

## **Toward Empathy and Accountability: Male Power & Male Suffering**

Sunday, October 13, 2024

Unitarian Universalist Society of Sacramento

Rev. Dr. Roger Jones, preaching, with Andy Cramer

Hymns: #354 Come, Sing a Song with Me; #21 For the Beauty of the Earth; I'm Gonna Lift My Brother Up (by Faya Rose Touré).

Special music: R. Glière, Intermezzo (piano, double bass); S. Rachmaninoff, Vocalise (piano, double bass); J. Shelton, Saranam (choir; Sanskrit for *refuge*).

### Introduction and Personal Reflection by Andy Cramer

This morning's service explores some of the emotional costs of cultural stereotypes about masculinity. I was born in 1962 and will be turning 62 later this week. I was raised in a small suburb of Rochester, NY. I half-jokingly say that the only acceptable emotions in my home as a child were anger and "I'm OK." In reality, being in a large Catholic family, guilt and shame were also common. I understood that I was loved, at least most of the time, but the word "love" was not spoken.

In many ways, I had a privileged childhood, and I was well prepared to be a functioning adult. But emotionally, not so much. My sisters may have been allowed a little more space for emotional development, but I don't view my family dynamic as being influenced much by gender. In a telling statistic, my five siblings and I each had relatively long marriages... all of which ended in divorce. To varying degrees, we lacked the self-knowledge and communication skills to sustain our relationships.

In my 20s, I outwardly displayed myself as a reasonably successful adult. I had friends, meaningful jobs that I was successful at, and a place to live. But in my inner life, I was a mess. I often felt lonely and isolated. I had a very telling dream at that time that I still remember today. I was encircled by a high brick wall, and I could not reach people on the other side of it. At that time, I never would have shared that dream. I was too emotionally guarded to expose my own weaknesses.

Fortunately, that emotional pain was a force for growth and ultimately for healing. But that was a long journey. Every now and then over the years, I would find a therapist for myself and talk through the emotional challenges that I was experiencing. In the end, I had to learn to recognize and communicate my emotions and the needs that lay beneath them. I will not claim to be great at that. But I do respect that I have emotions and needs, and I must honor those to be my true self. I've also come to feel a lot of empathy for my childhood self, that kid carrying a load of emotional pain and confusion.

Being a Unitarian Universalist has been helpful to my emotional growth over the last 20 years. My UU friends and I would laugh about how often we would tear up on Sunday mornings. Sunday services are an opportunity for me to stop all the busy-ness in my life, to quiet my very analytical mind for an hour, and to be emotionally present.

In my former congregation, we did workshops in Nonviolent Communication, sometimes called Compassionate Communication. During the workshops they passed out a page long list of feelings and another page long list of associated emotional needs that we all share. Wow. I was

blown away. So many nuanced emotions! Certainly, a lot more than anger, guilt, and shame. I still refer to those lists sometimes.

I have learned that establishing meaningful relationships requires trust and vulnerability. I can't hide from my emotional self. In fact, I need to share it. Still, even now as an adult, I sometimes encounter someone close to me that views my expression of emotion and vulnerability as a weakness. I guess they think that a man shouldn't express weakness. Interestingly, that has come from both men and women. But now I understand that it is more a reflection of their emotional immaturity than it is mine.

Practicing being vulnerable is one reason that I like being a Worship Associate. Besides getting to see your beautiful faces from the pulpit, I am called upon to be vulnerable and share parts of myself. It isn't always comfortable for me, but it is good practice. And sometimes what I share becomes the starting point for a conversation after the service when you tell me a bit of your story. I welcome those conversations and the community that we build together.

### Sermon by Roger Jones

As with most other Western countries, American society was structured by elite white men to give a lot of power to men like them and somewhat less power to other men, and very little to women or children. In spite of this apparently privileged place, however, men and boys have been suffering horribly from isolation, anxiety, depression, addiction, and physical illnesses. This has led too many of them to commit violence against others and themselves.

What I have learned is that the culture of masculinity that we have maintained not only has confined and endangered the lives of people who are female, transgender or nonbinary, it has confined and hurt the lives of men too. And it starts confining us at a young age. The stereotypes we accept and the codes we follow about masculinity have been choking boys and men.

Dan Kindlon and Michael Tompson are the authors of the book *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*.<sup>1</sup> Both of them have been teachers and therapists of boys and young men. "In service to rigid ideals of manhood," they write, our culture is "railroading boys into lives of isolation, shame, and anger. The prejudice of American culture is that boys are self-reliant, confident, and successful. We ignore evidence that they are hurting," whether it is in statistics or in the silence of the ones near to us.<sup>2</sup>

This made me think about a time in high school. Six weeks after I had started the ninth grade, my father died of a heart attack at home on a Wednesday afternoon. Though his declining health and addictive habits had given me a sense of dread for a number of years, his death was a shock. I was 14. Over the next few days, I felt so awkward in responding to people showing up at our house and the funeral home attempting to provide comfort. I still remember phrases from our minister's eulogy even though I was sobbing through it. I hadn't been able to cry till then. When I went back to school on Monday, my mother wrote a note which was required to explain my absence. She wrote: "Roger has been absent from school due to a death in the family." I handed it to the freshman guidance counselor, so he could write me a pass. Sitting at his desk as I stood there, he opened the note and read it. "Who died?" *My dad.* "Sorry." *Thanks.* That was the only conversation I recall having about it at school. So it seems accurate to me that Dan Kindlon and Michael Tompson write that in America "we assume that boys don't have deep feelings, or don't wrestle with complicated emotions."

Fear, anxiety, and sadness are treated as not acceptable for many young men. “Oh, you’re a big guy; you can handle it.”<sup>3</sup> How many times has that been said, over how many generations? Without the support or skills to process and accept real feelings, many males respond to sadness, frustration or shame with anger and violence rather than reflection and communication. Kindlon and Thompson write: “Boys act impulsively, moved by emotions they do not understand. Boys exercise their emotional ignorance in cruel treatment of one another, of girls”<sup>4</sup> and of kids who don’t conform to rigid roles of gender identity or sexual orientation.

The statistics of this crisis are shattering. Boys are the perpetrators of four out of every five crimes that end up in juvenile court, nine out of ten alcohol and drug law violations, and 95 percent of juvenile homicides. Their suicide rates are higher. Studies regarding AIDS and other sexually transmitted infections among adolescents have concluded that “the biggest risk factor for involvement in unprotected sex is boys’ beliefs in traditional male and hypermasculine attitudes.” These attitudes lead them to put unfair pressure on their partners and to be dismissive about their *own* risks.

The saying “boys will be boys” is familiar enough to feel harmless, even quaint, but when it suggests that harmful behaviors of young men result simply from their biology, “it ignores a culture that promotes violence.... If we think it’s biological, then we don’t think we can change it.” These are the words of Niobe Way, a developmental psychologist.<sup>5</sup>

Even though many parents and other care providers work to avoid gender stereotypes, Dr. Way notes, “the larger culture has embraced stereotyping with a vengeance.” I’m sure that many of us could identify individual examples that seem to confirm a stereotype about a group identity, including sex or gender. However, to do so is deceptive, especially for sex or gender. According to a social neuroscientist named Lise Eliot, “There are more differences among males as a group and among females as a group than there are between the two groups.”<sup>6</sup>

Niobe Way is a professor at New York University. She has written several books, including *Deep Secrets: Boys’ Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*. She explains that children are born into a culture we have inherited and maintained, and our culture has led them (and all of us) to a “crisis of connection.” She blames rising rates of suicide, anxiety, partisan violence, hate crimes, and mass killings to this loss of connection among people, especially young men.<sup>7</sup> Some politicians, preachers and online influencers proclaim there’s “just not enough discipline”; there are “not enough consequences for bad behavior.”

Well, maybe, but consider that for generations, American boys have been subjected to harsh discipline at home and in school—often with physical pain as well as with verbal humiliation. Likewise, a violent punitive attitude pervades our systems of mass incarceration. As if prison weren’t hard enough, solitary confinement is used widely as a means of control as well as convenience for prison guards, not to mention a legal way to mentally torture someone. Young people of color, especially young men of color, are stopped and harassed more frequently by law enforcement, and are more likely to die from police violence even while unarmed.

None of the authors of the books I’ve read are seeking to criticize females or promote the needs or interests of boys over the needs of other genders. “[All] genders will be better off,” they say, “if boys are understood and are encouraged to become more emotionally [flexible] and literate.”<sup>8</sup> These authors remind us that adolescence is by definition a time of rapid changes. Emotional flexibility is the most important tool for growth during those changes. Self-understanding is vital. Understanding yourself, empathy for yourself, is necessary in order for you to show empathy for others.

As a matter of fact, when they are small, most children of any gender are quite in touch with feelings—their feelings and the feelings of other people. And they can be open in showing how they feel. They can be open with parents and friends, if they have a sense of trust and safety, and if their openness is returned by another's. Niobe Way writes that all children, including boys, “long for love, acceptance, and approval from their parents and peers. They struggle for self-respect.”

She and her colleagues interviewed dozens of boys year after year, for several years, to find out how they spoke of their needs for friendship, connection, and emotional intimacy.

In the interviews, younger boys often expressed happiness and gratitude for their male friendships. She also notes that many boys know of the mental health benefits that come from having a trusted friend. For example, at age 15, Justin told her, “If there’s nobody there to [share with], you gonna keep it inside, then you will have anger. So you need somebody to talk to.” Indeed, Way says, “Researchers find that having adolescent peer relationships is a good indicator of good health later on.”

Boys frequently spoke to interviewers of the importance of having a trusted friend with whom they could share their deep secrets, whether it’s a problem at home or a secret that’s not a problem at all. A boy she calls Carlos said this about his best friend: “If I feel bad one day, I tell him why... We show each other love... I know the kid inside of him. Cause I, I grew up with that kid, you understand. I know who he really is.” A number of boys said they loved their friends. They used the word *love*. Eddie said, “It’s like a bond, ... like if there is something that’s important to me, like I could tell him and he won’t go and make fun of it.”<sup>9</sup> This is one of dozens of examples of quotations from young male friendships which are non-judging, honest, trustworthy, and caring. And these are ingredients of emotional intimacy.

Ten or twelve years ago several children were sitting in a circle around a chalice with a candle and a large bowl of water in a Religious Education room here at UUSS. I was helping out with our first through fifth graders. During the time of Joys and Sorrows, they were invited to come forward and speak something that was on their heart and drop a stone in the water. Two boys whom I’ll call Dan and Eric were often there together, as they were on this day. One of them came up, released a stone, and said, “My joy is that I’m happy that Eric is my friend.”

One boy in Niobe Way’s research study had lost his mother to cancer in the previous year. He told his interviewer about the comforting words of one of his young friends, who had said: “I know it’s hard but if you loved her, she loved you.” The grieving boy said, “They be telling me, ‘You got *us* now. We are like your brothers.’ And that really helps me.”<sup>10</sup>

Niobe Way asserts that boys and young men understand their own emotions... at a depth that adults ... often forget that we once had.”<sup>11</sup>

Yet as boys get older, many of them close off their emotions, or close off expressing them. Being vulnerable is no longer a way of connecting; it’s embarrassing. In interviews, the older boys now give terse answers to questions about what’s important to them: “I don’t know.” “Maybe.” “I don’t care.” As they reach late adolescence, they feel pressure to “act like a man.” In a homophobic society, this means pressure not to behave in ways that others might consider to be feminine or effeminate—girly or gay.

The sharing of secrets and concerns often stops; it’s not a guy thing anymore. One boy challenged his interviewer, who was asking about his close male friendships—asking the same questions he had answered so [openly] a year earlier. He said: “Why are you asking me so many questions about my friendships? I am not gay!”

Too many boys start following the culture and stop following their hearts into friendship. They learn that growing up means becoming stoic and not needing relationships anymore. It means learning to withhold your feelings. In a revealing sentence, one older boy said this to his interviewer: “It might be nice to be a girl because then I would have to be emotionless.”<sup>12</sup>

Shutting down emotionally hurts them, and it hurts their ability to relate to others. After all, empathy and understanding for yourself is necessary in order to show empathy to others and accept them as they are.

As boys get older, the codes of masculinity cause confusion and loneliness. And as they suffer, their isolation and sadness can become anger, which can become violence, directed at themselves or at those close to them or, as we know from too many stories in too many places, waged against many innocent strangers. Young men are suffering in this culture, which means all of us are suffering.

Psychotherapist authors Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson write that all of us “have to come to grips with the fact that every boy has an inner life. [So does every child and youth of any gender, I would add.] Their hearts are full.”

To be sure, the psychologists write, “parents have a unique influence on a child’s willingness and ability to learn emotional language and literacy.” Yet most of us can play a role in helping children and youth to gain these skills. We can model emotional openness and connection. We can demonstrate empathy. We can listen to their feelings without judging them and hear their problems without dictating solutions. We can respect them.

Something else we all can do is to cultivate friendships for ourselves, as adults. Niobe Way writes that “all of us... want close friendships,” no matter our genders, ages, or other identities. Moreover, she says, all human beings “are born with the cognitive, emotional, and relational skills to have friendships.”

The crisis of connection affects us all, not only boys and young men. Loneliness is an epidemic in this country, according to the current Surgeon General of the United States.<sup>13</sup>

Our culture doesn’t nourish the skills for close friendships, but we can *improve* our culture by learning and using the skills for connection.

From research as well as newspaper headlines and my own experience, it seems that a whole bunch of us adults may have endured a lack of supportive, intimate friendships. Maybe we learned the code that said: keep it to yourself. I know that I did. There’s good news, however. Niobe Way says that healthy friendships and other “mutually supportive relationships *later in life* can repair damage done in early years.” As we grow up, she says, it’s not as easy to have *as many* friends as it might have been as a youth. Hence for adults, the health and quality of our friendships becomes a more important factor than the number of them.<sup>14</sup>

To build a renewed culture of connection, she says, we have to learn to be curious again. She notes that children are naturally curious and often will surprise us with a question. We need to celebrate that skill, remember it, and practice it. We all should be asking questions of one another — and listening.

Leading with curiosity can “allow us to see each other outside of a set of stereotypes/ and learn something about the other person and about ourselves.”<sup>15</sup> And [we need] not just listen to those we know but listen with curiosity to everyone else we encounter.” Living in the City of New York, she has found that “people generally love to answer real questions, even on the subway.” Of course, she says, “We should also remember to give them... the choice of whether to answer our questions.”<sup>16</sup>

She does offer some hope that our culture is improving in certain ways. She writes: “Research shows younger men are engaging in close male friendships and expressing their feelings like never before.... They will open up to others in safe contexts—although not all men have these safe spaces.” If we have young men and boys in our circles of care and community, we can build places of safety and personal responsibility. We can model vulnerability and then accept emotional openness in others.

But whether or not we know any boys or young men, we all have a role to play in healing the crisis of connection. We can promote empathy, respect, and acceptance—starting with ourselves. By taking responsibility for our own emotions and building our own connections, we can give others the courage to do the same. They can see the value of understanding themselves, sharing themselves, and honoring what their hearts long for.

Whatever identity we may hold, we have a role to play in connecting and healing. Whoever we may be, and wherever we are, all of us have the power to support others and lift them up. The health of the human family depends on it.

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<sup>1</sup>Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (New York, 2000: Ballantine Random House).

<sup>2</sup> Kindlon and Thompson, 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>5</sup>Niobe Way, *Rebels with a Cause: Reimagining Boys, Ourselves, and Our Culture* (New York, 2024: Penguin Random House). Though I do not quote her earlier book (*Deep Secrets: Boys’ Friendships and the Crisis of Connection*) here, she repeats much of its findings in the current one.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>8</sup> Kindlon and Thompson, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Way, 60.

<sup>11</sup> Way, 95.

<sup>12</sup> Way, 28.

<sup>13</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, “New Surgeon General Advisory [etc.],” May 3, 2023. <https://www.hhs.gov/about/news/2023/05/03/new-surgeon-general-advisory-raises-alarm-about-devastating-impact-epidemic-loneliness-isolation-united-states.html>

<sup>14</sup> Way, 45.

<sup>15</sup> Way, 268.

<sup>16</sup> Way, 269.