

What's a Man to Do?

Sermon by Reverend Rebecca M. Bryan

March 19, 2023

Last June, the members of the Men's Group put their heads and wallets together and bought this sermon as their contribution at last year's auction. It was a generous and brilliant idea. I was excited to imagine the sermon topic they would choose. "Maybe it will be about an obscure theology, or a famous Unitarian," I thought. The last two times I had "sold" a sermon the winners picked liminality and the #MeToo Movement as the topics.

The members of the Men's Group and I got today's date on the calendar and said we would talk more as time drew closer. They invited me to join them at one of their recent meetings so we could discuss the service. At the meeting, they gave me an article from *The New Yorker* to read. It was entitled "What's the Matter with Men?" *Oh, good!* I thought to myself. *Finally, I get to talk about...*

It turns out the title didn't mean what I thought it did. Members of the Men's Group were concerned and bewildered about the information in the article. "What's a Man to Do?" one member said to me.

The article written by Idrees Kahloon, Washington bureau chief at *The Economist*, describes the plight of men and boys in society including statistics on their academic standings, workplace trends, and health metrics. Much of what I read was new to me.

Boys are far behind girls academically at the elementary, high school, and college levels. In 2009 in American high schools, the top ten percent of classes were two times as likely to be female. There are close to two female undergraduates for every male. This ratio was basically fifty-fifty in the mid 1980's.¹

Additionally, men are leaving the workplace at an alarming rate and not replacing work with volunteerism. "They are overdosing, drinking themselves to death, and generally dying earlier, including by suicide. And men are powering

1 Idrees Kahloon, "What's the Matter with Men?" *The New Yorker*, January 30, 2023, 3-5.

the new brand of reactionary Republican politics, premised on a return to better times...when men could really be men..."² said the article. These statistics are especially true among Black men.

Some folks don't want to talk about these statistics. Others believe they reflect an inevitable adjustment period as women assume a more equitable position in society. Socialist David Morgan says that the current conditions are moving men away from a "ontological security" and confronting the possibility of "cultural redundancy."³ Idrees Kahloon believes "the problems—and their solutions—are far more complex,"⁴ He writes, "Self-doubt has broken through the supposed imperviousness of masculine self-belief."⁵

Richard V. Reeves, British scholar of inequality and author of *Of Boys and Men*, says men are "beset by bewildering changes that they cannot adapt to."⁶ He also notes that these are the results of the same cultural systems and forces now working on men that have applied to other groups of people historically marginalized and oppressed: "...nobody predicted that women would overtake men so rapidly, so comprehensively, or so consistently around the world."⁷

Still, only 10% of CEOs in the Fortune 500 are female, which is a twenty-six-fold increase from 2000 when there were only two female CEOs in that group.⁸

Clearly the current situation among men and boys is not good. The answer however is not to reinstate or reinforce the traditional male patriarchal definition and role of masculinity. The devastation and destruction of that system is

2 Kahloon, "Men," 3.

3 Ibid, 4.

4 Ibid, 3.

5 Ibid, 4.

6 Ibid, 3.

7 Ibid, 5.

8 Ibid.

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clear. It is time for something new. Albert Einstein said, "We cannot solve our problems with the same thinking we used when we created them."

"What's a Man to Do?" the man in our Men's Group asked. I've thought long and hard about the answer to that and have boiled it down to three points.

What's a man to do?

1. *Do your own work.*

This includes growing in self-awareness. Learn how to apprentice sorrow, do grief work, and forgive others and yourself. Your work includes being a part of a trusted community that supports you in healing your family of origin wounds, discovering your blind spots, and developing new skills of the emotions and heart.

Your work also includes learning what to do with your rage and anger about the expectations and norms you were given as a man without choice. Learn how to process and transform your own rage, so you don't transmit it. Then help others transform their rage. "May every one of us become more curious and less frightened of rage," says Buddhist author Ruth King.

Learn about the strength that comes from vulnerability and the power that comes from collaboration. *Do your own work...*

2. *Stay true to who you truly are underneath the expectations, burdens, and privileges of traditional manhood.*

Bring your true self into the world. Don't let cynicism or fear keep you away. Debunk the myth of being "too old" or "over the hill."

Michael Schwalbe, North Carolina State University Professor of Sociology, writes in *The Hazards of Manhood*, "Most American men know perfectly well the qualities they must display to be considered fully credible as men: power, competitiveness, and toughness. This turns out to be enormously useful for generating profit. Just give men opportunities to display manhood in these ways, and they'll do things that add to the bottom line, even if it's to their own detriment."⁹

9 Michael Schwalbe, "The Hazards of Manhood," *Yes Magazine*, Fall 2012, 42.

Question what you've been told and drop what doesn't work. Be who you truly are. Who you are matters. A lot. *Stay true to who you are...*

Which brings me to my third suggestion.

3. *Listen to and help women and other traditionally marginalized people.*

As a man you have irrefutable power. Even if you are older than 65. Even if you don't have a job. Even if you like women. Even if you don't believe in patriarchal values. What you believe matters; how you act and use the power you have matters even more.

Women know about male power. "*Many of our foundational myths are, in this way, stories about men, related to men by other men,*"¹⁰ wrote Idrees Kahloon. I received two master's degrees, one in business and the other in theology, both were almost entirely taught by and educated through perspectives of men. I was taught what men believe about power. I have also been harmed by it in micro and devastating ways.

Are you willing to learn from women?

Olympic soccer player Abby Wambach writes about a feminine understanding of power in her book, *WOLFPACK*.

The picture of leadership is not just a man at the head of a table.

It's also every woman who is allowing her own voice to guide her life and the lives of those she cares about.

Leadership is volunteering at the local school, speaking encouraging words to a friend, and holding the hand of a dying parent.

It's tying dirty shoelaces and going to therapy and saying to our families and friends: No. We don't do unkindness here.

It's signing up to run for the school board and it's driving that single mom's kids home from practice and it's crating boundaries that prove to the world that you value yourself.

Leadership is taking care of yourself and empowering others to do the same.

10 Kahloon, 3.

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Leadership is not a position to earn, it's an inherent power to claim.

Leadership is the blood that runs through your veins – it's born in you.

It's not the privilege of a few, it is the right and responsibility of all.

Leader is not a title that the world gives to you –

It's an offering that you give to the world.¹¹

Be willing to learn from women and other traditionally marginalized people. Sexism is still real, even as the trends for boys and men are unsteady.

Here are examples within Unitarian Universalist congregations where we pride ourselves on being ahead of the curve regarding sexism. A new minister was negotiating her starting salary. A male leader said, "Why do we have to pay her so much? Isn't she married?" A female minister could buy a clerical robe fitted for women or with three velvet stripes representing her Ph.D. A male minister can be called Tom, Dick, or Harry and people do not question his authority. That same authority is not presumed for a female minister, whether white, black, or trans.

Act on behalf of women.

When the scandal with Robert Kraft visiting massage parlors in Florida happened, I was appalled. The men I spoke to about it said "People know it's wrong. We don't need to say anything." Yet your silence is saying something.

Your voices matter. They matter to me and many women. We care that you speak out and that you act alongside us.

One in three women have been victims of sexual abuse, including me. It is much higher when we include other forms of physical violence. These things cannot help but affect us. Listen to and help women. Don't rescue us. But be part of the solution.

You are not personally responsible for patriarchy.

11 Abby Wambach, *WOLFPACK: How to Come Together, Unleash our Power, and Change the Game* (New York: Celadon Books, 2019), 40-41.

But there are things you can do. *Do your own work. Stay true to who you are under the expectations and burdens of manhood. Listen to and help women and other traditionally marginalized people.* So that we may be in right relationship with each other.

We are at a pivotal time. The article "What's Wrong with Men" ended with this quote. "Masculinity is fragile; it's also malleable. The shapes it will assume in the future have consequences."¹²

I'll close my answer to your question "What's a Man to Do?" with a poem by Fred LaMotte.

Men

Men who believe women. Men who care for women in pain. Men who praise women when their bodies grow old. Men who listen to women even when they repeat themselves.

Men who hear women even when they do not speak.

Men who grasp whole women with their hearts, not parts of women with their hands. Men who hug women well, radiance to radiance.

Men who linger by forest ponds and gaze into green stillness, speaking to the great Mother. Men who travel deep into the wilderness not to hunt or kill, not to climb the highest peak, but just to be there. Men who know valleys, observing the etiquette of mist, the customs of cedar and willow. Men who understand that the fire in their belly is the Goddess.

Thank you for asking.

Amen and blessed be.

12 Kahloon, 15.