

“Men At Work”
16 May 2004
Unity Church–Unitarian

Worship Leader: Rob Eller-Isaacs
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READING: The Journey – Edward Field

When he got up that morning everything was different:
He enjoyed the bright spring day
But he did not realize it exactly, he just enjoyed it.

And walking down the street to the railroad station
Past magnolia trees with dying flowers like old socks
It was a long time since he had breathed so simply.

Tears filled his eyes and it felt good
But he held them back
Because men didn't walk around crying in that town.

Waiting on the platform at the station
The fear came over him of something terrible about to happen:
The train was late and he recited the alphabet to keep hold.

And in its time it came screeching in
And as it went on making its usual stops,
People coming and going, telephone poles passing,

He hid his head behind a newspaper
No longer able to hold back the sobs, and willed his eyes
To follow the rational weavings of the seat fabric.

He didn't do anything violent as he had imagined.
He cried for a long time, but when he finally quieted down
A place in him that had been closed like a fist was open,

And at the end of the ride he stood up and got off that train:
And through the streets and in all the places that he lived in later on
He walked, himself at last, a man among men,
With such radiance that everyone looked up and wondered.

READING: Wake up. Day calls you.

– Pedro Salinas (William Barnstone, translator)

Wake up. Day calls you
To your life: your duty.
And to live, nothing more.
Root it out of the glum
night and the darkness
that covered your body
for which the light waited
on tiptoe in the dawn.
Stand up, affirm the straight
simple will to be
a pure slender virgin..
Test your body's metal.
Cold, heat? Your blood
will tell against the snow,
or behind the window.
The color
In your cheeks will tell.
And look at people. Rest
Doing no more than adding
your perfection to another
day. Your task
is to carry your life high,
and play with it, hurl it
like a voice to the clouds
so it may retrieve the light
already gone from us.
That is your fate: to live.
Do nothing.
Your work is you, nothing more.

SERMON: Men at Work – Rob Eller-Isaacs

I've always been an underachiever. When I was in the seventh grade our teacher informed us that he needed to meet with the principal and that he would be away for half an hour or so. He asked us to sit quietly and read. Unfortunately he left his attendance book sitting open on his desk. As soon as Mr. Jensen left the room, Dick Chandler, the alpha male of the seventh grade strolled up to Mr. Jensen desk and started thumbing through the attendance book to see what he could see. "Whoa...look what I've found," he exclaimed. We all left our desks to see what excited him so. And there, listed in descending order were recorded the IQ's of every member of the class.

It was the early '60's, the heyday of intelligence testing. Eugenics had been discredited as thinly veiled racism. But it was commonly believed then and I'm afraid it still is commonly believed that a person's intellectual capabilities can be measured by intelligence testing and that the

results of such measurement are generally accurate indicators of future performance. What I saw written there in Mr. Jensen's attendance book told me I was no genius but that with disciplined effort I should be able to excel in whatever field I might choose. That moment was the high water mark of my academic career for soon I was chastened by algebra, chemistry and three long years of first-year Latin. I began to realize that I was gifted but that my gifts were not equally applicable in every field of endeavor. It was the beginning of discernment.

Unfortunately that realization came too late. Performance anxiety had already set in. Grades mattered. Anything below a "B" sent me spiraling down into the abyss. I got a "D" in chemistry and saw my future falter. To borrow a phrase from the divine Ms. Joni Mitchell, it felt like I was crossing "stepping stones on sinking sand." I had already learned that work has to be one's first and foremost obligation. My parents were not particularly heavy-handed. They tried to reassure me when I failed. But I had already internalized an intense and I now believe, neurotic need, certain drivenness, which has been both a blessing and a bane to my life and to my ministry.

I hesitate to say the men are more prone to suffer this variety of inner tension than are women. Still, our lives are shaped by the expectations bred into us, at home, at school and in society at large. And though biology is only part of what determines who and how we are, we do need to take it into account. So, in spite of my hesitance I'm going to take a risk and share with you a controversial theory I've been thinking about for some years.

I've come to believe that men are more prone than women to lose themselves in their work because we can't have babies. I think women, by design are more faithful than men because the capacity to bear children, whether or not it is exercised, helps women deal with their own mortality. I know I'm making dangerous generalizations here. I'm well aware that gender itself can easily become an oppressive concept that denies the personhood of those who don't fit easily into its categories. I have no need to overstate the case. What I'm trying to talk about is the way that I and far too many of my male friends allow our work to become a hedge against our own mortality.

I love my work. I'm so grateful to serve in the liberal ministry and in particular to have been called by you to be one of the ministers of Unity Church. But I'm also scared to death that my own neurotic need, that drivenness, that yearning to yield my life to the work will poison the well. It's possible to lose oneself in striving. And its possible to do damage to the people and the places we care about most by encouraging neurotic ambition.

Parker Palmer, Quaker philosopher and educator, writes in Let Your Life Speak about the need to examine our work lives. *"If we, as leaders, are to cast less shadow and more light, we need to ride certain monsters all the way down, explore the shadows they create, and experience the transformation that can come as we 'get into' our spiritual lives."* He then offers what he calls "a bestiary of five such monsters." Each of the five is familiar both in my own life and in the life of the church. Each of these monsters can afflict both men and women. This morning I want to talk about the ways these monsters undermine the lives of men at work.

The first shadow-casting monster on the list is insecurity. How many times have you encountered men whose self-doubt causes them both to doubt others and to be overly dependent upon external activity as a way to generate confidence and meaning? This monster causes far too many men to neglect their families, their friends and every other source of nourishment and inspiration. This is the monster that causes men to disintegrate and even die when they retire.

How many of us are enslaved by the need to prove we're better than our snide, judgmental inner voices whisper to us that we are? How many of us work ourselves to death because we're afraid to engage other people in meaningful, intimate, nourishing ways? I want to believe that my passion to build and strengthen liberal churches reflects a deep commitment to the principles and purposes for which we stand. I want to believe I work so hard because I believe so fervently in the gospel of freedom and conscience. But in my heart of hearts I know my life is out of balance. I work too hard and so do most of you. We need to wake up to the fact that each and all of us come into this world both whole and holy, that we are welcome and worthy and that we, in Palmer's words, "are valued in and for ourselves."

The second monster in the bestiary is the belief that the universe is a battleground. This one takes hold when we convince ourselves we always have to fight in order to survive. We talk about "those people" and make assumptions based on ideology. This kind of dualism is at the very heart of violence. Difficult as it may be we cannot let ourselves indulge in dualistic thinking. It's always easier to generalize and disregard the opposition than it is to make real connections across the great divides which separate us. The tragedy of dualistic thinking is that we dissipate our energy in making war instead of making peace. We know there is another way. We know what miracles can happen when people circle round and listen well and try to tell the truth.

Palmer calls the third monster "functional atheism." I wrestle with this terror every day. Every day I fall back into believing that the ultimate responsibility for everything rests with me. I start second guessing everyone around me. Instead of building trust and moving forward faithfully, I can't imagine how anyone could possibly care as much as I do. And so I undermine the very people I am charged to encourage and inspire. Here Palmer's comment is too good to paraphrase. He writes:

The gift we receive on the inner journey is the knowledge that ours is not the only act in town. Not only are there other acts out there, but some of them are even better than ours, at least occasionally! We learn that we need not carry the whole load but can share it with others, liberating us and empowering them. We can learn that sometimes we are free to lay the load down altogether. The great community asks us to do only what we are able and trust the rest to other hands.

Next comes the fear of the natural chaos of life. We want the world to be predictable. We want our lives to be tidy. And so we attempt to force our families and our institutions into patterns we can trust. We're afraid we will be overwhelmed by forces out of our control. So we try to keep the lid on. We run from dissent, innovation, challenge and change, and as we flee rigidity sets in. It first takes form as necessary self-protective rules and regulations, and then those rules

and regulations take on a life of their own. They become parasites and wrap around the roots which nourish and sustain us, choking off the liveliness and creativity which make life worth living. The fifth and final shadow-monster takes us back to the issue of mortality and the ways that we deny the inevitability of death. It takes institutional form in our reticence to eliminate programs and projects that fail.

We cling to the ways we've always done things. We say they're tried and true but all too often we shy away from change because it forces us to face the fact that each and all of us are going to die. It's that simple. It's that terrifying.

It's no wonder then that far too many men subsume their lives in labor. It's such a good escape from existential loneliness. Staying busy helps to keep the emptiness at bay. Still, it seems a crime to squander so much time. We drive ourselves to stay afloat. We tell ourselves our jobs come first. And we inflict these same restrictions on our children. We send them to schools which teach them how to make the same mistakes we've made. We're not only too busy, we're also not doing the work that love calls us to do. How many of us have, as Joseph Campbell often observed, climbed the ladder of success only to discover as we reach the top that we put it up against the wrong wall?

The real work men need to do now is to embrace the obligations of intimacy. Though women's lives have had to bear the brunt of patriarchy, violence, exclusion and disparity, men's lives have been severely limited as well. Just as women are ascendant in the public realm, men now need to move with hesitance and care to set aside the old constraints and venture into tenderness.

This is our true work now. This is our obligation and our challenge and our need. May this church be a place where the seed of just such tenderness will take root and grow and blossom.

May it be so and amen.