

2006-2-12 Neil Chethik: Voicemale

Opening Words

We are here

on a Sunday morning in late winter

to worship, to say yes to the gift of life.

For this is the marriage of love and learning,

and the union of commitment and dreams.

And so with joyous voice we say:

Mindful of the responsibility our freedom presses into us, blest by the beauty of the world, and drawn by a vision of a community known for its honesty, generosity, depth, love, and justice-work, we focus our time together by the kindling of light.

Sequence:

When I woke up one day this week,
people were insulting each other's religion,
protesters were shouting threats,
anger was poking its finger in the eye
of both the Holocaust
and ancient and important cultural norms.
So I went back to dreamland,
and imagined instead...dreamed instead...
people daring to ask each other questions,
strangers offering each other bouquets
of tulips in the middle of winter,
and artists drawing the bare winter branches
set against the sharp winter sky
so as to reverence them, not revile them.

When I woke up on another day this week,
people were speaking for their God,
and telling me that the Almighty

tinkered the world together 6000 years ago,
and that their religion IS science,
and that the Bible is a textbook
required of all people who want to avoid hell.
So I went back to dreamland, and imagined instead...dreamed instead...
a world
where no one dares to speak for G-d,
and where the scientific method
is the very touchstone of awe,
and the scriptures are written on hearts first,
pages second,
and where no one clings to an idea of the Holy
that is so crabbed, narrow, controlling and sad.

This morning I woke up, and came to this
my beloved community, and decided that, instead of going back to the
land of dreams, I would stay awake, and keep awake,
and remain steadfast in that silence which
always seems to serve as the proper preface
before the actions of those who wish to see their dreams come true:

silence

Waking up, I remember that I am in this world with many people who
have held my hand along the way, people who have challenged me,
taught me, or held me, so much so that I am actually able to distinguish
between being awake and dreaming in my sleep. Some of them come to
mind and heart now. I name them inside me, or outside of me by
whispering the sounds that are their names into the silence.

naming

Waking up, I remember that the song of life
rises up only from those who are awake, and
alive, and turned toward love and honesty.
Let the songs begin.

Readings

The First Reading comes from the anthology *Chicken Soup for the Romantic Soul*, published in 2002. The words are from a man named Tim Hudson, NOT the baseball player.

Sheila and I had just celebrated our 30th wedding anniversary when somebody asked Sheila why she thought her marriage had lasted so long. She answered, "On my wedding day, I decided to make a list of ten of Tim's faults which, for the sake of our marriage, I would always overlook. I figured I could live with at least ten." When Sheila was asked which faults she had listed, she replied, "I never did get around to listing them. Instead, every time he does something that makes me mad, I simply say to myself, 'Lucky for him, it's one of the ten!'"

The Second Reading comes from Neil Chethik's new book, *VoiceMale*, a quote from a 48-year-old man, married 15 years, in response to the question: *What did getting married mean to you?*

"Getting married was heroic for her and for me. It required courage and action. I know guys who went to Vietnam, who were jumping out of helicopters. That was much easier than jumping, open-eyed, into marriage. Whether it's compared to Vietnam, a hurricane, a lightning storm, or climbing Everest, to be available to your partner while staying true to yourself -- that's the ultimate challenge for a man."

Sermon

Let's say a guy named Chuck is attracted to a woman named Janet. He asks her out to a movie. She accepts. They have a pretty good time. A few nights later, he asks her out to dinner, and again they enjoy themselves. They continue to see each other regularly, and, after a while, neither one of them is seeing anybody else.

And then, one evening when Chuck is driving Janet home, she has this thought, and she says it out loud: "Do you realize, Chuck, that, as of tonight, we've been seeing each other for exactly *six months*?"

And then there is silence in the car. To Janet, it seems like a very loud silence. She thinks to herself: Geez, I wonder if it bothers him that I said that. Maybe he's been feeling confined by our relationship; maybe he thinks I'm trying to *push* him into some kind of obligation that he doesn't want, or isn't sure of.

But, hey, I'm not so sure *I* want this kind of relationship, either. Sometimes I wish *I* had a little more space, so I'd have time to think about whether I *really* want us to keep going the way we are ... I mean, where *are* we going? Are we just going to keep seeing each other at *this* level of intimacy? Are we heading toward *marriage*? Toward *children*? Toward a *lifetime* together? Am I ready for that level of commitment? Do I *really* even know this person?

And Chuck, who is driving, is thinking: ... Six months. So that means it was... let's see... *February* when we started going out, which was right after I had the car at the dealer's, which means... *Whoa?* I am way overdue for an oil change here!

And Janet is thinking: He's upset. I can see it on his face. Maybe *I'm* reading this completely wrong. Maybe he wants *more* from our relationship, *more* intimacy, *more* commitment: maybe he has sensed – even before I sensed it – that *I* was feeling some reservations. Yes, I bet

that's it. That's why he's so reluctant to say anything about his own feelings. He's afraid of being rejected.

And Chuck is thinking: And I'm gonna have them look at that transmission again. I don't care *what* they say, I know it's not shifting right....

And Janet is thinking: He's angry. And I don't blame him. *I'd* be angry too. *God*. I feel so guilty, putting him through this, but I can't *help* the way I feel. I'm just not sure.

And Chuck is thinking: They'll probably say the transmission is out of warranty.

And Janet is thinking: Maybe I'm just too idealistic here, waiting for a knight to come riding up on a horse, when I'm sitting right next to a perfectly good person, a person I *enjoy* being with, a person I *truly* do care about, a person who seems to truly care about me. A person who is in pain because of my self-centered schoolgirl romantic fantasy.

Chuck is thinking: Warranty? I'll give them a warranty.

STOP HERE

Those of you who know Dave Barry's writing won't be surprised that he's the author of this little sketch. Now I love Dave Barry, but for the past three years, I have been looking for this man – Chuck – the relationally-challenged, automotively-obsessed fellow that Barry so sadistically describes.

And frankly ... I have yet to find him.

Certainly there are bits of him in here (point to belly) and perhaps out there (point to audience). But my guess is – like so much else we've

been led to believe about men and relationships – Chuck is a myth, a fabrication built of stereotypes.

Today, I'd like to challenge some of the most pervasive stereotypes about men and relationships – stereotypes such as men won't talk about relationships; and men are commitment-phobic; and men have only one thing on their minds.

As Unitarian Universalists, we know that if we go into a relationship – whether it's a gay or straight relationship; a relationship with a lover or a friend or a child or a business associate -- if we go into a relationship with a preconceived notion about the other person, we deny the first principle of Unitarian Universalism: that each individual person has an inherent worth and dignity.

And when we go into a relationship with preconceived notions about the other person, we sabotage the relationship before it begins.

And so let's explore a couple of the more popular stereotypes about men and relationships.

The first is one that Dave Barry hints at in his excerpt about Chuck and Janet: That men won't talk about relationships. Indeed, in the passage I read, Chuck never once opens his mouth. And yet, doing research for my book, I had no trouble getting 360 men to share themselves openly about their marriages. Nearly 300 of those men were selected randomly from across the country in a telephone survey by a university research center. Picture this: The phone rings in someone's home, a man answers, he hears about a survey being done by a university for a book, and he's asked if he'd be willing to spend the next 15 to 20 minutes answering questions about his marriage.

Amazingly, in my mind, almost exactly half of the men were willing to do it.

What's more, 80 percent of those men agreed to allow their names and numbers to be passed on to me so I could call them back and ask even more detailed questions. In the end, I spoke in-depth – between 2 and 5 hours each – to 60 of those randomly-selected married men. No topic was off-limits.

Why were these men willing to talk? Because, I believe, I spoke their language. I almost never began the interview with allusions to feelings: I didn't ask: How did you feel? Or what were your emotions about that? This is not men's first language. When they hear such words, they put up barriers.

Rather, I asked: What did you think? What did you do? How did you react? What happened then?

Feelings almost always came through. But they were revealed on the man's terms, in the man's time. A man will say what he feels – a man will talk about how his relationship – but his feelings tend to flow out of his thoughts, and out of his actions.

Men *will* talk about relationships if their way of communicating is honored, if they're assured that the person doesn't want to judge them but rather, to genuinely hear their truth.

Another stereotype number about men is that they're commitment-phobic. Threatened with “confinement” in a relationship, males become Houdini-like, scrambling to shed their chains.

As I explored this stereotype, however, two facts kept getting in the way: first, 90 percent of men get married at least once in their lives, and secondly, 85 percent the time, the men are the ones doing the asking. If we recognize that perhaps 10 percent of men are gay, and that most of them also get hitched – in whatever way happens to be legal – then we're looking at virtually all men being committed, at some point, to a relationship.

This stereotype of male commitment-phobia may have gotten started because men tend to be slower than women to make the decision to marry. But, from men's point of view, they're not being slow. They're just being thorough.

And that's part of our training. We've been taught from early on to analyze situations carefully before making decisions, to examine assets and liabilities, costs and benefits. One man even spoke to me about having a spreadsheet in his head when he was deciding whether or not to marry. Over here are the pros, here are the cons, and which outweighs the other?

Ultimately, it could be argued that men take longer to decide to marry, not because we're afraid to commit, but because we know the momentousness of the decision, and we want it to be right.

Here's a third stereotype about men. You can help me with this one: All men care about is (you tell me) sex.

Again, this stereotype has some grounding in reality. Men have more testosterone than do women, so, biologically, men tend to have stronger sex drives. You probably know that one of the treatments for low sex drive, in both women and men, is a literal shot of testosterone. So, it was no surprise that in my survey for *VoiceMale*, about four out of five husbands told me that they wanted sex more often than their wives did. Apparently, nature has determined that for the good of the species, men's drive must be stronger.

But I found that biology was not destiny. In my in-depth conversations with husbands, I found, clearly, that when it comes to sex with their wives, men are willing to wait it out, work it out, and, if necessary, do without.

There was barely a husband I spoke with who hadn't gone through weeks and even months without sex at some time in his marriage. But

these men rarely strayed. Rather, as men are wont to do, they tried to solve the problem.

Here are some quotes from men who have been through dry periods in their marriages:

A 59-year-old husband, married 36 years, told me that his wife has not wanted sex in the several months since he retired. “I’m not even thinking about [affairs],” he told me. “I don’t even consider leaving her. We need to create something new because our life situation has changed. But staying together is not one option. It’s the *only* option.”

Another man, in his late 30s, told me that his wife had been sexually abused before they met, and that she had ever since been wary of sex. But the relationship, this man said, was much too valuable, he said, to give up simply because of the lack of love-making. As he told me: “I’ve always had long periods of my life without sex. I grew up Catholic, for crying out loud!”

Why are men willing to stay – even in a relationship with a less-than-satisfying sex life. Because, they told me, they like being married. They know the trade-offs, and the trade-offs are worth making.

Indeed, nearly two-thirds of husbands in my survey said they were very happy in their marriages – including many who would have liked more sex. And more than 90 percent of married men said that if given the opportunity, they would marry the same woman again.

I found other stereotypes – or apparent truisms – about men that were equally questionable.

For example, it’s said that you can’t change a man. But in my survey, 60 percent of men said they already had been changed in a significant way by their wives, and 90 percent said the changes were for the good. Men actually expect their wives to change them. They don’t like to be criticized, nagged, or pressured to change. But even they said that if their

wives encourage, reward, or in some other way positively invite change, they are open to it.

It's also said that if you want to know how a man will treat a woman, look at his relationship with his mother. But according to my survey, a man's relationship with his mother in no way predicts how he will treat his wife. Rather, if you want to know how a man will treat his wife or partner, look at the man's relationship with his father.

PAUSE

Now, in recent weeks, as I have begun speaking about men and marriage, I'm often asked for advice on how to have a good marriage. As a journalist, I don't usually give advice. But I did ask the 360 men I surveyed for their advice. They had a combined 8,000 years of marriage experience, and this is what they said.

First, to husbands, I would say this: Do the laundry. Or the cooking. Or the vacuuming. Or, if you can't stand to do any of these and can afford it, hire a cleaning service.

We've all heard rumors about a link between housework and sex. Well, my survey confirmed it. According to husbands themselves – remember, I only surveyed men – according to husbands themselves, the happier a woman is with the division of housework, the happier a man is with his marital sex life. Maybe it's because she's less tired; maybe it's because she feels more appreciated.

Whatever the reason, when he contributes in a way that his wife perceives as fair, she not only has more sex with him, but she's less likely to have affairs, and less likely to be interested in getting marriage counseling.

Which makes me think: Hiring a housecleaner may be a good financial investment. You can pay a housecleaner now or a marriage counselor down the road.

Now, primarily to women, this advice from married men: Don't expect your husband to love the way you love him, or the way you wish he would love you.

Each person has a different style of loving. Among men I interviewed, I found that there is a masculine style of loving.

It's a style that relies less on sharing feelings than on sharing space. It puts less stock in words, and more in action. It is less likely to emphasize face-to-face intimacy, and more likely to focus on side-by-side activity.

And, finally, this piece of advice for all lover, and would-be lovers, of any gender. Be careful about the term "soul-mate," as in: I want to find my soulmate.

Because, men told me, a soulmate is not something you find, but something you create over the course of many years. You create a soulmate by living with someone day after day, decade after decade, through good times and hard times, through tragedies and triumphs. Soulmates may even fall out of love with one another at times along the journey. But they find their way – sometimes they have to WILL their way – back to each other.

A man I interviewed who had been married 44 years summed it up this way: "Having a soul mate is a good goal, but it's a lifetime goal. It's not a realistic goal in pursuit of a spouse. What is a realistic goal is to find someone who shares as many values with you as possible, so that you can become best friends."

Today, let us honor those of us who are pursuing their soulmates the old-fashioned way, one decade at a time. Let us also honor all of those who have jumped, open-eyed, into relationships, and now struggle to make them work for the long run.

And, finally, let us especially honor those who have jumped before, fallen, and are thinking about jumping again.

So Be it.

Offertory

And so because we are in this together, and because each life here is important to the person who is living it, and because this is a place, a circle, a community where lives can be honestly faced, welcomed, and blessed, we set aside this time for giving and receiving in support of such a remarkable and unexpected home for the heart.

Litany with #131 Love Will Guide Us

1 and 3 Intrinsic worth. Everyone. No one has to earn it. No one has to buy it. It comes with waking up on the day we are born.

2 No preconceived notions. No pictures of the future in advance. No stereotypes. Just love that grows so that it is greater at the end than at the beginning.