

VISIONARY



Our North American culture is goofy when it comes to sexuality. On the one hand, sexuality and sexual information is suppressed, perhaps because we confuse ignorance with innocence. On the other hand, sex is everywhere—used to sell toothpaste, brain-dead television sitcoms, soft drinks and cigarettes.

Our culture is also goofy when it comes to spirituality. The scientific age in which we live has us satisfied only when we have broken everything down into the smallest parts possible. "Mystery" has come to mean a failure to understand or

beloved, we can acknowledge the mystery involved in the erotic. Despite our cultural conditioning, we intuit that something uniquely powerful is upon us.

As children we explored our bodies with joy and without inhibition. Left to their own devices, kids play doctor and touch one another without shyness. Boys bathing find their hands travel predictably to their genitals, there to explore sensations and the body's delights. Judgment is not a part of this process unless an adult is around to shame the child.

As we enter puberty the sensations of the body and the meaning of our exploration changes. What is erotic becomes more powerful. In this culture, it often becomes more dangerous as well. Boys anxious about their own bodies may project their fears on each other and wound one another. For queer kids, the simple delight of sharing touch with another boy may be replaced by taunts and name-calling. Our bodies and

CULTIVATING SACRED SEX

BY JOHN BALLEW

research thoroughly enough. Mainstream religion - meaningful for many, but a compromised resource for lesbians and gay men - seems equally uncomfortable with the puzzles of life's meaning at the end of this millennium. Despite all our knowledge, we find ourselves adrift.

Sexuality in America is more often associated with entertainment (think "movies") or medicine (think "Viagra") than with spirituality. This reflects our nation's Puritan Protestant roots. We have a prurient but ambivalent attitude toward sex, and we may find it unimaginable that other traditions take a very different approach. Tantra, for instance, understands the cultivation of erotic energy as a pathway to the Divine. Taoism views the raising and cultivation of erotic energy as a pathway to health. A Cherokee friend told me once that in his language, the phrase for masturbation means "to pour honey on the heart." Most of us did not grow up in families that talked about pouring honey on our hearts, if they talked about sex with us at all!

Where is the mystery in our sexuality?

Gay folk may have more insight into the potential sacredness of sexuality than others. For us, the journey into our sexuality has often resulted in growing in our self understanding, acknowledging our identity, taking action in the world, finding our place. We experience revelation in our sexuality as well as the potential for communion.

Many of us have felt the touch of the Divine in the touch of another. Whether simply the joy of connecting with another eager body or the sharing of intimacy and passion with our

our sexuality become problems for us and we learn to dissociate ourselves from our sexuality. Some of us disdain our bodies or turn our physical selves or those of others into mere objects.

Many of us enter adulthood with a high degree of ambivalence about our bodies and our sexuality. Joys of earlier years are replaced by disconnection between our spirit and our physical self. Sex becomes a performance or a test of our manhood. Any sense of the sacred is fleeting or gone completely. When erotic joy is gone, we wither and fragment.

The alternative is to seek pleasure in our own selves as a way of reconnecting with the mystery of our bodies, the mystery of Creation. Similarly, deepening our capacity for lasting physical intimacy with others requires us to look to our relationship with our selves first.

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AN ETHNICITY DAY REPORT

BY AL COTTON

Let me admit that I was one of the skeptics four months ago when Jonathan sent a message out on our e-mail reflector and reopened a painful and ongoing discussion of GSV's history of dealing with the issue of men of color. We'd never had a GSV event that had a significant number of African-American attendees, in spite of "Out-



reach" efforts in the past. Predictably enough, all the old issues came up for me again — Are we too "New Age loony" to attract African-American men (who I stereotype as tending to be more spiritually conservative) to our process? Can anyone be "recruited" to attend GSV? Is that type of proselytizing (which I find so offensive in Baptist circles) the right goal of a spiritual organization to begin with? An old pattern of ours began to re-enact itself — we started to slip into the language of "recruiting," followed by the language of recrimination when our recruiting failed, followed by a hopelessness and resignation to the ongoing sense that "the time is not right."

But Jonathan had a different vision of how to start — "big dreams, small goals," he said. He began by not dealing with the "issue of men of color," but instead actually dealing with the men of color themselves. He called suitable organizations of African-American men and set up a meeting to plan this event. He enlisted professional diversity trainers, and then taught them about GSV. He lowered the price drastically, to make sure there were no barriers keeping men away (much to the consternation of the budget-oriented Planning Committee). And he listened to a lot of shit from the men who have a lot of shit around these issues, as well as to those with valid issues who might not have expressed themselves very diplomatically.

The result was an event that absolutely reflected our Gay Spirit values, that dealt with serious issues both seriously and

fey-ly, and at which the attendance was 20% African-American. 38 men gave up a Saturday AM and afternoon to hear Vern Lewis, Scott LaSalle, and the irrepressible Duncan Teague take us on a journey through the ideas of ethnicity, spirituality and gay spirit. Using lecture, movement, guided meditation, draw-ring (sorry, Scott <g>) and small group process, we touched sensitive places with care and thoughtfulness. And when Dandelion sent us on our way after the closing Heart Circle with a gentle chorus of "Happy trails to you... Until we meet again..." I knew that the exact right tone had been struck. (One of the great lessons of being on the Planning Committee is the constant reminder that when you evoke it properly, Spirit takes over and does the rest, no matter how little faith the Planning Committee expressed during the run-up to the event.)

The illumination point for me was Scott's guided meditation, where we were led to doors that said Ethnicity, Spirituality, and Gayness. Behind the Ethnicity door, I found nothing — I've spent a lot of time unplugging from my closed-minded childhood programming, and focusing on a spiritual path that feeds me; behind the Spirituality door, I found an antique store filled with Quan Yins and Stars of David and Celtic Knots and amethyst crystals, the many choices I've browsed among during the last seven years of GSV-ing; and behind Gayness, there was a party going on, with people wandering over every so often, checking out the Spirituality room. This perfectly reflects where I am right now, how these issues mix together in my life, and how I believe they mix in the world. I left with a strong insight — the idea that my Southern white maleness, strongly flavored with the English/Scotch/Irish mix that you find in the backwoods of middle Tennessee and northern Alabama, should not be perceived by me as a baseline devoid of substance, but instead an ethnicity that I bring with me wherever I go, coloring all I see and say.

For the record, I remain a skeptic about getting people into our space who don't feel called to be there. I still believe that people won't find GSV until they're ready, and that the personal journey that each of us embarks on when we set out

on a non-traditional spiritual path requires us to respect those choices. But Jonathan has shown us very clearly that sometimes we are responsible for issuing the call a little more loudly than usual. Our responsibility on the Planning Committee is to make sure that people hear that call over the chasms that fill our society.

And I, for one, think it would be really great if what grew from this event was an ongoing Heart Circle of men who want to explore this issue further, who want to get together and talk from their hearts about common ground. If this interests you as well, Jeff Ford is happy to take your calls — 404/244-3555.

Happy trails to you, too...

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CALENDAR



- September 12** — Planning Committee meeting, 10AM, Atlanta Friends Meeting House
 - potluck, 7PM, Al Cotton's house
638 Stratford Green
Avondale Estates
404/292-8567, bearsokr@aol.com
- September 24-27** — the Ninth Annual Celebrating Gay Spirit Visions Conference
- October 10** — Planning Committee meeting, 10AM, Atlanta Friends Meeting House
 - potluck, 7PM, Ramon Noya's house,
1385 Lively Ridge Rd.
404/634-2221,
RamonANoya@aol.com
- November 14** — Planning Committee meeting, 10AM, Atlanta Friends Meeting House
 - potluck, 7PM, Jeff Ford's house
2319 Tarian Drive
404/244-3555, jeff.ford@usa.net

VISIONARY

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John Stowe, Presiding Elder; Joe Chancey, Bursar; Treewalker Martin Isganitis, Recording Elder; David Salyer and Gerry "Dancing Dolphin" Mitchell, Elders at Large.

The 1998 GSV Planning Committee

consists of The Council of Trusted Elders, plus Danny Bohlman, David Brodeur, Al Cotton, Dandelion Bruce Tidwell, Jim Fason, Jeff Ford, Jonathan Lerner, Ramon Noya, King Thackston and Roger Weinstein.

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Communications Chair, Al Cotton

Volunteer Chair, Dancing Dolphin

Outreach Chair, Jonathan Lerner

1998 Conference Chair, King Thackston

Finance, TBA

Ongoing meetings, TBA

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Visionary

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FIRE AT THE MOUNTAIN

BY TREEWALKER MARTIN ISGANITIS

Fire is one of the universal symbols for Spirit. Most spiritual traditions use fire in a ritual manner. People have been gathering around fires for spiritual warmth, comfort, and protection for as long as there have been people and fires.

Since 1992, we've been keeping fire on *the mountain* in a ritual way. The ritual was given to us by Peter Bear Walks, who was a friend and teacher to Raven Wolf-dancer and others of us. The ritual is simple to perform, yet symbolically powerful. Our mountain fire isn't just for our own spiritual use while we're on *the mountain*. Our ritual involves creating a fire bridge. As we build our fire and ignite it, we ritually connect with all ritual fires honoring Spirit. We do this by using ashes from previous fires in the base of the current one. Those ashes were ritually and physically mixed with the first fire bridge ashes in 1992. They include ashes from all of our conference fires since then, being connected over time and across space.

We know that many men are not able to be with us on *the mountain* in person. Some agree intentionally to keep a fire at their homes during the time our fire is going, and by using the same ritual words, they connect with our mountain gathering through Spirit. I'd like to invite you to participate in our fire bridge in the

way that works best for you. Some who do not come to *the mountain* may light a candle during their regular meditation time at home. By using our ritual words, they "plug in" to the energy of our gathering. Others have kept a fire burning at their home, maintaining their fire bridge throughout the weekend. Others might choose to come to *the mountain* and become a fire keeper. If Spirit calls you to participate in any way, I encourage you to say "Yes!"

At *the mountain*, at 4:00 PM EDT on Thursday, those who feel so called will gather at the fire circle on *the mountain* to begin to build our fire and learn the ways of fire keeping. Much of fire keeping is about safety, so we'll spend some time clearing the space of rocks and debris, and clearing the fire pit. We'll smudge ourselves and the space, haul the wood in from the road, and build the fire. Later, at sunset, the fire will be ignited. The ritual words we use are printed below.

Since Spirit exists outside of space and time, it doesn't much matter how you connect with our fire. This invitation is for you to just make that connection with intention, and let Spirit bless you. ▼

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Father Earth, Mother Sky, the one source of all that we are and can ever hope to be,
we honor you and your abundant blessings
which come to us through each other.
We blend these elements of earth and air in this sacred way
to honor your presence in our lives.
Great Spirit, we open our hearts and minds to you.
Touch these elements with the flame of your love.
May this light draw together
all who seek to know you in their daily lives,
to heal their wounds,
to nurture their spirits,
and to guide them along their path of knowing and honoring their contributions
to this world.
Strengthen and protect us on our journey of soul.
And so it is. Blessed Be!

MEET DON CLARK

GSV is pleased to have Don Clark, Ph.D., author of *Loving Someone Gay*, as our featured keynote speaker this year. A writer, teacher, consultant and clinical psychologist, Don has been working with gay people in individual and group contexts since 1968. Published in 1971, *Loving Someone Gay* was for years the only resource gay people had for coming out issues. Among his other books are *Living Gay* and *As We Are*, and he is member of the faculty of The Body Electric School of Massage in Oakland, California.

We are pleased to offer excerpts from the upcoming 3rd edition of *Loving Someone Gay*.

People who study any facet of nature on our planet, whether it is botany, biology or meteorology, soon notice that nature is both generous and frugal. The widest imaginable variety of possibilities are created and offered the chance to grow and evolve, but only those that work or harmoniously contribute in some way to nature's complex ongoing development are permitted to continue.

Gay men and lesbians are, indeed, a queer tribe. We are born into every kind of family and nation in the world, yet most of us have more in common with one another than with the people of the community into which we are born. We persist. Whether or not we are appreciated, we are of great potential value because we are different. We are an opportunity.

We are the men who love men and the women who love women. Perhaps we serve nature's purpose less with procreation than with creation. Nature sees to reproduction for every kind of creature. It is nothing to boast about. But creativity is another matter. What is important is not a human's reproductive ability - not what is reproduced but what is produced. Our creativity can, and does, take many forms. Simply by being ourselves - being gay - we create an awareness of the value of people who are other or different. Our families, neighbors and co-

workers are forced to notice us and must try to come to some understanding of our place in the world.

Eventually we may help non-gay people to live in less fear of strangers. We may be able to help the world find the way to peace. Gay men have the musculature and reflexes of the male warrior, but we also have the attractions and desires of the potential lover of male strangers. Gay women have the impulses and strength to fight off intruders and protect the nest but also the attractions and desires of the potential lover of female strangers who, instead, may be invited to share the nest.

We gay people have come to a wonderful time in our collective development. Thanks to today's modes of information, communication and travel, we can find one another in distant places more easily. We can compare thoughts and feelings and generate a deeper understanding between us. We can separate layers of societal training from our core of inner truth. It permits us to understand our development, our maturation as individuals, to carefully select our elder guides and mentors, to learn what we can bring to them, and to prepare as we become the guides and mentors ourselves.

Getting beyond negative training about age is essential. Each of us is growing older. Too many of us are taught to worship youth. If you follow the dictates of that training it means that, with luck, you will perceive yourself and others as desirable for about a fifth of your lifetime! What a sad waste! If you have lived your life with care, you should gain in beauty, wisdom, depth and even sexual know-how as the years accumulate. You bring much more than your body to any human intercourse - and that includes sexual intercourse. To permit yourself to be discarded or devalued or to treat other people that way because they are halfway or more through their lifetimes is as sensible as throwing away the candy and eating the wrapper.

Developing nourishing friendships that may include erotic contact and sex is important. Too many people rush about looking for a spouse or lifetime partner as if such a person were the grand prize in a scavenger hunt. The loved-one sought is not the missing item hidden in the undergrowth, however, but one of the many flowers in the meadow. Learn the names of the flowers in your meadow well and let them take their individual places in a natural order of emotional importance. If one of them becomes most important, he or she is a candidate for lifetime partner. But this process takes time and care.

When the friend, lover or life-partner appears, a relationship begins. But it must be tended. The more conscious you are in setting the foundation of your relationship the more stable it will be in the years ahead. Consciously lowering your defenses with another, one small step at a time, carries you in the direction of intimacy. All intimate relationships require mutual acceptance, but before there can be acceptance, it must be possible to see one another. That does not mean tearing off all of your protective layers immediately. You have learned to keep them in place so as not to get hurt too easily. Removing too much of the defensive structure too quickly leaves a need for protection that the

THINGS TO REMEMBER ABOUT THIS YEAR'S CONFERENCE

- It starts on Thursday evening, not Friday afternoon. We've talked for years about adding an extra day to have more time to do all the things we do at the Conference. We hope you like way we use the extra time.
- The deadline for most things that had deadlines was August 28.
- Scholarships are being handled by David Salyer; Ride share is being handled by Ramon Noya; workshops are being coordinated by David Lender. The brochure contains information on how to contact each of them.
- *the mountain* has done extensive renovations on cabins 13-20; keep those in mind if you have mold allergies or other issues around cabin cleanliness.

other person may not be able to provide.

The most important component of a solid foundation is clear communication. In addition to touch there must be talk that reveals and clarifies. It never does any harm to repeat to the other person what you believe that she or he has told you. It offers an opportunity to correct small misunderstandings before they become large misunderstandings. You must also have the courage to say difficult small truths rather than the seemingly innocent little lies that are easier. Each small fib told in the first weeks of a relationship, later revealed in unguarded moments, provides a reason for doubt about anything said in the months and years that follow.

It is also helpful to remember that the other person is an individual, attached to you perhaps, but a separate being entitled to have his or her separate identity respected. No matter how clear your

vision of what is worthwhile and what works best in the world, you have neither the right nor the ability to remodel another person without a specific request or permission to offer that sort of assistance. If you try on your own authority you will find a stone wall of defense and a creature on the other side of it ready to fight you tooth and nail. This other person has devoted years to integrating the bits and pieces that go into his or her unique makeup.

Your motto might be respect without neglect. The other person is a special individual, attached or attaching to the special individual who is you. The reason you are building a relationship together is because you both need the love, acceptance, care and communication that you can offer one another. Offer yourself generously, genuinely and respectfully.

There is something wonderful about being part of a group that has survived and brightened the world under the most adverse circumstances. We're like that beautiful orange flower called the California poppy. We are apt to pop up anywhere - beside a railroad track, in the wilderness, in a pampered floral display or in a long forgotten garden covered with weeds and trampled by careless footsteps. We keep blooming with a beauty that is there to be seen by anyone willing to appreciate it.

Most of all, I suppose, from the long list that could be drawn of the rewards that come with being gay, I like being able to be myself. Being gay has given me a self that is respectful of differences in people. It has granted me the ability to look on the human world with a greater sense of compassion. ▼

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LABYRINTHS

Walking a Path of Spirit

BY DANCING DOLPHIN

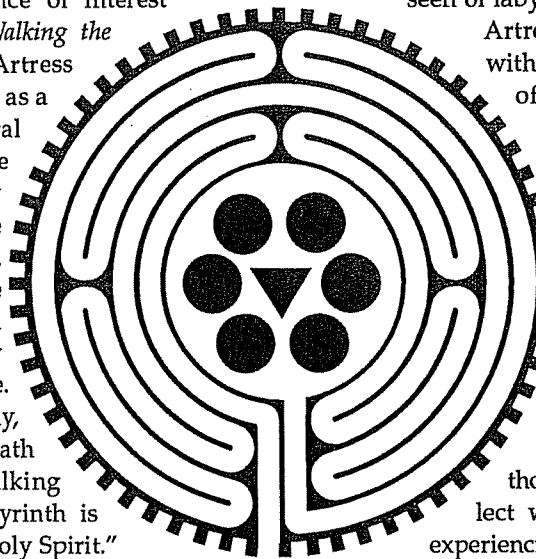
Tools for journeying with Spirit are best kept simple. The repetition of the simplest mantra 'Om' is a powerful tool for reinforcing our oneness with the universe. It's important to keep it simple because our best tools are those that are not cumbersome and thus travel with us easily where ever we go. A labyrinth at first glance seems to be too big to be simple, but with a little experimentation it also has much simpler expressions. Since the experience of the labyrinth will be part of this year's GSV Fall Conference at *the mountain*, I wanted to talk with you about its history, significance and the part it can play in healing.

For those of you who may not have much familiarity with the concept of the labyrinth let me share a little of what I've learned. A couple years back, a friend, healer, and mentor first introduced me to a stylized labyrinth that she had painted on a 12 foot canvas floor cloth. I had excellent personal experience walking it individually as well as using it in conjunction with others.

The labyrinth is simply a tool. An ancient symbol, the labyrinth at the heart of the practice carries the potential to strengthen our spirituality. Centuries old, it has been refined in use by the faithful and is being rediscovered in our time. Reverend Lauren Artress, a Canon for the Special Ministries at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, has largely been credited with the resurgence of interest with her book, *Walking the Sacred Path*. Artress defines a labyrinth as a meandering spiral design that is large enough to allow people to walk the path to a center. The walking of the path is said to be a symbolic journey of our path in life. She goes on to say, "A labyrinth is a path of prayer, a walking meditation. A labyrinth is the bones of the Holy Spirit."

So this spiritual tool is not a product of the New Age as many think, but dates back to the cathedrals of the Middle Ages. They were used for symbolic pilgrimages. At the time, Christians vowed to make a pilgrimage to Jerusalem, but many could not make such a journey. The great cathedrals offered the labyrinth to represent the final stage of the journey. One of the most famous labyrinths is the one which covers the floor of the cathedral in Chartres, France, created in 1220 AD. This particular design has inspired most the designs seen of labyrinths today.

Artress believes that with the advent the Age of Reason that the church became grounded in the intellect. The relationship with God became one of thinking rather than of experiencing. She further believes that, "we mistakenly thought that the intellect was the avenue to experiencing the Sacred, to



FALL CONFERENCE

nourishing the Soul. We discounted the imagination and our other faculties of knowing mystery."

As a trained psychotherapist, it became apparent to Artress that the "churches became containers, where the acts of religion were performed. But not many people were inquiring about what's going on within the container. We tell people to love their enemies. But we never teach them how. The church has stopped addressing the how of faith, it only points in the direction of the ideal. When we allow the intellect to define our experience of faith, we lose sight of the path."

This realization led Artress to the intention of encouraging people to use their imagination to journey toward God. Artress traveled to the most famous labyrinth in the Chartres Cathedral in France in 1991. After spending much time using and studying this tool she introduced it to Grace Cathedral in San Francisco. To the amazement of many, the reaction was tremendous. It was not uncommon for upwards to 500 people to walk the labyrinth at Grace on any given week. She was soon traveling with a portable floorcloth and giving workshops on the history and use of the labyrinth. Then in 1995, her book was published sharing the powerful stories of people affected by the use of the

labyrinth. With her book came great interest in the use of the labyrinth as a tool for healing and transformation. Yet, she still admits, "I don't know how it works," but offers, "the soul thinks in symbols." Many are amazed with the powerful presence of Spirit in this sacred space.

The process of the walk is a metaphor for our spiritual journey and generally thought to be three-fold. To enter and walk inward is a "purgation" or "relinquishing the things what we attempt to control." We release the cares and concerns which distract us from our Source. At the center is a place of meditation and prayer. This is often a place of clarity. The journey out of the labyrinth is one of union, where the journey experience is integrated. As we walk out the same path that brought us in, we are given the power to act. Yet it should be remembered that the experience varies from person to person. Most come away with an experience that strengthens their relationship with Spirit and an intuitive feeling of the presence of something holy.

I have been experimenting with different expressions of this tool. The drawback that I sense is that lacks a convenience for regular practice. This smaller version of the labyrinth described above was already a scaled down version of its predecessors

that were 40 feet across and generally created a journey of 1/3 mile. I would still like to create a labyrinth floorcloth to use with clients. I am presently experimenting with labyrinth designs in clay where you let your fingers do the walking. I have worked with a two inch small paper version that I keep in my journal. I have followed the path of a web site labyrinth with my mouse. There's one buried on my desk at this moment. You are also able to find scheduled dates for labyrinths that are traveling the country-perhaps soon to a neighborhood near you!

I hope many of you soon to arrive at *the mountain* will play with this tool as presented for the conference. Others of you will likely be finding one to play with in your neighborhood soon. To join in this experience gives our community a unique opportunity to unify our vision. I also understand that not all of us can arrive at *the mountain*, have labyrinths visiting our neighborhoods, or even have Internet access to labyrinths on-line. So allow me to close with another way to keep it simple. The same journey can be taken visually into a flower.

Blessed be your Journey. ▼

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ANNOUNCEMENTS

Retreat to Restructure Planning Committee Scheduled

There will be a planning committee retreat on the weekend of November 7-8, probably at the mountain, to help the committee refocus and restructure our operations to best serve the GSV community. Many planners intend to leave the committee this year, so things seem quite fluid right now. If you have a passion to help chart the future of GSV by serving on the committee, let us know. If you have suggestions or opinions on appropriate priorities for the organization, but can't commit to serving on the committee, please share your ideas with us by mail or e-mail.

Farewell, and Hello...

With the redesign of *Visionary*, we bid farewell to Joe Chancey as a *Visionary* volunteer. As the only typesetter/layout person this publication has ever had, Joe's is

one of two people whose hard work over the last four years has made *Visionary* a reality, and all the planners of GSV want to thank him for his time and effort. You can send him your good wishes at JoeChancey@aol.com. We also wish him "Mazel Tov" on his recent conversion to Judaism.

Special thanks to Mike Goettee, mastermind of the redesigned *Visionary* that you are holding in your hands. We think it looks great, and hope you like it too. Thanks, also, to Jeff Ford, who worked on the layout on this issue with Mike and will be handling the layout with him for the foreseeable future. Feedback on the redesign can be sent to Mike at MaxGlitz@aol.com.

WORK WITH ME PEOPLE!!!

Spirited Gay Men wanted as volunteers to serve Gay Spirit Vision mission. Work

varies as Spirit leads. We are open to receive your gifts including but not limited to artistic design contributions, assistance with mailings, book salons, conference committee, communications committee, newsletter development and production, cyber committee, drumming circle, fundraising, gay pride, guest accommodations, HIV education, healing work, mentoring, outreach committee, potluck dinners, program committee, scholarship fund, workshop presentation. Hours flexible. Immediate positions to be filled. At *the mountain* apply in person.

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Spiritual

SWEEPSTAKES

A few weeks ago I received one of those irritating Publishers Clearing House prize documents in the mail.

I opened it, like I always do, fully expecting the usual assemblage of stickers and deceptively attractive statements about my future as a millionaire. But this time the letter said, "Remember, David E. Salyer, you'll definitely be receiving a cash prize." I read that statement two or three times until finally I bellowed "Don't fuck with me!"

If you think I was addressing Dorothy Addeo, Contest Manager for Publishers Clearing House, whose signature closed the letter, you are wrong. I was talking to God. Basically, I ordered God not to fuck with me.

Some of you will think that was remarkably arrogant. Some of you will think I've lost my mind. Some of you may think I'm irreverent or crude. And others will wonder how I managed to dodge a fatal lightning bolt from the heavens. Well, I'll happily admit to arrogance and irreverence. I happen to like irreverence. In fact, it's a characteristic I'm delighted to possess. As for arrogance, it's really only dangerous when mixed with ignorance. Classic examples: Jerry Falwell... Zsa Zsa Gabor... Dan Quayle... you get the picture.

That I can finally yell at God is an indicator of just how far we've come in our relationship. I was raised Southern Baptist in Alabama and taught not to question God or take his name in vain or get angry at him or even refer to him in a sentence without using a capital "H". I was taught that such infractions would surely invoke the wrath of God. Believe me, when I was 9 years old the last thing I wanted was to piss off the Almighty and end up burning in hell for eternity. I learned to fear God, to the point that every prayer was an apology for some childhood blunder and a promise never to do it again.

As a college freshman I converted to Catholicism – I was looking for a kinder, gentler God. To some extent, Catholic God seemed more pleasant and forgiving. I didn't quite fear his wrath so much because I got the bizarre impression he couldn't be wrathful without permission from the Pope. After five years as a practicing Catholic, I knelt to pray in church one Sunday only to realize I was doing it out of habit rather than genuine desire or need. I was 23 and I had nothing to say to God. I had no relationship with him at all beyond an occasional desperate, heartfelt plea for a gas station when I let my tank get low and the fuel warning light would come on.

I literally wanted my chance to see [God] sans incense, organ music, bellowing preachers, grape juice and collection plates.

So I spent the next ten years as an agnostic... watching TV evangelists collect money for satellite dishes, theme parks and prostitutes... exploring groups like Integrity... dating a Lutheran minister in the '80s... and an Episcopal verger in the '90s. I attended weddings and funerals and midnight mass and Evensong. None of these things brought me closer to God. I was looking for a revelatory moment—God's disclosure to me. I literally wanted my chance to see him sans incense, organ music, bellowing preachers, grape juice and collection plates. I wanted to ask him for directions. I wanted to know if he actually wants me to worship him or just converse respectfully with him.

Apparently, God doesn't make appearances. Or at least not for whiny, but guileless homos with a history of unsuccessful Baptist/Catholic/Agnostic flings. (The Virgin Mary, on the other hand, is a regular guest star on Earth, appearing in small French towns and rural Georgia skies. Even if I saw Mary myself, I'd probably end up asking her to take me to her Leader.)

God has never spoken to me. I know not whether his voice is masculine or feminine. I don't know whether God likes me better than you do. I don't know what part, if any, God has played in the orchestration of my life. Maybe it's random. Or maybe everything matters, right down to the avocado you choose to purchase at the grocery store.

Anyway, I talk to God now. I don't visualize a he or a she. No gender. I just talk the way I talk to a best friend. I talk in the car. In the bedroom. On vacation. I suspect you would be shocked at the kinds of things I say to God. "I've had enough, get me out of here." "What more do you want from me?" "If this is supposed to be a learning experience, I'm over it." And who could forget, "Don't fuck with me"?

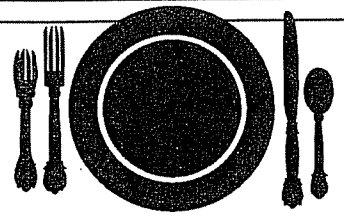
Then sometimes I just ask, "What do you want me to do?" I think God likes the vulnerability inherent in that question. I listen for answers or wait for a sign. Sometimes the answer is as close as my own gut. Sometimes spirit just kicks my butt.

I've created a relationship with God. I did it. It's rough around the edges and volatile. It's real. Sometimes I'm angry. Other times I'm apologetic. It doesn't involve getting down on my knees or bowing my head or genuflection. For me it's all about being, if you'll pardon the expression, straight with God. And I can do that anywhere, anytime. I don't have a formula or sequence of words. It's really not about adoration for me.

As I write this I still haven't heard back from Publishers Clearing House about my "guaranteed cash prize." Should the Prize Patrol show up at my door with a check, I think a moment of thanksgiving is in order. If not, I may have to mention to God that I don't find this stuff amusing anymore. ▼

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DINNER AT "CAFÉ MINDFULNESS"



The other night, I decided to grab dinner on the porch. The fridge was in definite "time to hit the store" mode, so I culled what I could and tossed it onto a plate. Nothing here to write home about—a few carrots, a slice of leftover turkey seasoned with the last scrapings of mustard, and part of a fresh tomato from the garden. I couldn't even find anything to read, so I sat outside with nothing to do but pay attention to the food. It took me on a most unusual journey.

Start with the tomato. Something about it, maybe its deep red color, catches my eye. Glancing at the garden, I muse about how this very tomato grew right there, ten feet away, on a vine I planted and fed with cow manure. Sort of a miracle, to get something this delicious from a seed and water and some dirt mixed with shit. I look back at the plate and, as if I've pressed some hypertext link on the computer, a lot more information comes through really fast. It's sensory. I can smell the green vine. I can feel the seduction of the little yellow flowers as they strut their stuff for passing bees. I can sense the hunger in the knobby roots, the tickle of passing worms, the rich nutrition of the compost.

"Am I flipping out?" I ask myself. "Is this a flashback?" If it is it's a good one. I try the carrots and double click into more sensations—the soothing warmth of springtime rain, the dusting of a breeze across flat white flowers. "Queen Anne's Lace," I remember, "wild carrots." And they taste great—full of crisp, orange life.

I glance around to make sure nobody's watching before I dare taste the turkey. It's only a little piece, yet the image it brings astonishes me. A turkey spirit, looking for all the world like some white-feathered ghost, stands by the table watching, asking with dark eyes if I like it. ("Yeah, it's a flashback for sure. I promise myself not to tell anyone.") I get the feel that the turkey gave its life for that slice of meat on the plate and now it's waiting to see my response to its sacrifice.

I hope my lover stays inside for another

minute while I whisper quickly to the turkey, "Thank you." It's still there looking, so I try more, "I honor your spirit and the gift of your body. I pray that it nourish me to do good in the world. Bless you." That seems to be what it wants because the image in my mind fades. It doesn't come back while I savor one slow mouthful after another.

The meal tastes awesome when I approach it this way, as if my paying attention has raised its energy somehow. I can sense it connecting me with other living things, with the Earth and the rain and the air. I can feel it nurturing my

I couldn't even find anything to read, so I sat outside with nothing to do but pay attention to the food. It took me on a most unusual journey.

body with strength and health. It makes me think about the so-called "primitive" peoples we study, the ones who made offerings of thanks to the spirit world for food, clothing, and other necessities. What must it be like to feel that you're living inside one great mass of spirit consciousness? What must it be like to know that everything you receive is not wrested from some hostile, non-living world, but freely given instead?

I'll admit, this isn't the first time I've thought about such things. This time, though, the images are so strong and visceral, they feel like they've come from outside. Sitting on the porch, I wonder, "Where did that come from?" As if in answer, I hear chanting up the street. It's Wednesday, so it must be the Sufi dancers at the Friends Meeting. Odd, that they should be chanting for peace and unity at the very same time I'm having my moment.

Coincidence? Maybe, but I don't believe it. I'm more inclined to believe that the intention of the chanters has in fact opened a bit of space for just the kind of experience I've had. Not literally, of course—I doubt that the chants say a word about tomatoes or turkeys—but energetically.

We live in a world that encompasses many levels of existence. The tangible, measurable, taste-able material reality we put such stock in is only one aspect of the whole. It's probably not even the most important. Plato suggested that material objects are but "shadows on the wall of a cave," artifacts of some more profound reality. What would our lives be like if we paid more attention to the energetic reality behind surface appearances?

I know from my own healing work that what goes on in the physical body is never separate from what's going on energetically. Nor, by extension, is any interaction between two people separate from the intentions of the individuals involved. True communication or healing comes only when body, mind, emotions, and spirit are aligned in harmony. Even a brief touch of tenderness, a few words of gratitude, or a quick shared smile can bring benefits far beyond the bit of energy they cost. Why should the way we approach the rest of the world be any different?

Buddhist teachers call it "mindfulness" and make it an important part of their practice. To me, mindfulness means paying attention, in the moment, to our actions and intentions. It means pausing in the rush of day to day activity to let a little more of the real essence come through. When we support our actions with the underlying energies of gratitude, respect, and conscious awareness, not only do we improve the quality of our lives, we have a definite positive effect in the world.

What would it take? A moment here and there to acknowledge what's really important. A blessing of thanks before a meal. Half a minute before jumping into bed to look into your partner's eyes and honor the fullness of his being, not just his gorgeous body. A pause before you enter that business meeting to breathe, get centered, and remember your true priorities. Without a lot of trouble, you can make up mini-rituals that provide you with ongoing balance. Try it. I bet you notice a difference.

Continued on page 14

ASSIMILATION AND CHANGE

Dandelion's column this month arose as a response to what John Stowe wrote in our previous issue of *Visionary*. John suggested that gay men need to share more of their gifts with the world at large, and be less focused on "gay identity."

Coming out, fully accepting one's identity as a Gay man, is the first step towards the rest of one's life. For many years that was the only step. Coming out was just an optional step that made bar hopping and casual sex a less shameful, paranoid experience. The very first organization of gay men in America, the Matachine Society, asked three questions: Who are we? Where did we come from? Why are we here? It took almost thirty years for Gay men to start seriously pondering that third question and the resulting Gay Spirituality movement has spent almost twenty years collectively building a theology of myth and philosophy to frame an answer. After two decades of soul searching and spiritual questing we have collected a considerable body of wisdom and many have found the confidence to say "Yes! We absolutely do have gifts to offer the world." When it comes to exactly what those gifts are and how we can contribute them to a world that is quite adamantly uninterested in receiving them, our uncertainty returns.

Fifty years ago coming out meant walking into a small room full of people and saying "I'm a homosexual." Today coming out is just the first step in a complex journey of self discovery and identification. A man must find his place on the various continuums from homosexual to bisexual, straight acting to transgender, vanilla to leathersex, gay Christian to Radical Faerie, monogamist to polygamist to promiscuist, and separatist to assimilationist, just to name a few. These multiple dimensions of Gay identity have proliferated because we are socially

outcast. There are no rules beyond the pale of mainstream society. The power remains, however, to create identity there and the Gay community has done so with imaginative complexity. The most recent possibility that has opened for Gay men is that of assimilation. Mainstream society is finally making

small gestures of inclusion and equality towards the Gay community. Some Gay men have intuited that progress might be hastened and encouraged by efforts on our part to fall back into line with mainstream standards of lifestyle and identity and, to a certain degree, they are correct.

Much of homophobia today is motivated by a mixture of fear and envy in reaction to Gay men's differences from the mainstream. Almost fifty percent of the pregnancies in America are unplanned and only a small number of them are unmarried women. That indicates that to a large degree parenthood is often some thing that happens to straight people rather than some thing they seek. For every child who is an answer to prayer, another is an occasion of dreams set aside and heavy responsibilities dutifully shouldered. How can there not be a reservoir of disappointment and anger hidden under the joy, and yet, that is some thing that can't ever be spoken of. No, new parents are expected to straighten their shoulders, put on a smile and make the best of the situation resigning themselves to the "natural" order of things. It's no surprise that this hidden, often unconscious, anger should erupt when they are confronted with Gay men's freedom and casual sexuality. It is easy to think it is a crime when nature deals you life of responsibility and another a life of pleasure.

Men are statistically more likely to be homophobic than women. It's not a coincidence that straight men have more reason to resent Gay men than women do. While women have insisted upon breaking free of the patriarchal female stereotype, men have given themselves very little permis-

sion to abandon the patriarchal male stereotype. The modern straight man's identity is based less on what he is than on what he is not—primarily effeminate. Gay men, however, being disqualified from the full supremacy of their gender are, once again, free to make their own rules. They can be as straight acting as they want to be and still lose nothing by being nelly when they choose to be. Straight men largely still invest their personal pride in being the superior gender, an idea that is dependent upon sharp contrast between male and female roles. As less and less of the traditional male role in society is reserved strictly for men the defining characteristics of masculinity become less clear. Consequently, straight men become ever more resentful of the gay men who further blur the distinctions and flaunt their freedom from the increasingly small territory of pure masculine identity.

There is an ongoing debate as to whether these differences are somehow innate to our orientation, or simply the result of our reaction to homophobic ostracism. A much more important question is how do these differences serve us and can they serve the larger society. Certainly some straight people would be more willing to accept us if we hide, or deny, our differences and "play by the rules," although many will continue to despise us because they need a scapegoat to project their own conflicted emotions onto. Even to the extent that we can achieve acceptance by compromising our identities we should ask ourselves if we are truly helping ourselves or the mainstream community by doing so. I think not.

Someone must bear the children and take on the responsibility and expense of raising them. We can't offer any respite from that. Although in an increasingly over-populated world we might offer examples of how it is possible to live a rich and vibrant life without placing children at the center of it. It would do the world good if more married couples questioned the inevitability of parenthood. In a world of fragmented families and frequent relocations, the Gay community also offers a model of "families of choice" that transcend the boundaries of blood relations and yet offer every bit as much support and community as the Traditional Family, often times more. With fifty percent of American marriages

ending in divorce it seems obvious that a "one partner for life" model is not a satisfactory ideal in the modern world. As horrifying as any alternatives may be to the Judeo-Christian establishment, society is crying out for imaginative alternative paradigms for romance and family. Setting aside the Gay relationships that don't work and the sexual dysfunction that certainly does exist, Gay men are far more honest and genuine in their sexual expression than the mainstream and have achieved great success in negotiating relationships that respond to the unique needs of those involved.

Straight men will eventually confront the fact that an obsolete 19th century macho identity is not an adequate response to 21st century life. The mostly straight Men's Movement is already borrowing much of its substance from gay men, though carefully refraining from acknowledging its inspiration. The transitions and growth that must take place will be much easier if they can accept that Gay men have already created alternatives and cleared pathways to new identities that can provide inspiration if not role models for their own journey.

Time never flows backward. Society will never revert to the simplicity of yesterday, if that simplicity ever existed at all. The world appears to move faster all the time, growing more complex every day. Surviving that environment requires flexibility and creative non-linear thought. Gay men, not weighted down by nostalgia or fenced in by social expectation, have the freedom and ability to create new frameworks of identity and society. Unfortunately we will probably not be recognized for this contribution, much less thanked, and many will resent and revile it. In spite of that, now is not the time to retreat into conservative closets and straight acting hetero-imitation. We must claim our sissyness. There is little reason for Gay men to shackle themselves with an outdated and dying vision of masculinity when the alternative means giving up little except limitations. As the stagnate but reassuring certainties of the past dissolve into the fluidity of the future we are the ones best equipped to show the world that they need not drown if they can learn to swim. ▼

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IN THE FLESH: Undressing for Success

by Gavin Geoffrey Dillard

Gavin Geoffrey Dillard, the author of this tell-all memoir, was a gay porn star and L.A. hustler in the '70s and '80s. But before you make the mis-

take I did at first and categorize this book as simply gossip or yet another cautionary tale about the pitfalls of the porn industry, drugs, and anonymous sex, look again.

Of course, all of those elements are there. He definitely serves up an enormous dish of Hollywood gossip, so much so that the book was kept from publication for five years, tied up in the courts with lawsuits supposedly filed by the likes of Barry Diller, David Geffen and, of all people, Dolly Parton. Only Dolly is actually named in the book. The others are given pseudonyms (but, if true, exposed on the web). *[Though it looks like that website has been deleted — I've been searching for it and can't find it. Ed.]*

There's also just a bit of the cautionary tale there too, even though to Mr. Dillard's eternal credit, he does not write judgmentally or from the perfect 20/20 "moral hindsight" of, say, the many Betty Ford graduates/turned autobiographers of our time. He is not contrite. But then, Mr. Dillard is by no means a Betty Ford graduate. He's a graduate of following his natural instincts, living his life, and taking the responsibility for his choices. This makes the difference.

The book's title and photos of the naked Gavin found on inside pages, as well as his pretty face and bare chest on the cover, indisputably add to the book's sex appeal. But this is really a spiritual

odyssey, one unlike any I've ever encountered. I think a better title might have been something like "Adventures in Being Who You Are" or "Does God Really Love All Her Children?"

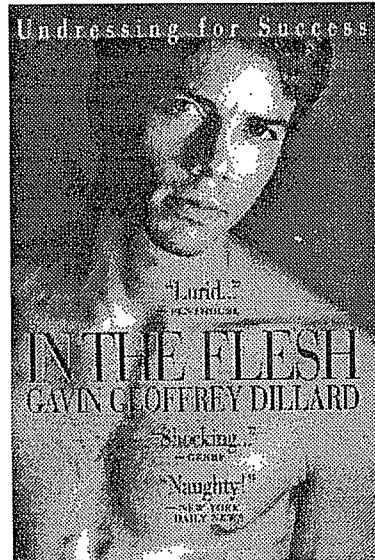
One of the things that attracted me to the book was that it was about those Boogie Nights/Tales of the City years in Los Angeles and San Francisco that fell somewhere between 1975-1983. Having lived in Southern California during the early part of that era, I was curious to see what Gavin's experiences were and how they might have compared to my own.

I can't truthfully say there was no compar-

son at all because anybody who was there at that time encountered and experienced some wild stuff. But I can say that Gavin Geoffrey Dillard partook of much more and went miles further than I ever did, or would have. I think it's a miracle he's still alive but maybe that so-called miracle arises out of his having had the guts to be himself no matter how scary it might have been.

Once during those years, in a drug-induced stupor, I asked the question, as Pontius Pilate did, "What is Truth?" A very wise man who was with me answered back that I was the truth. It took a long time for me to understand what he meant exactly, but now I pretty much get it. Everybody has to follow their own truth from the inside. If you don't, you become terminally frustrated and lose your potential as a human being. Nevertheless, being who you are and living your own truth isn't always a lark either.

That's what this book is about: the



good times and the bad times -- black sable one day, next day you're touring in stock, but you're here and you're continuing your journey with no regrets. Non, j'ai regrette rien (Thank you both, Mr. Sondheim and Ms. Piaf.)

The theme of no regret is implicit in almost every chapter of *In the Flesh*, each of which is titled with the name of a lover, and not always a sexual lover. The chapter subtitles are, I believe, taken from some of Gavin's poetry and other writings. Here are some of my favorites:

The key to perception is one's own reflection.

One good cat is worth a thousand lovers.

Is anything better than the ability to be small?

Experience is the only teacher; the heart the only preacher.

It takes a little devil to make a good angel.

A visionary is someone who sees in the dark

Like a mirror that riddles the truth; age is but an excess of youth.

Rules are created by small minds; and followed by smaller minds.

The truth is not divisible by opinions.

At every juncture of his life he seems to throw himself wholeheartedly and intensely into whatever he's gotten into, whether it's making a porn film, gardening, hustling, following a big mama cult guru, curing himself of AIDS (yes!), or baking bread in a monastery in Virginia. He's the searcher extraordinaire, always mindful of walking his talk, even when he doesn't quite measure up to his own standards.

But does he ever find the answer? One subtitle to a chapter reveals that it isn't enough to know the answers, one must forget the questions. This comes near the end of the book by which time he has realized that there's no better guru than his own inner voice. He now spends his time writing poetry, gardening, taking care of six cats and living alone on the "foggy cliffs" of Northern California. He can also be seen from time to time reading his poetry in the buff at some of the more courageous bookstores around the country.

It is the responsibility of the poet to be naked at all times, he says in yet another chapter subtitle. Gavin Geoffrey Dillard

has absolutely no qualms about being naked -- physically, emotionally, or spiritually. The fact that he's not a saint, makes no apologies, and encourages his readers only to be themselves, makes this book all the more spiritually insightful, and extraordinarily so.

In the Flesh is a good read for sure and a breath of fresh air that is hard to forget, if for no other reason than its straightforward, down-to-earth, politically-incorrect honesty.

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From
IN THE FLESH:
Undressing for Success
by Gavin Geoffrey Dillard

The rest of [my weekend with my new boyfriend Davie] was swell. We had a splendid time discussing art, music, and spirituality, preparing and devouring healthy gourmet meals, Dave and I impiously making out, pulling each other's *dhotis* down, pinching tits and otherwise behaving like love-crazed brats. It was a liberation for me, after a year-and-a-half without this. But more, absolution from the *concept* (karma) that asexuality had anything at all to do with spirituality. As if sex and spirit could somehow even exist without one another—blasphemy! *That* marriage is eternal.

Four or five years earlier, shortly after meeting [my guru] Big Mama for the first time, I was walking through West Hollywood when a thought appeared to me: *hamburger*. I went inside the local hamburger joint, secured and devoured my first hamburger in fifteen years, and had the most profound experience of release. It wasn't that I desired to begin a diet of meat again or that eating meat was spiritually correct or incorrect or anything; it was just that I didn't *have* to be a vegetarian anymore. My concept of vegetarianism was gone, and even though I rarely had any yen for meat whatsoever, the fact that I *could* indulge made all the difference in the world. From that point on, my choices to not eat meat were made *in the moment*, and were choices of

the *heart*, and not those of *dogma* or *belief*. This is the way that I felt now, with Dave, that I was again free to choose for myself what was right or was wrong for me in the moment.

I stayed in SF with porn star Scott "Biggest-Dick-in-San-Francisco" O'Hara, whom I had not met before, but had discovered, through our mutual friend the writer John Preston, was an avid fan of mine. Scott and I had begun corresponding—he is a brilliant writer and conversationalist and he had invited me to bed with him whilst in SF. I did, and all was lovely—the contrast between Scott's mature and experienced twenty-six years and Craig's naive and troubled twenty-four was extraordinary, bolstering my theorem that maturity begins only from the point of losing one's proverbial cherry.

I called Craig only once and we had a perfectly simple, pleasant, and banal conversation, and that was that.

Had I been the one that had proved HIV negative, and *he* the one who was positive, I then could have pontificated on the principle that true love does not recognize such earmarkings. But given that the rubber was on the other penis, I fell silent to the Fates (cursing them in my heart).

I had some time ago coined a notion that because of the nature of the spread of HIV (then believed to be the sole cause of AIDS), that anybody that was worth "having" (anybody that knew how to have good, open, active sex) would end up dying, leaving behind a world full of gimpy wimpy white boys who were plainly too milquetoast, inhibited, or inept to have ever contracted the disease in the first place.

Would we never know spontaneous, passionate, celebratory and carefree sex again?

When I returned home Craig was a stranger. I was never able to see him or communicate with him again. I keened for months for the loss, and still cry now.

Of all the AIDS-related losses, the deaths of lovers and friends alike, I consider my forfeiture of Craigele to be by far the most grievous and inexcusable. I am still in love with him. We knew each other for only one week. ▼

IN A PLACE LIKE THIS:

CONFESSIONS OF A DECADE IN GAY HOLLYWOOD

MARK S. KING

Visionary is pleased to offer two excerpts from Mark S. King's unpublished memoir, *In a Place Like This: Confessions of a Decade in Gay Hollywood*. In the first excerpt, Mark discusses his teen years in Louisiana; in the second he talks about the death of his friend Lesley with his new lover, Chris.

I used to get "saved" at the drop of a hat- I loved the rush of the experience, and as a gay teenager there were plenty of reasons why I thought I needed some refreshing new spiritual cleansing every once in a while. When I heard our Methodist preacher talk about the evil of homosexuality, I knew I needed to get saved again sometime soon or find a church that didn't mention my favorite sin so much.

I wanted to love God and be a Christian and all of that. Actually, the whole idea of a spiritual dimension in life and after death fascinated me and I constantly sought it out. I was attracted to anything that might bring this otherworldly dimension closer to me. Dark Shadows on television. Miracles. Scary movies. Really good hymns in church when everybody is singing loudly and you get a chill up the back of your neck and think you might start to cry while you're singing. Ouija boards. Seances.

There seemed to be good opportunities to experience that kind of rush in church, and I was active in youth fellowship. I was also a teenage gay boy who was effeminate and a bit outrageous. I didn't get along with the other youth very well, because I was a pansy and that was that.

Although my parents were raising me Methodist, I would accept invitations to attend youth activities at other churches. These were often Baptist youth revivals, and I rarely attended one without feeling "called."

It depended on the effectiveness of the preacher, of course, but if he gave twenty good minutes on how sinful young people were, and how we needed to accept, right this very minute, Jesus Christ as

our personal savior, then I was sold and would be one of the first down the aisle when the time came to accept the "call" to join Jesus. It was real emotion, it was being a part of something, and it was filled with spirit. I couldn't resist.

Once, my Methodist youth group in Louisiana took a summer trip. We visited churches across the South, and almost each night attended some sort of youth revival event. And almost every night, I cried and witnessed and had a renewed commitment to offer.

Part emotionally charged hormones, part sincere spiritual thirst, and part performance art.

After again accepting Jesus as my personal lord and savior at a local Baptist event one evening, I learned that I needed to return the following Wednesday night to be baptized. Simply witnessing at the event was apparently not enough for this church, and I was instructed to return and to "bring my family."

That would be a bit of a problem. I had not been sharing my religious quests and church-hopping with Mom and Dad. Mom took us to church on a semi-regular basis, but we weren't exactly religious and I was far too embarrassed to tell the folks about my latest conversion. The idea of being baptized appealed to me, however, because whereas my Methodist preacher had sprinkled some holy water on my head, this Baptist church was going to immerse me completely. This was just the rush I was looking for, and might even help clean out the impure, totally sexy thoughts I had been increasingly having about grown men.

That Wednesday, I told Mom I was going to the movies with a friend. I informed the Baptist family that had agreed to give me a ride to their church that my parents just couldn't make it but were pleased, very pleased.

My big moment happened during the evening service. I had put on a white robe over my underwear, and was led to a line of young people - culled from the recent revival -- who were standing "backstage" and waiting their turn.

When mine came, I handed the preacher an index card printed with my name and glanced out into the sanctuary. Through the glare of bright lights focused on the baptismal fountain, I saw rows and rows of smiling faces. I remembered to grab the preacher's hands to steady myself just as he lowered me completely down into the water and back out again. A perfect dunk.

When I got dressed in the boy's locker room, I put my wet underwear in a plastic bag provided to me. I also noticed that the short-lived rush of my baptism hadn't prevented me from noticing the bodies of the other boys, still dripping from their spiritual immersion.

That evening, with the bag containing my wet underwear safely concealed in my jacket, I crept past my father in the living room and up the stairs past Mom. But what should I do with the bag? Mom did all the laundry; I couldn't have soaking wet underwear in my hamper. After days of hiding the evidence in various places in my room, I threw it in a dumpster down the street when I noticed it was beginning to grow mold.

It would be years later that I would experience what would become my last baptism, when I joined a Mormon church near my college home in New Orleans. The missionaries who had come to visit me had spoken with such authority and conviction about their faith, and they were awfully cute. My ill-fated, complete immersion followed a few weeks later, just two months before I would be found engaging in sinful behavior initiated by a church member named Colin. We had been discovered in a Sunday school classroom while services were being conducted fifty feet away.

Afternoon sun peered into the bedroom of Chris' apartment. I laid close to him, keeping warm on an unusually cold, late January day.

"I didn't feel anything I would call religious," I said to Chris, my head on his chest, his shirt damp with my tears. "Nothing happened."

"What do you mean, nothing?" he answered, stroking my head.

"You know what I mean, Chris. If God can part the Red Sea and change water into wine and all that, why couldn't He show up when Lesley died? Why not make the drapes rustle or something? Why not give me just the slightest glimpse of grace?" I knew that Chris didn't really believe that those biblical wonders had happened either. He felt they were merely symbols, stories told to explain God's power. But Chris also knew my point. Why couldn't God throw a little magic my way, to a man drowning in death and hopelessness?

"You're looking for a miracle again, Mark..." he said.

"Yeah. I am. And I sure wish He would cough one up."

I let myself cry a little more, remembering the scene at Lesley's bedside which had haunted me since he had died a few days before. I couldn't shake it. I didn't believe I ever would.

"I've been doing this a long time, you know," I said.

"Doing what?" he asked, patiently.

"Trying to figure out if there was a God. I didn't just start getting into this religion stuff when I realized I was gay, you know."

"When did you start asking questions like that?"

"Oh, when I was a kid, I guess. Nine years old? Maybe ten or eleven. I remember one night I was laying in bed and I was saying my prayers ..."

"You said prayers all by yourself when you were ten?" Chris said. "That's really something, for a kid."

"Well, I tried, but my mind would usually wander and I would be scared that I was going to hell because I didn't say 'amen' before I started to think about other things. You know, like just hanging up on somebody in the middle of a conversation. I figured it probably pissed God off."

Chris tightened his hold on me and I could feel his smile.

"Anyway," I said, "I was lying there and I just wanted God to do something, to show himself to me somehow, you know, give me a little miracle. I looked over to the wall beside my bed and the night light was on, so I could see this tiny black spot on the wall. So I put my thumb on the spot, and I prayed really hard, and I told God that if he were real

he would make the spot disappear."

"You were a very sweet, dramatic young man," Chris said, and squeezed me again.

"Oh yeah, I sent off for magic kits and everything. So here I was praying for God to make the spot disappear, right? And then I opened my eyes and took my hand away from the wall and the spot was gone. Completely gone, Chris."

"What did you do?"

"My heart just about stopped, and I got all excited, and then I looked at my hand and there was a little bitty squashed bug stuck to my thumb."

Chris' chest began to heave with laughter, and it made me laugh, too.

"Wait a second!" I said. "Now hold it, 'cause it's wasn't all that funny to me at the time, you know." I sat up and looked at him. He laid on the bed, beaming with affection and stifled giggles. "Because," I went on, "it didn't prove a thing. It was a trick..."

"No it wasn't, Mark," Chris said, and he sat up as well, taking my hand, "it proved everything. Look. What happened with that bug - and that's a scream, you can't blame me for laughing - but maybe it says that you had the power to do something you wanted God to do. You made the spot disappear."

"So?" I looked at him, unsatisfied.

"The miracle, Mark, was the fact that Lesley was surrounded by friends who loved him. You all were there, and you cared for him and spoke to him and ministered to him."

"But I didn't see anything when he --"

"God is not Hollywood, Mark! God is inside us, and in little boys who pray at night and in the laughter of our friends."

Chris pulled me back beside him.

"The fact that you're still searching for something is great," he said. "It's a noble quest. It's something I love about you. But what you keep looking for is around you all the time." I smirked a bit. "And what's more important, it's in you. It makes sense, right?"

"Yeah ..." I said, unsure, and he hugged me again.

"And in the meantime, Mark," Chris said, grinning, "try to stop looking for God in the drapes." ▼

Mark is an AIDS educator who lives in Atlanta. He can be reached at MarkSKing@aol.com

MEDITATION SURVEY

If you have a regular meditation practice...

AL COTTON

I'm interested in doing a feature in *Visionary* on meditation, but I realize how unspecifically that word is used in New Age circles. If you have a regular meditation practice, answer any or all of the following questions (or just write me a paragraph that covers the issues you want to address), and send it either to me:

Al Cotton

638 Stratford Green

Avondale Estates, GA 30002

or e-mail it to bearsekr@aol.com

Unless you tell me otherwise, I will assume that it will be OK for me publish what you say anonymously.

1. How long have you been meditating? How often do you meditate? How long is your typical meditation session?
2. Does your meditation follow any sort of specific tradition? Is it derived from a tradition, and then modified to suit you? Did you get it from a teacher? Or did you make it up yourself?
3. What is your meditation designed to do? Quiet the mind? Train the mind? Clear the mind of ego issues, or thoughts, or bad feelings? Take you to another place? Make you more aware and available in the here and now? Raise energy? Connect to your erotic nature? Help you to write? Cause you to move? Help you to heal?
4. What does your meditation consist of? Breathing? Visualization? Writing? Movement? Self-pleasuring? A combination of these? Do you use gongs, incense, candles, toning, music? Do you go to a certain place every time or encounter a guide every time?
5. Have you stopped meditating? Why? Do you go back and forth between meditating and not meditating, or different kinds of meditation?
6. How has meditating changed your life?

Thanks for taking the time to do this.

—Al

RAY OF LIGHT, or Confessions from a Closeted Madonna Fan

BY JEFF FORD

When Madonna first hit the scene, I thought she was a no-talent whore. Think back to the mid 80's, when MTV was new. They played that tired "Lucky Star" video of hers over and over again, and I just couldn't figure out what the fuss was all about. She could barely sing and hardly dance. Madonna seemed much ado about nothing. I told my friends "If you ever see me buy a Madonna album, shoot me."

Since then, I have gradually, and somewhat reluctantly become a fan, albeit a closeted one. Her albums kept getting better and better, her material more and more personal. Even a skeptic like me had to acknowledge and almost admire her ability to reinvent herself and captivate the world time and time again.

Then, after years of gaining my trust, she scared me off with her *Erotica* album. The critics panned it, saying it was too much, too sexual, too over the top. Amid a media backlash and poor album sales, Madonna took a much needed vacation from the spotlight. I joined everyone else in saying "Good riddance!"

A few years later, a friend turned me on to the *Erotica* disc. I discovered for myself that it is an excellent album, with infectious songs that can alternately make you laugh, think and feel if you take the time to listen to the lyrics while you're dancing. The lesson I learned: evaluate Madonna myself and don't listen to the critics.

Now, one child later, she's back again with *Ray of Light*. Not needing her cone tits to get our attention, she talks freely about her newfound spirituality and her daughter. And guess what? Our bratty little Madonna has grown up.

In one of her interviews with MTV's Kurt Loder about *Ray of Light*, Madonna said she wanted to make a CD that sounded like the music that she listens to herself. And what is that? Electronica—techno dance music. So go ahead, put it on, turn it up and groove until you can't groove no more. Most of the album is

very danceable, with some slow nasty grooves and some hard and fast ones.

But wait, what's with the lyrics? What is she singing about? Anybody can lay down a bass track and come up with a dance song. The payoff is in the lyrics, and this is where *Ray of Light* shines. Madonna sings about the price of success and the emptiness of fame ("Substitute for Love"), about the newfound spirituality she discovered while studying the kabala ("Shanti"). She sings about the importance of heart ("Frozen"). She sings about the futility of life's pursuits and the importance of love ("Nothing Really Matters").

One of my favorites on the disc is "The Power of Goodbye":

Your heart is not open
So I must go
The spell has been broken
I loved you so
You were my lesson
I had to learn
I was your fortress
You had to burn

There's nothing left to try
There's no place left to hide
There's no greater power
than the power of goodbye

Learn to say goodbye
I yearn to say goodbye

In addition to the simple power of the lyrics, the song is even-paced and lush, conveying a sense of understanding and resignation toward herself, whoever she might be saying goodbye to, and the listener. The instrumental break in the middle is so full of longing that I well up with tears each time I hear it. The disc is full of moments like that.

Madonna and her collaborators have created a disc that works on many levels. *Ray of Light* is energetic yet thoughtful, provocative yet accessible. To top it off, Madonna's voice has never sounded better.

If you listen to *Ray of Light* long enough you may find yourself asking "Is this the



same 'Material Girl' we knew in the 1980's?" The answer is a resounding "No." Madonna has undergone yet another transformation. For any listener who practices any form of spirituality, it becomes clear that Madonna has been asking herself some deep and probing questions about life, and is willing to share the answers that she's found for herself.

The question remains, though: is this just another phase that she's going through? Is she just capitalizing on the recent upswing of spirituality? Will she reinvent herself yet again with whatever fad comes next? The thought leaves me on the fence again. Maybe she'll settle down, but if she changes again, you can be sure it will at least be entertaining. ▼

Jeff is our newest GSV Planner, and this is first contribution to Visionary. He can be reached at Jeff.Ford@usa.net.

CAFÉ MINDFULNESS

Continued from page 8

Just as importantly, mindful attention helps us when we come together in groups. Whatever we do to cultivate deeper awareness pays us back bountifully. When we hold hands before a heart circle, we open to touch each other with deeper meaning. The few moments we take to invoke "sacred space" in which to retell our stories, hear our elders, mourn our dead, or witness each other on the paths of spirit, enrich our experiences hundredfold.

Over the years, I've approached rituals as something we do primarily for ourselves. It feels good to speak words of gratitude, or to take part in a ceremony—especially when it involves good costumes. I'll think about them differently now, courtesy of the Sufi dancers and my slice of turkey. Next meeting, next ritual, I'll try to remember that the effects of our focused attention go far beyond the personal. What we do here to nourish ourselves as Gay men touches like-minded people everywhere. When we learn to be more mindful, individually and together, not only do we feed ourselves, we feed the world as a whole. That's a pretty fair return. ▼

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CULTIVATING SACRED SEX

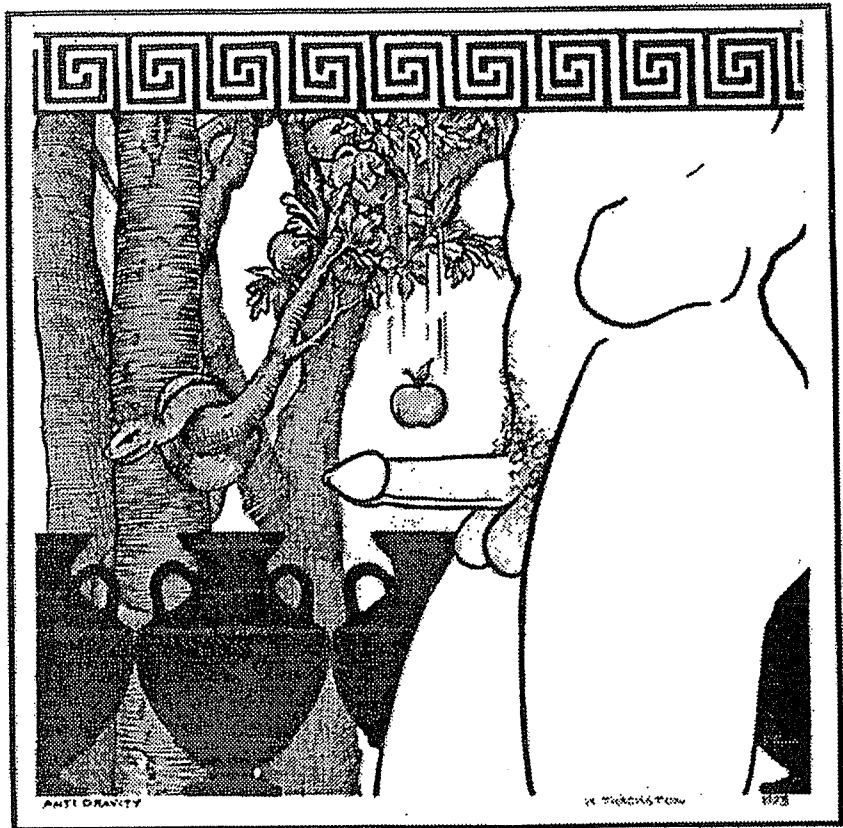
Continued from page 1

Consider making a date with yourself. Imagine touching your body the way you would want a lover to touch you. Experiment and explore with yourself as if you were touching your body for the first time, not the ten thousandth time. Instead of focusing on sexual release, make pleasure your only goal. Light candles. Burn incense. Warm some oil. Put on beautiful, sensual music. Perhaps start with a warm bath. Run your hands over your body. Touch your skin. Allow the oiling of your skin to be a sort of anointing--one of the oldest ways we humans have of honoring one another. Explore yourself with a mirror. Then close your eyes. See with your hands. Relax your breathing. Move your hips. Stretch. Let your hands travel to your genitals without hurry.

Imagine sex without a goal other than self-enchantment. How much pleasure will you allow yourself this time: 30 minutes? An hour? Maybe a second hour? Let the honey come to your heart in its own time. Breathe. Relax and smile. Savor the moment. Can you take your body by surprise, catch yourself off-guard with some little happiness?

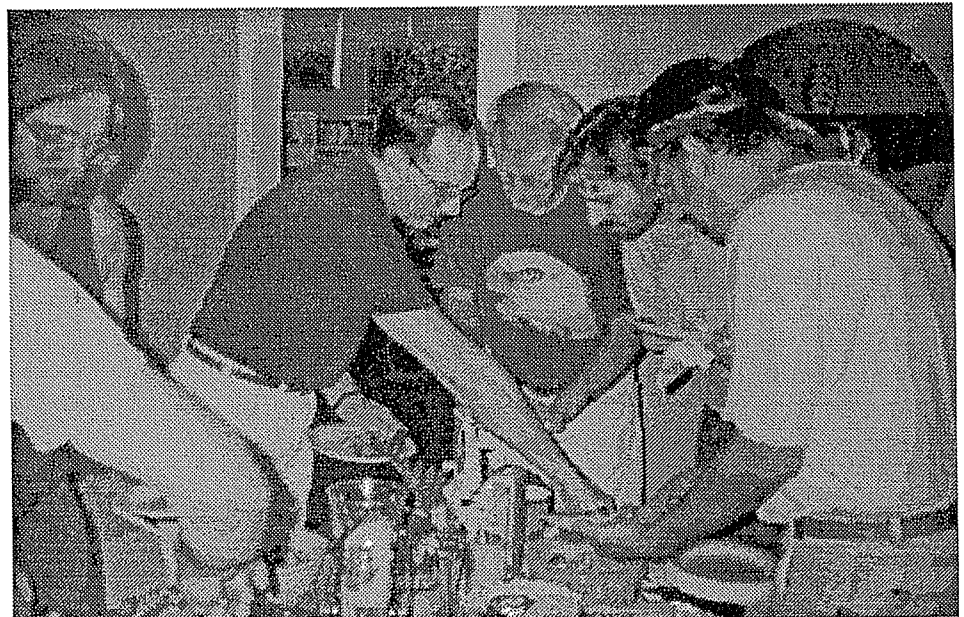
Another process I like is something I call meditative masturbation. As you slowly pleasure your bodyself, focus on each sensation. Let go of thought and fantasy. Be present to yourself. Breathe consciously. Follow sensations around the body. A client of mine who uses seven-syllable mantras in his meditation chants, "This pleasure is my birthright." Let your touching slow to stillness if you would like, conserving your ejaculate in the Tantric or Taoist fashion. If you choose to ejaculate, take your time and allow yourself to do so in a state of total relaxation--not tensing your body, which restricts the sensation. Savor the stillness afterwards. What sensations drift into your consciousness? Is there a revelation here for you? ▼

John Ballew can be reached at jballew@mindspring.com, or at 404/874-8536.



"The Miracle of Anti-Gravity"

Pencil Drawing by King Thackston



Food for body and soul at a GSV Potluck get-together at King Thackston's

If you're interested in writing for *Visionary*, either a guest column, an occasional column or an regular, ongoing column, contact Al, bearsekr@aol.com, or call 404/292-8567.

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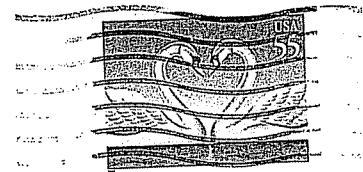
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