



FORGIVENESS

Forgiveness is one of the greatest challenges on our spiritual journey. Five of our GSV brothers describe their personal struggle with the transforming and liberating power of forgiveness.

Visionary (ISSN 1533-8231) is the journal of Gay Spirit Visions and a publication of The Council of Trusted Elders of Gay Spirit Visions, Inc., a Georgia not-for-profit corporation recognized under Section 501(c)(3) of Internal Revenue Code of the United States. Copyright, 2004.

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Dear Gentle Brothers:

Since my last letter to you my life has continued to be in transition. Finally, after 2½ years, I sold my townhouse and moved out Dec. 23! While living in my friend Elaine's basement, I began the search for a new home. Each morning with my "MLS" listings, a map and lots of coffee in hand, I drove and looked. Many afternoons I found myself questioning my original intention. "Have I lost my mind?" My quest for a house and land, in my price range, knowing from the start it would be a fixer-upper, seemed flawed at times. But my mantra "stay the course" and my vision, to live on land and in a house that is payed for, to plant, paint and play with no homeowners association or bank standing over me, kept me focused. After more than 100 viewings and 2½



BY CRAIG COOK

months, I found a place. Owned by a bank, sitting empty on Allgood Circle, this house needed so much work. But I made an offer. Now, three months later, I finally live there. It's rough and I still have no appliances. But hot water, rose bushes, mockingbirds, Home Depot bills and brick and mortar, I've got. I've also been shown anew friends and family who have supported me, listening patiently to plumbing stories, sheet rock dilemmas and trash pick up sagas, terribly uninteresting. But they listen. My point? "Stay the course." With clear and wise intention, visualization of that intention and faith in Great Spirit, we can achieve anything. It may take longer than we hoped, it may take us to the "dark" side and back. It may take us places we couldn't have imagined but Spirit will take us. We can have what we ask for! Hold on to your dreams, and know that all of you are welcome, safe and loved at "All Good Circle."

As Ever,
In Love,
Craigalee

Craig Cook is a long-time Atlanta resident and can be reached at Craigalee@gayspiritvisions.org.

Gay Spirit Visions

A Mission Statement for Our Second Decade and A New Millennium

We are committed to creating safe, sacred space that is open to all spiritual paths, wherein loving gay men may explore and strengthen spiritual identity.

We are committed to creating a spiritual community with the intent to heal, nurture our gifts and potential, and live with integrity in the world.

We are committed to supporting others in their spiritual growth by sharing experiences and insights.

To fulfill these goals we facilitate annual retreats and conferences, sponsor social events, publish a newsletter, and maintain web-based communications for men who love men.





FORGIVING CLEVE

My biggest struggle for forgiveness is about my father, Cleve.

Cleve's life was rough from the start. His mother was killed by lightning when he was 4; his father was an alcoholic his whole adult life; Cleve lived with different relatives until he grew up.

BY JENNINGS FORT



He joined the Army and was in active combat in World War II. He came home, married my mother, had my sister and promptly became an alcoholic before I was born. I heard his drunken tales about the terrible battle at Anzio, his own sad childhood and his unending anger at my mother, which at least once, turned violent. On Friday nights I listened for our backdoor to open, wondering if he would come in drunk, knowing that we had no control over it.

He struggled all his adult life too — in and out of state hospitals with many chances to dry out. But he never did. He was arrested at least once for drunk driving. Once he drove his pickup off a 30-foot embankment, broke his arm and ribs, lacerated his head and injured two other men riding with him. Cleve was smart, everyone said, becoming a licensed electrician, but making every wrong business decision possible and placing alcohol ahead of his family.

The weight of supporting a household and children and dealing with Cleve was especially hard for my mother and I realized this quickly. That's when I started to hate him. One winter my father spent every day passed out on the couch. The oily stain from his head on the arm of that couch never came out.

There were a few bright spots. Sometimes he drove the neighborhood kids in the back of his pickup for ice cream. He was a pretty good cook. When I was in high school and college, he made a few attempts at making a relationship by asking me to help him with some kind of building project. But it was too late.

Cleve was a better grandfather. After retiring, he drank less, took his grandsons fishing and bought them Rambo

knives and canteens. But when his present for one grandson's 12th birthday was a handgun, we knew something had changed. His mind was going and his drinking eventually resurfaced. My mother called me when he began vomiting blood and we took him to the hospital where he eventually lost half his stomach to a perforated ulcer. A year later, in a cussing rage, he stood up, stumbled and broke a hip. Again my sister and I came to pick up the pieces.

The last call about Cleve came when my mother believed he was going to die. He had sat in his pickup in the backyard for a week, drinking cheap beer, refusing to come out. I found him clutching the steering wheel, wild-eyed, with scraggly, gray overgrown whiskers, soiled with excrement smeared throughout the truck cab. What was I going to do? How many times had we been through this and how many times had things always ended up the same? It all came down to this pathetic, stinking mess of a person who would never change. This was my father and I was disgusted. When he started having convulsions, we called an ambulance but he died before it arrived. I was the last to see him alive.

It was hard to forgive a dead person, especially someone you hated. Years of perspective (and counseling) helped. But while my mind began to forgive, my heart was reluctant. A few years ago a spiritual guide told me that my father had always loved me but had his own homosexual feelings to deal with. This was a revelation and brought enormous sadness. In his time, living as a gay man in a small North Carolina town was unthinkable. Cleve had been doomed since birth.

I cling to this explanation because it helps me make sense of his life and helps me forgive. At GSV conferences I always invite Cleve to be with us and, maybe through me, he can experience a little of the life that he never had.

Our special section spotlights the struggle of several of our GSV brothers to embrace forgiveness to help them grow and move forward as spiritual men.

Although I would never bring Cleve back, I have to honor the fact that he is the reason I'm here and he is part of who I am. I believe Cleve carried a terrible

GSV potlucks in Atlanta, are held the fourth Saturday of the month at 7:30 p.m., unless otherwise noted.

GSV Heart Circles in Atlanta are held the second Sunday of every month, hosted by Ben Linton at 7:30 p.m. For location contact Ben Linton at 404-373-9869, benlinton4@bellsouth.net

June 26 – GSV Potluck Hosted by Phil Robst, 3030 Park Lane, Chamblee, GA. Contact Phil at 770-986-1205 or phil@robst.com

July 24 – GSV Potluck Hosted by John Warner, 3038 Clairmont Road Apt G, Atlanta. Contact John at 404-315-0234 or johnw26@yahoo.com

August 28 – GSV Potluck Hosted by Doug Caulkins and Mikel Wilson, 535 Watergate Ct., Roswell, GA. Contact Doug and Mikel at 770-993-9959 or snakeowl@yahoo.com

A special GSV sleep over

Lem Arnold and Pat Boyle will host an overnight adventure at their place in Noble, GA, about 20 miles south of Chattanooga, the weekend of Aug. 14-15. This is about 1½ hours travel time from central Atlanta.

They invite everyone for dinner Saturday at 7:30 p.m. and request RSVPs.

Plan to arrive Saturday morning/early afternoon (or come up Friday evening). There are two guest bedrooms, three extra mattresses, three sofas and lots of space inside for sleeping bags. You can also bring tents and camp outside.

Lem and Pat's property has more than 30 acres of woods and a 1½-acre pond. They suggest a hike around Cloudland Canyon State Park on Lookout Mountain as an option Sunday after breakfast. Contact Lem or Pat for directions and to RSVP for Saturday dinner: Noble phone: 706-764-2801. Email: lem1951@mindspring.com

secret all his life and I don't want to carry my own burden of bitterness and anger, maybe just as heavy.



Jennings Fort lives in Atlanta. Contact him at jenman@mindspring.com.

Reflections on the GAY SPIRIT CULTURE SUMMIT

April 29-May 2, Garrison Institute, Garrison, NY

The Gay Spirit Culture Summit was the passion and brain child of Patrick McNamara, a tall, lean, elfin man from upstate New York with global vision. He coordinated this event to see what might be possible if you gathered 100+ of the men who hold sacred space for men who love men.



BY MARTIN
"TREEWALKER"
ISGANITIS

Attending were 130 men from different paths, locations, ages, ethnic origins and yet united by the same curiosity: What could possibly happen during and after this event?

My lineage is Gay Spirit Visions and our tribe was well-represented with active participants, elders and alumni. I reconnected with several old friends I've been holding in my heart at our Fall Circle.

GSV wasn't the only tribe represented. There were body workers, healers, magicians, spell-casters, seminarians, priests, rabbis, dancers, painters, writers and ethnographers. Some had yet to step fully into this work in a manner that produced results. Others had written, spoken, made movies, art, workshops, dances, pot luck suppers, street outreach programs and more.

www.gayspiritculture.org

The core group followed a consensus-based process. Okay, you couldn't have 130 gay male leaders and have instant consensus. There were ego and passion along with selfless sacrifice and compassion. But the men were able to breathe with each other, hold in their hearts and prayers the planet we share and everyone on it.

We recognize our needs and are willing to help bring change. Our intention is a more inclusive, less-violent culture with mutual respect and fully-realized, fully-shared human dignity. We're committed to move toward this in our local communities. We've focused our vision

and inventoried our resources. We believe there's more than enough work and more than enough resources (you and I). We recognize the benefit of an interdependent consciousness with others. Rather than exploit resources for personal gain, we believe in ensuring that everyone has enough to sustain them. Rather than creating another organization hierarchy, we wish to organize resources, talents and abilities locally to solve problems such as depression and suicide among our people, spread of HIV and other sexually transmitted diseases, the despair of the spiritual wasteland that so many of us have experienced, hunger, poverty.

I'm not at liberty to discuss everything that happened between the opening and closing of the Summit. Those details will manifest in the lives of the participants. I will, however, share some of my own observations:

1 There are thousands of us. Probably tens or even hundreds of thousands of gay men of Spirit. One of my early GSV mentors and friends was Raven Wolfdancer. His last public statement in his last closing circle was, "We must come out spiritually!" Yes. We must. We mustn't judge others by outside appearance. We mustn't assume people are against us. If people love and respect

us, we must nurture those relationships. Every time a circle is drawn that excludes us we must draw a circle that includes those who left us out. We can no longer be silent. But we must take appropriate, safe steps as we're able *right where we are*. We must build a community where everyone is welcome and safe. This could be a sanctuary for men who love men or projects to improve your neighborhood.

Those who know how to build such communities must begin. Start where you are. Soon the men of the Summit will make resources available to show you *how* to do this work if you need help. Maybe

you already know how and would just like some companionship. We could help with that. Volunteer at local non-profit organizations. There may be people who aren't surprised that a gay man is motivated to help your community.

2 Boundaries are important. I learned this from the youth affinity group. These old souls in young bodies told us how much they appreciate boundaries, especially within friendships with mentors. Boundaries are important in all facets of our lives. We come from a dominant culture where boundaries are confused and conflicted. As a result, what passes for acceptable behavior when we're taunted and bullied on the playground is acted out in foreign prisons when we're adults. We must take a stand *demanding* respect for loving, consensual, sexuality regardless of gender. We must draw a boundary between exploitive sexual expression and life-affirming sexual expression.

3 We are of many lineages. I'm of the GSV tribe and the white men in their 40s tribe. I'm a shamanic life coach – if you will – for other men who love men. I'm a leather faerie. I'm a man, an Earthling, between earth and sky. Who are you? Who are you called to be?

4 Dream bigger. Imagination is your only limitation. If you can imagine it, you can experience it. Just be careful what you ask for.

5 Listen. Hear Spirit's voice in your every day life. Listen behind people's words and connect with them on a deeper level. Keep breathing, beloved ones. And take one step at a time. Know you're part of a movement that transcends sexuality, spiritual path, color, age, ability, ethnic origin and race. Walk in the truth of who you are.

TreeWalker lives in Decatur, GA. He welcomes comments on his writing and is available for individual consultation. Contact him at ElderTreeWalker@att.net

The Guardians

We are the Shamans and the Gatherers.
We are the Finders and the Healers.

We are the Bringers to the Meeting Place
We are the Men of the Mask-Face.

We have been called to greatness and to
lowliness.
We have been called to oneness and loneliness.

We are the storm-chasers,
The tree-herders,
The finders of the Sacred Groves.

And we continue, and we prevail
And we fear not the veil,

We hold the Spirit of Earth in our sinew
And we heal to birth life anew.

Bright blessings my brothers, Keepers of the
Mystery!
Know and love your Sacred History!

From the past, we have great builders seen
To the future we vow to Walk Between
We are the snake, the Stag, the wolf and wren,
We are the Tribe of the Two-Spirit Men.

We stand encircled under the holy Stars,
Balancers of Venus and of Mars

Let us call forth, through Space and Time,
Great men, of this our Line
Knowers and mediators, seekers and Seers,
We tell a story that the world now hears.
Lovers and brothers, blessed friends,
A circle of light, without end.

My thoughts and love to you this Night!
May your Moonshadow-spirits now take
flight!

With Earth and Sun and Wind and Sea,
By The Great Life Force, Blessed Be!



BY MICHAEL
"PERIGRINE" CHAVEZ

*Read at the Gay Spirit
Culture Summit,
May 2004*

THE BEAUTY OF ALL THINGS

What if we could somehow see everything in the entire universe as being exquisitely beautiful, like the finest piece of great art? What if we saw every single thing and event, without exception, as an object of extraordinary beauty?

We would be momentarily frozen in the face of that vision; all our grasping and avoiding would come momentarily to rest; we would be released from the self-contraction and ushered into the choiceless contemplation of all that is. Just as a beautiful object of artwork momentarily suspends our will, so the contemplation of the universe as an object of beauty would open us to the choiceless awareness of that universe, not as it should be or might be or could be, but simply as it is.

Could it then be possible that when the beauty of all things is perceived, we're actually standing directly in the eye of Spirit, for which the entire Kosmos is an object of beauty, just as it is, because the Kosmos is, in fact, the radiant Art of Spirit itself?


In this extraordinary vision, the Kosmos is the artwork of our own highest self in all its shining creativity, which is exactly why every object in the universe is an object of radiant beauty when perceived with the eye of Spirit.

And conversely: if you could, here and now, see every thing and event as an object of sheer beauty, then you would be undone as ego and stand instead as Spirit. You would want nothing from the Kosmos at that moment except to contemplate its unending beauty and perfection. You would not want to run from the universe or grasp it or alter it. In that contemplative moment you will neither fear nor hope, nor move at all. You will want nothing whatsoever, except to witness it all, contemplate it unendingly. You want it never to end. You are radically free of will, free from grasping, free from all mean motion and commotion. You are a center of pure and clear awareness, saturated by the utter beauty of everything it contemplates.

Not a single particle of dust is exclud-

ed from its beauty, no matter how "ugly" or "frightening" or "painful." Nothing is excluded from this contemplative embrace, for each and every thing is radically, equally, unendingly the brilliant radiance of Spirit. When you behold the primordial beauty of everything in the universe, then you behold the glory of the Kosmos in the eye of Spirit, the "I" of Spirit, the radical "I-I" of the universe. You are full to infinity, radiant with the light of 1,000 suns and all is perfect as it is, eternally, as you contemplate this, your greatest artwork, the entire Kosmos, this thing of beauty, this object of unending joy and bliss radiant in the heart of all that arises.

Think of the most beautiful person you've seen. Think of the moment you looked into his or her eyes and, for a fleeting second, you were paralyzed. You couldn't take your eyes off that vision. You stared, frozen in time, caught in that beauty. Now imagine that *identical* beauty radiating from everything in the universe: every rock, plant, animal, cloud, person, mountain, stream - even the garbage dumps and broken dreams, radiating that beauty. You are quietly frozen by the gentle beauty of everything. You are released from grasping, from time, avoidance, released altogether into the eye of Spirit, where you contemplate the unending beauty of the art that is the entire world.

The all-pervading beauty isn't an exercise in creative imagination. It's the actual structure of the universe. That all-pervading beauty is the very nature of the Kosmos right now. It's not something you have to imagine, because it's the actual structure of perception in all its domains. If you remain in the eye of Spirit, every object is an object of radiant beauty. If the doors of perception are cleansed, the entire Kosmos is your lost and found beloved, the original face or primordial beauty, forever. And in the face of that stunning beauty, you will completely swoon into your own death, never to be seen or heard from again, except on those tender nights when the wind gently blows through the hills and the mountains quietly calling your name. *May 15, 1997* 

Harold Cole is a retired person in his 80s who spends much of his time counseling, teaching and writing. He lives in a log cabin in Kentucky.



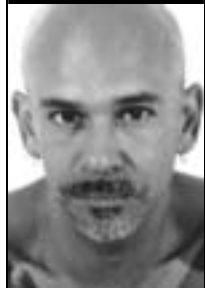
BY HAROLD COLE



PRACTICING FORGIVENESS

I need to learn more about forgiveness. The general perspective on forgiveness has something to do with generosity in overlooking wrongful acts. How goofy is that? Turn the other cheek,

BY MIGUEL MOLINA



slap me again? What does that resolve? Doesn't do a thing for me. I need a better solution, but our society doesn't often provide a great example of forgiveness.

We're probably the most litigious culture that's ever existed. Don't really want to practice forgiveness. Really rather accuse and engage in lawsuits. I've never sued anybody, though by popular norms I could have. And I probably haven't forgiven those that were "suit-worthy," either. More likely I've guarded my grudges and let them control my being.

Well, the picture's getting a little clearer now. I'm better off with a shift in perspective. That wrongful act could turn me into a victim unless I'm willing to view it as someone's temporary lack of mindfulness. If it's a wrongful act I commit against myself, then it's my own lack of mindfulness. Let me illustrate with a story that's present with me today.

About 15 years ago, a dear friend decided that I was too judgmental and that he would be better off without me in

his life. So, a friendship I considered vital, was severed. I honored his choice...how magnanimous on my part! The truth is, I took the proud fighter stance. The story I told myself was that I really didn't need that kind of energy around me and there was probably some truth to what he said, but maybe he deserved it, blah, blah, blah. No relenting, no forgiveness, no connection for nearly 15 years.

We connected a few months ago, over breakfast, found each other again and made a commitment to heal our relationship. There were a few soul-cleansing tears.

My friend passed away the day after my last birthday. I never knew he was even near death, dammit! At his memorial service, one of the speakers spoke about, what else, radical forgiveness.

I could have practiced forgiveness. If I had forgiven him 15 years ago, I might have become more objective and healed that judgmental self. I could have let go of that pride which certainly blocked spiritual growth. I might have tried to heal our relationship long before now. When I think of all that we might have experienced together....

I've got to get into this forgiveness thing, so here goes:

First, I forgive myself for not being forgiving.

I forgive my parents for being less than perfect. They were as perfect as they could be. I don't have to become them,

but they had great lessons for me.

I forgive my lovers who left me. In retrospect, it wasn't about leaving me at all. They were moving forward on their paths. So that's a good choice. I don't have to be the relationship failure any more.

I forgive all those kids in school for their teasing. They had their own struggles. What a relief, they're no better than I am after all.

I forgive myself for all my sins, intentional or not. I just "missed the mark" now and then. I imagine I'll make a few more mistakes before I'm through.

What do I have to gain from this? Forgiveness is a far better choice for me than guilt, than bitterness, than long-term anger, than feeling less-than, than being a victim. It is a choice to live intentionally, to be whole, to feel connected, to tell the truth faster, to live in service to my own *betterment* and to that of others. It's fairly simple, really. What took me so long to get here?

While I'm at it, I might as well own something I've struggled with time and time again all these years: I forgive myself for being shy. That's a big one. All the times I've been afraid to say something, so much so that it became a habit to say nothing at all. What a great understanding that I'm not a prisoner to my beliefs! If they don't work for me, I can change them!

Miguel Molina is a teacher/librarian/media specialist/gardner and traveler from Atlanta who loves to dance/play and practice yoga. He has been a GSVer since the early 90s. Reach him at magic_miguel@hotmail.com.

FORGIVENESS AS AN ACT OF RADICAL SELF-INTEREST

In the sixth decade of my life, I'm beginning to hear new and different messages from my soul. I interpret these messages as pleas to hear what "I'm not saying." Messages which ask me not to be fooled by me. Messages which tell me that the persona I exude is a mask which I'm afraid to take off lest I expose my authentic self.

I've always tried to give the impression that I'm secure, that the water I sail on is calm and that I'm in control. Again, this is only a mask. Underneath dwells the real me - confused, afraid and lonely. I panic at the thought of my weakness, yet I panic even more at the emptiness in my life. I need a formula to change things.

I dare not tell you this. I dare not tell myself this. I'm afraid that if I do, I might not receive acceptance and love. I'm afraid that deep down inside I'm nothing, not good, not loveable, not worthy, that I'm a fraud. So I build walls to protect the trembling child within. I frantically create the mask, a façade of "things," and "achievements" to help me pretend and shield me from a knowing glance or passing judgment.

My walls are designed to keep me safe from the societal imposition of feelings of shame at being both black and gay.

Have these walls kept me safe? *No!* But I've created stories and lived an existence as if they have. My stories have kept me from living, from commitment and unrestrained passion. They've kept me alone and from the things that I most want - until now!

I have constructed my masks and walls over many years. In some ways they've become an art form. While building them, I've learned to listen *strategically* with a third ear for suspicious, hidden motivations that could trap or invalidate me. By listening, I can react and then ensure that no one would think of me as

my worse fear: *a big, dumb, sissy, "nigga."*

In overseeing these masks and walls, I've spent an enormous amount of time and energy to independently prepare and analyze *the correct actions* so that I might temporarily feel special and acknowledged.

I honestly dislike hiding and playing games. I want to be genuine and spontaneous. I know that the walls need to be disassembled. Perhaps not brick by brick, but sizable sections so I can assess progress. I know it won't be easy. A long conviction of worthlessness and feelings of not being loveable have built a mighty edifice. But I also know that disassembly has begun and will continue with the process of forgiveness.

The power of forgiveness is perhaps best expressed in these actions I pledge to follow:


- Acknowledging that forgiveness is a gift I give myself from a position of strength, not weakness
- Learning my psychological defenses and confronting my anger about having been "injured" by a racist and homophobic world
- Giving grace to those defenses which helped me survive
- Deciding that those defenses no longer always work and keep me stuck in a familiar response to people and things
- Reframing my beliefs to realize that I'm special and acknowledged just for being alive
- Letting myself express feelings in the moment without editing or suppressing
- Becoming aware of and taking responsibility for my fears that could have caused me to silently reject or criticize my own efforts

As this forgiveness process continues, I must recognize that my walls and masks have protected emotional wounds, real or imagined. And, like physical wounds, they will require time to heal. While healing, I must guard against infection in the form of anger, bitterness, sadness or suspicion. Likewise, I have to put structures in place to help me guard against old behaviors of interrogating, remaining

aloof, being agitated and sometimes becoming immobilized by my fear-filled creation.

I need to listen naturally and lovingly for how I can flow with my own unexpected currents, touching and feeling the connected oneness now. I need to courageously create infinite possibilities for wholeness. Finally, I need to explore, adventurously and bravely, ways to connect to others while *knowing* that I am liked, accepted and loved.

I can do none of this without forgiveness - of myself, of a world and history that has decided irrationally to despise the wonderful, miraculous combination of spirit and genetics that is me. I must forgive actions and deeds that happened and those that I only feared might happen. I must forgive those who hurt me accidentally and, to a certain extent, those who did so intentionally. I must find a way to be wary in a difficult world, but open and approachable in ways I've never been before. In the greatest of paradoxes, I must, to truly savor life, take on these challenges with a joyous and open heart. There's but one route to the rest of my life: the path of forgiveness.

I set foot on this path in my 60th year, with fear, I admit, but knowing that nothing on my journey can harm me more than what would have happened if I hadn't started. Join me. 

Wendell Johnson is in development as a tall, graceful, bare-chested dancer on the stage of life. He wants to be known not for how tall he stands, but for how often he bends to help, comfort and teach. He is a retired human resources executive with Amoco Corporation and a GSV member is good standing.



BY WENDELL
JOHNSON

THE ART OF FORGIVENESS

My latest struggle with forgiveness concerns my relationship with my stepmother, Jeanette. She can be stingy, pompous, haughty, bossy, rude and totally domineering with regard to my 92-year-old father. This 80-something-year-old woman (no one in the family knows her real age) has alienated herself from my siblings and their spouses so much so that they want nothing to do with her.

BY WILLIAM PERRY



I've come to realize, through my spiritual journey, that I'm obligated, not by God, but by my Higher Spiritual Self, to practice forgiving her. My goal is to experience harmony every time I think of her. Life has taught me that by not perfecting this art, I lose! In considering this sacred contract and all other contracts, I come to a simple conclusion: a lesson in acceptance is being offered to me. I fare better when I recognize the present moment, the Now – the only real space I own. When I lose this awareness, anger, resentment, stress and anxiety cloud my perception. These attitudes weaken my resolve to stay physically fit, pollute my mind and fuel negative emotions.

So what's a guy to do? The answer for me is simple, yet it's one of the life's hardest challenges, especially when there's such a negative case built against another. First *I thank God for my sacred contract with another*, in this case my stepmother. The nature of this situation, according to Carolyn Myss, author of *Sacred Contracts*, is that it constitutes a spiritual agreement by two people to learn lessons of self-empowerment and self-acceptance. According to Myss, we're challenged to thank those who are thorns in our side because they show us that we value their opinions more than we do our own. Why else would we be so angry and upset by their negative treatment of us?

Secondly *I remember that once the con-*

tract is fulfilled, I no longer need their ill treatment because the spell has been broken. Then I no longer care or depend on their opinions, beliefs and attitudes, no matter how vicious or aggressive they are. I remember the title of a book I once read called *What You Think of Me Is None Of My Business*. This helps me focus on my objective – never to give away my power.


This simple mantra reminds me that I'd rather be present to life instead of reacting to thoughts about the supposed harm Jeanette brought. These perceptions of "having been wronged" are erroneous because I sincerely believe the truth is: *she did nothing to me.* This is my third step toward forgiveness – I take personal responsibility for all my feelings. They happen within me, I create them and I own them – end of argument.

When I'm in the Now, there's no room for tension and upset caused by my insistence for revenge, hatred and desire to take over my dad's affairs. This negative self-talk prompted by my need to rehash the past only promotes frustration and anxiety, hiding the solution. I can't change the past no matter how many times I call her a stupid witch or say "she should have known better." What, then, ends my suffering? The answer is simple: "Be here Now."

This brings me to my next step: *trading places.* After much internal bickering, I start walking a mile in her moccasins in my imagination. When I center myself and stay open, I receive realizations about her age, physical condition, fears, security issues and low self-esteem. I try to witness these realities surfacing in me like a theatergoer watching a movie. We all have baggage that keeps us ignorant of our potential. I can't presume to know Jeanette's full story, yet I'm aware that she's gone through many husbands from divorce or death and, at her age, she's not looking forward to losing another. I realize she often operates out of fear prompted by low self-esteem and a need for approval.

The last step, *owning the projection.* is cathartic and can't be rushed. We either

understand how mirroring works or we don't until we're ready to view what's in the looking glass. One morning, while in a peaceful, reflective state, a major awareness hit me. I declared out loud: "Oh my God, we're reflections of each other. I'm fully capable of being everything I'm accusing her of. We both need healing."

I had my revelation. True forgiveness, *mine for her and mine for me,* started in earnest. So what's left? Realizing the process may need to be repeated and I need constant reminding that "life is O.K., William, and no one's keeping score but you and you always have choice." I've learned that guilt and punishment on my path are unnecessary. Instead I can release the past and get on with serving mankind. I can return to the power and perfection of the present moment where harmony with others awaits me Now. 

William Perry is a spiritual counselor and educator in spiritual growth and development. He is the author of the book What's God Got to Do With It, a roadmap to the bliss beyond religion. Contact William at williamperry2003@earthlink.net



GETTING OVER IT

Forgive and forget. That tired admonition is perhaps the mother of all modern clichés. Such counsel has evolved considerably in my own lifetime. What was once tasteful – *to err is human; to forgive divine* – eventually morphed into a simultaneously terse and dis-

BY DAVID SALYER



missive order: *Get Over It!*

I was raised Southern Baptist – not so much about forgiveness; more about making sure I was “saved.” As a suburban, middle-class child in Huntsville,

AL, I was taunted for being a sissy but never beaten up or humiliated to the point that I felt compelled to return to school with a gun – readily accessible at home – and kill my classmates. I survived largely due to intrinsic gifts I discovered early – a sense of humor and the capacity to move on. Are those components of forgiveness?

As a college freshman, I converted to Catholicism. During one-on-one catechism classes with a priest, I was taught that sins fall into two categories, venial and mortal. A venial sin does not deprive the soul of divine grace because it’s a minor offense. Mortal sins – murder, masturbation or missing Sunday mass – are willfully committed and serious enough to deprive the soul of divine grace. Way scary stuff for an 18-year-old who liked to masturbate.

This budding Catholic learned that, to be forgiven of my sins, I needed to make confession before a priest and private confession to the Lord. I was taught that confession was the most significant means of repenting and the way to receive assurance that even my worst sins would be forgiven. In contrast, my deeply religious, Bible-quoting Southern Baptist college roommate constantly sought forgiveness from ordinary folks like me. During our sophomore year, he was arrested for having sex with a man in a park. After confessing this to me, he

produced a hidden stash of gay porn, five times the height of his Bible and asked me to forgive him. That never made any sense to me, though I instinctively knew he needed to be let off the hook by *someone*.

Now a middle-aged adult, I’ve had lots more experience with forgiveness. My father languished with cancer for months and eventually died without ever saying he loved me. It forced me to acknowledge that a man who survived the death of his own father at age 4, the Great Depression and World War II might not have ever known how to interact with me in the first place. He kept a roof over my head, bought me a car for my 16th birthday and paid for my college education – maybe *that* was love. I forgave him for the belt whippings, the substitution of material things for nurturing words and his inability to say he loved me because it’s just possible the man was doing the best that he could do. A little forgiveness was in order.

Forgive and forget. Get over it. How do these unreflective instructions apply to the complexities of life on Earth? For me, they don’t. I can forgive, but will I forget? What does it take for me to get over transgressions? There’s a personal process involved. What needs to be forgiven? Why do I feel that way? Do I need to be asked for forgiveness or can I arrive at it on my own? One of life’s most interesting lessons has been that forgiving another person isn’t contingent upon having them ask for it. I can choose to forgive someone who would rather die than utter the words, “Will you forgive me?”

Life is a series of forgivings. I wish I could say that I’ve successfully completed every act of forgiveness attempted. I have not. I was able, after more than a decade, to forgive two men who sexually assaulted me, but I live with the consequences – HIV infection – daily. I have not been able to forgive the employer responsible for terminating me when I developed AIDS and I confess I’ve quit trying, even though I know that it might facilitate the release of a great deal of

anger, bitterness and resentment. Tidy resolutions are not always available.

Are some things unforgivable? Maybe. Is there a twisted sense of comfort in fantasizing that those who’ve trespassed against us will spend eternity rowing a tiny boat on some fiery lake in hell? Sometimes. This life, so precious and yet so cruel, offers us regular opportunities to practice the art of forgiveness and to ask for it ourselves. Once I realized that forgetting wasn’t necessarily going to be part of the equation, I was able to get on with the business of forgiving. As for getting over it – whatever *it* may be – sometimes that may not be entirely possible. Even when we can’t get over *it*, we can choose to get on with something else: living.



David Salyer is an HIV+ journalist and AIDS activist living in Atlanta. He leads safer sex presentations for men and has facilitated workshops for people infected and affected by HIV since 1994. Reach him at cubscout@mindspring.com.

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Gay Spirit Visions' 7th Annual Spring Retreat

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Construction of
the sweatlodge



Chase Robinson, kneeling upper left, describes the beginning of the process: "...This is of one of the most moving moments of the weekend. Tom Clephane and I are cutting the saplings used to build the sweat lodge. Hunter Flournoy is shaking a rattle and singing to thank the saplings for giving up their lives so that the men in the sweat lodge could find new life. Hunter poured water for each of the 26 saplings we cut at the base of the mountain. I was in a puddle of tears. One tree stump had a huge amount of sap coming from it. Hunter anointed Tom and me with the tree's "blood." This all happened on Good Friday about the time many who follow the Christian path would be remembering Jesus on the cross...."



Photography
by Lem Arnold, Randy Taylor and Jake Geelin



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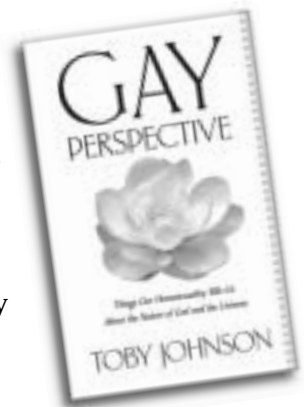
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Submission of workshop ideas for Fall Conference 2004

Brothers, if you feel so moved to present a workshop at the Fall Conference, we welcome you and ask that you send us your ideas.

Please write a brief description of your workshop idea (200 words or less) as it relates to our theme of *Abound! Reveal your inner fabulousity*. Describe your workshop and what you hope to accomplish. Workshops should last about 90 minutes.

Send your proposals with your name, address, phone number and e-mail to:

Fall Conference 2004 Workshops
GSV
P.O. Box 339
Decatur, GA 30031-0339

You may also e-mail the information to:
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Our deadline for workshop submissions:
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