an intriguing Swiss study¹ in the 1990s found that church attendance by a family's father is by far the largest influence on his children's future participation in church, when they grow up. When the father doesn't attend regularly, only 2% of the children ever will, even if the mother does. But when the father *does* worship regularly (even if the mother doesn't) almost half of the children (44%) will carry the practice into their adult lives.

However, at least over the past half century, the presence of men in church *has* slowly but steadily declined. Maybe the recently circulated draft proposal by our UU Regional Growth Planning Committee is missing a bet. Their “Plan for Vital Congregations” does not include a strategy to bring more men into worship, which might just be a very efficient approach to growth. The presence of men seems to statistically improve attendance even beyond their own lifetimes.

And men need congregational life, I believe. During the 20th century, the nuclear family model emerged and the stereotyped roles of male breadwinner and female caregiver solidified, but social isolation increased. For men in this system, there have been costs that it has taken us a while to recognize, let alone accept.

In essence and in general, we have traded away our hearts—the warmth of interpersonal connection, including any perception of vulnerability—for the so-called rewards of accomplishment, such as the privilege of special status and external success, which are often accompanied by an deceptive sense of security and superiority.

However, the percentage of men who really benefit from this trade-off is probably pretty small; and those who do not keep up the bargain at all, either by choice or failure, are marginalized, ridiculed or worse. Men in all categories seem to show the strains of increased stress. Yet many of us resist change, preferring to defend or at least passively accept a system that actually improves the odds we will die sooner than later.

I find myself wincing now every time I notice a recently retired man dying without getting to enjoy much of his so-called “golden years.” The actual rate of this may or may not be increasing, per se, but I guess I’m beginning to take it more personally, as my own distance from that work milestone shrinks. And this makes me want to ask, one more time:

What really matters here, guys? *Do* you believe that “the only measure of your words and your deeds will be the love you leave behind when you’re done”? If so, what kind of motion does that inspire in you? I know a parent who embroidered that line on a pillow to give to a college-bound child.

I believe that all men, with or without biological children, have fathering energy that is generative, meaning we can pass on our love of life to others, especially those nearby. When we are in generative, life-giving motion, we are creatively authentic, growing connections that both support the community and fill our hearts. Almost any service to the greater good is generative and can help relieve pain, both the pain of those in need *and* the pain of those offering the service.

Generative motion also tunes up our inner gyroscope and provides energy to help us stand up to unwelcome, limiting stereotypes. It is indeed time that we more actively pioneer paths for men and women that are better balanced, more just, equitable and compassionate, not to mention healthier. Men can start with our own inner life, our relationship with our gentle self and see what is reflected there. We can deepen it, strengthen it, honor it.

And, to my mind, there is no better place in our culture for this generative energy to prosper than in our UU congregations and camps and conferences. But it’s hard; hard to crack the harsh outer layer a lot of men project; hard to persevere in offering opportunities that often don’t get prioritized in busy, frantic lives; hard to be strong in the face of cultural pressure to line up with seductive stereotypes.

Yes, it’s hard, but it may be the best game in town for men, because it holds out the very real promise of transformation and the health of a whole person. That’s my challenge, anyway, and I don’t think I’m all that much different from a lot of guys. Sometimes we just have to let go of what we *think* is fortifying us, and trust a larger motion...

[Performance of “Rock Me To Sleep” by Tom Hunter, arrangement by JBtH:]

*All I can hear are the crickets and the whistle from some lonely freight.
I’ve been working so hard to make everything right, but for now it’ll just have to wait*

CHORUS: ‘Cause tonight I’d like you to rock me to sleep. I’d like you to sing me a song.
I’m tired of trying to figure things out. And I’m tired of being so strong.

*I’ve never been too good at asking. I’m more apt to do it alone.
And it’s strange how a lot of us think something’s wrong if we can’t do it all on our own.*

CHORUS

*It’s funny how times when you’re hurting make what’s so familiar seem strange,
So when you need help it’s hardest to ask, and it always takes so long to change.*

CHORUS

It’s a good thing that men are in motion, externally and internally, *and* it’s an even better thing when we can also ask to be comforted—rocked to sleep, perhaps—because this signifies that we’re conscious of our connectedness, our shared fragility. I enjoy a good project and spectator sports and “male bonding” through experiential adventures as much as the next guy. But I’m also trying to learn how to build bridges of love in other ways, too, using other kinds of muscles that stretch out from my inner gyroscope to ground me in a wider stance.

I want to be true to my authentic vulnerability *and* have enough energy and strength to contribute to a better world.

The good news is: this is not an either-or situation—we can be in healthy motion *both* externally *and* internally. Chances are, we’re actually healthier when we *are* so balanced, because it echoes how the universe works—yin/yang and all that. We may each be small pieces of this interconnected universe, but that’s enough for any of us to tap into the balance of life, with its ultimate gyroscope. Listen—can you hear it humming?

Let us all go forth now, so that our next steps help to center us—in ourselves and in our communities, so that we can courageously transcend stereotypes and imagine everything possible. Go in peace; *be* peace.

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¹ “The demographic characteristics of the linguistic and religious groups in Switzerland” by Werner Haug and Phillipe Warner of the Federal Statistical Office, Neuchatel. It appears in Volume 2 of Population Studies No. 31, a book titled The Demographic Characteristics of National Minorities in Certain European States, edited by Werner Haug and others, published by the Council of Europe Directorate General III, Social Cohesion, Strasbourg, January 2000. Quoted by Henry G. Brinton, Senior Pastor of Fairfax Presbyterian Church, “Praying for More Men,” in the Washington Post Outlook section, Dec. 19, 2003.