

– UUMeN –  
UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST MEN'S NETWORK  
2001 Sermon Award Winner

# The Vanishing Male

by KATHLEEN ROLENZ

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READING from:

*How Hard it is to  
Keep from Being King  
When it's in You  
and in the Situation*

by Robert Frost

*by Robert*  
The King said to his son: "Enough of this!  
The Kingdom's yours to finish as you please.  
I'm getting out tonight. Here, take the crown."  
But the Prince drew away his hand in time  
To avoid what he wasn't sure he wanted.  
So the crown fell and crown jewels scattered.  
And the Prince answered, picking up the pieces,  
"Sire, I've been looking on, and I don't like  
the looks of the Empire here. I'm leaving with you."

So, the two making good their abdication  
Fled from the palace in the guise of men.  
But they had not walked far into the night  
Before they sat down weary on a bank  
Of dusty weeds to take a drink of stars.  
And eyeing one he only wished were his,  
The ex-King said, "Yon star's indifference  
Fills me with fear I'll be left to my fate;  
I needn't think I have escaped my duty,  
For hard it is to keep from being King  
When it's in you and in the situation."

*And then, later at the end of the poem the ex-King's son says:*

Let's see, where are we? Oh, we're in transition  
Changing an old King for another old one.  
What an exciting age it is we live in—  
With all this talk about the hope of youth  
And nothing made of youth. Consider me—  
How totally ignored I seem to be.  
No one is nominating me for King.  
And father...father's in for what we ran away from.  
He blames the stars  
For looking on and not participating  
(why are we so resentful of detachment?)

**How hard it is to keep from being King  
When it's in you and in the situation.**

# The Vanishing Male

Whew! Writing this sermon was hard work! Why is it so hard? Because talking about gender differences – talking about the experiences of women and men – feels like walking through a mine field. You never know if you're going to put your foot down on something that will trigger an explosive, emotional response. Like the color of our skin, our gender does determine and have an impact on how we live and move and have our being in the world. So, in the interest of hoping to invoke and invite discussion among you, I want to explore the phenomenon named in this sermon "The Vanishing Male."

I don't know if it is a denomination-wide trend or particular to certain church communities, but in the churches I've served I have noticed how few men there are serving on boards, as committee chairs, in significant leadership roles. I want to be clear: I'm not talking about large corporations like Microsoft, or Congress, where men still dominate the political arena. I'm talking about the smaller circles of interest in our lives: our church life, smaller areas of our work life, and our volunteer efforts.

So, in the last couple of weeks I've been field-testing this idea with some of you. I've asked women if they have had any response to the sermon title and description. Some have been neutral. *"I don't really agree with you...there are plenty of men in the congregation."* Another said, *"So...what's the problem? So what if there are more women in positions of leadership than men? It's about time, isn't it?"*

Yet, when I asked a few men about this idea, they were, by and large, carefully guarded in their response. I had the feeling that they were treading very lightly, so as not to say or do something that might upset or offend me. One man's response, however, was memorable. He said: *"If men are, in fact, vanishing from church life or other voluntary associations, it's because we feel that what we have to offer is not considered important or valid."*

Is this true? For centuries, up until the advance of feminism, men's accomplishments, voices, decisions and interests were represented *to the exclusion* of women and minority cultures, including church and church life. Men's experiences were believed to be normative. We have heard, for centuries about man-kind, and Father God, and a complete absence of women and women's stories and voices from the Bible and other sacred texts. In other cultures and other traditions, women are discouraged from taking leadership roles in the church. A recent convention of one of the largest Protestant denominations in the country, perhaps even the world, determined that women should not even be pastors! They said a woman should not serve a church as ordained clergy, even if her God calls her to do so! So, there are plenty of reasons why we celebrate the fact that women are taking on significant leadership roles.

Our denomination has always championed important causes, usually at a time when other denominations either chose to ignore certain issues or didn't think they were all that important. We are proud of claiming Olympia Brown as one of the first Universalist ministers ever to be ordained, and we are proud of the numbers of women

who enter our clergy ranks. As of Spring, 1999, there were 853 ministers actively engaged in UU ministry; 431 of them women, and 422 men.

When it became evident that women needed female-only groups in their churches, to grapple with the difficult questions of being a woman in a male-dominated culture, Unitarian Universalism was there, supplying the curriculum “Cakes for the Queen of Heaven” and other materials devised for women only. Many women have claimed this great faith of ours as the place where they have been empowered to leave an abusive relationship, to find their true calling in life, to appreciate their role as mother or scholar, companion or church leader, and we have much to give thanks for in that area. So, why, with our denomination reaching such a snug state of apparent equanimity, am I asking the question: “*Where are all the men? Are men retreating, not only from church life, but from areas where they used to exert influence and power?*”

My answer has been formed, in part, by a column I read several years ago, from the Rev. Suzanne Meyer, then minister of First UU Church of New Orleans. She wrote:

*Last summer, I taught church history at a UU lay-leadership school. I was sitting around late one evening unwinding with some of the participants. We were all in a jovial mood and were engaging in some good-natured teasing. I made a wise crack of the “all-men-act-like-male-chauvinist-pigs” variety. Everyone laughed. Well, almost everyone laughed. I looked around in time to see a look of pain flash across the face of one of the men in the group. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t have to. The look on his face said it all.*

*I apologized to him later, privately, and he accepted my apology with a gentle smile and a shrug. But I still felt ashamed of what I had said. I would have never made a joke at the expense of an African American, a woman, a gay person, or a disabled individual. And yet, I obviously still considered heterosexual, white males to be fair game.*

This column struck me, because in my strive towards empowerment, I too, have been guilty of exactly what Suzanne Meyer describes. If a man were to speak of a woman in that way, he would immediately be branded a sexist, and shunned by his peers, perhaps even his church family. However, I somehow, in an earlier stage of life, have felt completely comfortable exposing the flaws of patriarchy, of a male-dominated society, without acknowledging any of its benefit – or, without acknowledging the consequences my remarks have had on *men*. I have felt completely at ease making fun of my husband's love of sports, for example, as a “guy thing,” and then expecting him to say nothing in defense. I mean, after all, they're men, right? They should be able to take it, right?

As a Unitarian Universalist who firmly believes in the inherent worth and dignity of all persons, I also feel that it's time for our denomination to look at the feminization of our churches. I do not use that term as a slur. I use it to describe the change of church culture from predominately male-dominated (in the arenas of church leadership) to female-dominated. When the minister is female and most of the church's board is female, you cannot help but to have a church that is overlaid with women's ways of thinking and being in the world.

One of the great insights of feminist theology is that women's *experience* – not abstract thought dreamed up in an ivory tower – determines her theology and shapes her direction. So I began to wonder: do men have the feeling of being an “outsider” to the

inner circles of decision-makers, much as women used to feel? Do men feel like the King and his son (in the opening poem), thinking *"I've had enough of this"* and hoping that the next leader will have a handle on the Empire? Or, have we evolved in such a way that both women and men feel that they are on equal ground?

From my observation at the two Unitarian Universalist churches I've served, from an outsider's point of view, that *does* seem to be the case. I've observed men and women enjoying their differences with grace, good style and humor. And yet, despite the exemplary attitude that permeates our church, I did an informal survey through the directory to discover that there are approximately 96 women to 50 men. It begs the question: Is there a way of making the church more welcoming to men? Is there, in fact, a ministry to men?

I've heard a variety of reasons as to why fewer men actually come to church. *"Men aren't as interested in spirituality as their wives."* This may be true. I guess I will need to have more in-depth conversations with men about this, but I find it hard to believe.

I imagine that both women *and* men are interested in, if not spirituality alone, church services that offer vigorous questions, stimulating and challenging sermons, and prophetic words that inspire action, growth and courage for the living of these days.

*"Men aren't comfortable just sitting around in groups talking."* I don't know if this is a stereotype or not. From my experience of male/female groups, men enjoy a good discussion as much as the next person. However, the hallmark of any good church social program is that it devises a variety of opportunities for deep human interaction, whether in a small group discussion or pounding nails side-by-side on a Habitat for Humanity house without ever saying a word. Many of the programs that currently are offered by most churches are the ones which women may have created and feel comfortable with—and that's okay! This is not an indictment of small groups, discussion of feelings, and in-depth-sharing. However, if we are to consider what is a ministry to men, we may need to recognize that those styles of interaction may not be the preferred style for men.

*"Women have always been more active and involved in church. It's just the way it is."* This is cited as another reason for the "vanishing male." Again, I don't know if this is true for all males—or for the men of this generation—but for my father's generation being a good "church man" meant having a place where he could network with other men. It was also another place for men to get their needs for power and authority met. Certainly there is a downside to having needs for power and authority, but at the same time it has built institutions and traditions that have continued to this day. In our church life, we realize that power and authority, wisely and judiciously used, can build church buildings, sustain social justice projects, and do effective ministry both within and beyond the congregation.

With the many changes that have occurred both in society and in our own denomination, there is a recognized need for ministry to men. One of the little known resources in Unitarian Universalism is the UU Men's Network. Their charter states:

*We support church programs that are dedicated to the personal and spiritual growth of men, and that link such growth to the work of social justice. We stand for an inclusive masculinity: pro-feminist, gay-affirming, culturally and racially diverse. This means both honoring the goodness and courage in men, and taking responsibility for the harm that we create.*

And I would add to that description: this also means acknowledging *all* the contributions and gifts that men have to offer – not only gentleness and sensitivity, but toughness, aggressiveness, and other qualities that have traditionally been assigned to men.

As Unitarian Universalists, we have taken on a great challenge. We embrace theological diversity, so that the Pagan, the Christian, the Buddhist, the Agnostic, the Atheist and the Jew can sit together in one place and feel part of a great whole. We strive for racial and cultural diversity, not for its own sake, but because the differences so profoundly stretch and enrich us. And we seek to adopt and celebrate the various styles of leadership as represented by women and men – whether consensus or democratic, hierarchical or co-equals. We seek to build a community where neither gender feels the need to dominate, control, or manipulate, but rather, where both women and men contribute their unique, precious and powerful selves to the vision of a more just and compassionate society.

The (opening) reading has both the King and his son, the Prince, pondering the role of being “king” (or being a leader). *“It's hard to keep from being King, when it's in you, and in the situation.”* Centuries of patriarchy have taught men that they have to be King, they have to take control of a situation, they have to be in charge. What I see happening in this Great Experiment we call Unitarian Universalism is that both women and men are sharing the kingdom (or the Queendom) and learning that leadership qualities for both are in us and in our collective congregational wisdom.

What we must guard against is that if women expect men to act/respond/ behave in ways that are comfortable and acceptable to women, men may say, *“Enough of this! The Kingdom's yours to finish as you please!”* If we lift up what have been traditionally considered women's ways of being as normative and the only way – the right way of being in relationship and doing church – then we may hear the prince say: *“Consider me – how totally ignored I seem to be. No one is nominating me for King.”*

In my less enlightened moments, my feminist side may rise up and say: *“Great! You've had your place on the world's stage! Let women and minorities have a chance!”* At the same time, I remember the covenant I made when I decided to join a Unitarian Universalist Church: to affirm the inherent worth and dignity of *all* persons; not just women; not just people that think like me or act like me, but *all* persons – of differing race, and ethnicity, age and sexual orientation, genders and transgenders, class and theology – all of us must have a place to sit under the starlit sky and feel whole.

After doing the good work of the church, after working together, side by side, after new understandings are discovered and new truths lovingly revealed – all of us will sit together on a bank of dusty weeds to take a drink of stars and say: *“Ah, we did this, together.”* May it be so. Amen.

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