

VISIONARY

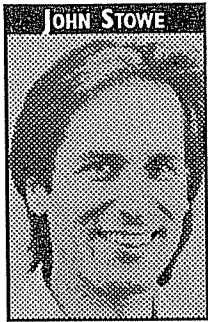


Volume 5, Number 2

The Newsletter of Gay Spirit Visions

May, 1999

A CALL TO JOY



JOHN STOWE

BY JOHN R. STOWE

Springtime in the South is anything but subtle. Every year it slaps my Yankee-born eyes awake with such a profusion of colors that I wonder how it

could be real. Clouds of white and rosy dogwoods line the streets. Fuschia and peach and scarlet azaleas hug in beneath them. Carolina jessamine climbs the trees and pops out blossoms like eager sunshine even before the winter slips back north. It's like all of Nature has donned rose-colored glasses and doesn't want to think about anything but celebration. The birds notice. With so much to say, they wake us with their chattering songs by 4:30 in the morning, even before daylight savings time. People notice too. Even as we all fret and worry about the possibility of a late freeze, we're smiling and thinking about playing hooky from work.

It's gorgeous, for sure. I can't help noticing that it's a lot more, too. It's erotic. Springtime down here sort of grabs you by the balls, as insistent as a seventeen-year-old's hard-on. For weeks at a time, everyone navigates through mists of airborne semen as trees reach climax and leave their yellow deposits on our cars and walkways. Tulips and daffodils erupt from swollen bulbs to shoot their wads in colorful extravagance. Entire groves of trees drip with pendulous lavender wisteria. It's impossible not to want to jump out of your skin, find a buddy, create something beautiful. Springtime here—springtime anywhere—calls the world with the essence of Joy.

Joy is the energy of life. Imagine it as a tiny flame alive in every cell, ready to dance outward at the first hint of permission. It's universal. Birds feel it and so do all those bees. Trees feel it too, as they release their precious cargo to the wind. Squirrels feel it. Skunks. Worms. Elephants. And humans. Boy do we feel it!

Part of the energy is sexual, especially now in the springtime. Yet, there's a lot more involved than just getting each other into the sack. Joy is erotic in the broadest sense, a creative force that infuses every interaction with others and the world. It inspires us to bring forth new life wherever we turn our attention. Maybe we access it by claiming and enjoying our sexual gifts to

their fullest measure. Maybe we let the same energy inspire us to create through art or other forms of personal expression. Maybe we let it infuse our jobs, our relationships, even our dreams with passion and spontaneity. Joy raises the quality of any experience.

At it's core, Joy holds us all together. It pushes us to seek meaningful connections outside ourselves. "All the world loves a lover," you've heard it said. Yet, if you've ever been in love, you know the reverse is also true. A lover loves all the world. The pair of bluejays cooing as they weave a nest in the magnolia beside the porch, the two women from the next block smiling as they walk up the street with a stroller, the elderly couple holding hands on a bench in the park, all these become extensions of our own joy. Opening to the joy in ourselves joins us with the whole, multitextured fabric of life.

Joy isn't just about happiness—it's more about connection. We can feel Joy at a funeral within the deep connecting of grief shared with others. We can find it in the smile of a passing stranger or the compassion of people who dig deep to help others after a disaster. We humans are social beings. Without connection, we starve. Is it an accident that one of the worst punishments handed out in prison is solitary confinement? Long-term isolation (as opposed to "alone time" or intentional retreat) saps our spirit—and ultimately our health—by robbing us of Joy.

Chinese medical practitioners have a word for it—*shen chi*. *Shen chi* is a basic life energy defined by the quality of our relationships with family, friends, and the natural world. Translators call it "Joy". Associated with the heart, *shen chi* is held to be equal in importance to the energy we receive from food, air, and inheritance. True health is considered impossible in the absence of loving, nourishing relationships.

Ever look at the stereotypes of Gay men from thirty or forty years ago in this country? In many of the pictures, there's a haunted, wounded, and often frail or unhealthy look *Continued on page 5*

John Stowe will offer Path of the Dancing Shaman, July 17 in Atlanta, a fundraiser for GSV. Call 404/292-1965 or e-mail AIC70809@aol.com for details

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Visionary

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ANTICIPATING FALL CONFERENCE 1999



BY STEVEN BAND, CONFERENCE
1999 CHAIR

As we begin planning for our fabulous 10-year celebration of GSV's fall conferences, we are looking at ways to make it better than ever. Here are some of our preliminary plans.

- One of the ideas we've settled on is to have a GSV Timeline of Memories from the past 10 years. Any of you who have photos or other memorabilia from past conferences, we request you bring them (or a copy if possible) to place on the timeline that will be set up in the lower level of the Treehouse. During the course of the weekend, people may place their items along the appropriate place in the timeline, and write of fond memories and fun stories for all to read and enjoy at your leisure. By the end of the conference we should have compiled a wonderful retrospective of those who have touched our lives through GSV. If you bring a copy of your picture for us to keep, it will remain a part of our archive. So please start gathering those treasured items to share.

- Now is the time to start thinking about workshop ideas for the conference. Whether you have led one in the past or have an idea of one you would like to lead, please let Jeff Ford know no later than August 15, by phone or e-mail address listed below, or mailed to the GSV post office box. Jeff can be reached at the GSV post office box, at 404/244-355, or via e-mail at jeff.ford@usa.net.

- The dates for this year's fall conference are September 23 through 26. Please plan this in your budget now, since we anticipate that scholarships will be more limited this year than they have been in the past. We request of anyone who is able to do so, to consider making a tax-deductible donation, large or

small, to the Raven Wolfdancer Scholarship Fund. We promise that all money donated to this fund will be used only for scholarships for those in financial need. This will allow us to know by September 1 how many scholarships we will be able to provide. Ideally, we would like to continue our tradition of not turning anyone away for lack of funds. This year, however, we may have to make choices among applications, and those choices will be based on financial need. With your generous donations in Raven's memory, we will do our best to continue our inclusive tradition of making this transformational event available to all who want to attend.

Look for your brochures in the mail some time after July 1. We look forward to a fun, miraculous, and informative 10-year anniversary celebration, with you in attendance, Spirit willing.

Sincerely,
Steven Band
Chairman-Fall Conference Committee

*e-mail: sbmassuer@aol.com
phone: 770/936-0045*

Editor's note:

The next issue of Visionary will appear just before our 10th Gay Spirit Visions conference. We'd like to print some reminiscences in the next issue, so if there's a special moment you'd like to share, something you've learned, or something you'd like to say, send your piece to Al Cotton by July 1, bearsekr@aol.com, or to the GSV post office box. Thanks!





UPDATE FROM THE MOUNTAIN

BY CELESTE DICKSON, SALES & PROMOTION

USA Today names *the mountain* as one of the "10 great places to renew the soul... crowning a 4,200-foot-high peak in the southern Appalachians, this sanctuary has breathtaking scenery, with lodge and cabin decks that overlook an ocean of mountains and clouds." This mention appeared in the April 2 edition of the paper, and was written by Jack and Marcia Kelly, authors of *Sanctuaries: A Guide to Lodgings in Monasteries, Abbeys and Retreats*.

Of course, while exciting, this newsbit tells nothing new to GSV retreat participants! GSV has been an integral part of *the mountain's* beauty (cabin renovation donation and building the fabulous fire pit) and presence as a "Place" of spiritual renewal, freedom to be who we really are, and (of course) fun.

Thank you, GSV! Not only do your contributions and participation affect you personally, they also ripple out and make a difference in the world. Your joy in *the mountain* energizes and encourages our staff to continue living our Mission: "To embrace the diversity of life, creating an environment to energize people to work for positive change."

This year is *the mountain's* 20th anniversary. To celebrate, we have planned three exciting events: Memorial Day Weekend (May 28-31) will be our Annual Meeting and Member's Weekend, Labor Day Weekend (September 3-6) will honor staff members from the past 20 years, and the New Year will be rung in with Millennium on *the mountain* (December 30-January 2). We hope to see all you life members at the Member's Weekend – did you know that GSV is an "institutional" Life Member?

The next REFUEL program for young adults in transition begins on August 29th. REFUEL (Residential Education For Unique Experiential Learning) is a 16 week alternative education program that focuses on supporting people age 18-20+ to recognize and work towards their potential. After high school, many young adults find themselves stumped by the limited traditional options; college isn't always a good fit and living at home isn't

appealing either. During REFUEL, young adults explore and strengthen their unique identity in a safe environment, clarify their values, and take charge of planning their future. Participants experience academics focused on social issues; community service projects; outdoor adventure; apprenticeships; leadership training; career and therapeutic counseling; and community living. You GSV guys know the mission and values of *the mountain*; if you know a young adult who could benefit from this type of creative environment in which to grow, please tell them about REFUEL. For more information call Sarah Walls at extension 228 (or e-mail mountain@dnet.net, to the attention of Celeste). We're taking applications now.

Several noteworthy things have occurred since last fall. The new Challenge Course has been completed at the bottom of *the mountain*, with both high and low elements. You can see the high course through the trees to your right as you drive up the first hill before you reach the field. The low course is on the left along the forest trail to the lake from the field. As I watched groups on the course, I was struck by the fact that strength wasn't everything. From the ground, it seemed that the most comfortable person up on the high wire was the person with the most balance, agility and untroubled mind: Susan Smith, a small and delicate woman who I now privately call Cat Woman (I guess it's out of the bag now!). The Challenge Course provides an embodied understanding of life truths: to walk gracefully along your path, you need balance, equanimity and friends to share the way, cooperate with and hold the safety rope! The Challenge Course will be used as a program offering to the many groups that come here: youth, congregational, business and retreat.

Another new event is Wolf Song X, August 27-29. This is an event I have personally had my eye on for years and never been able to attend. Imagine my surprise and joy when their organizers called to check us

Continued on page 9

June 5—GSV Planning Meeting, 10AM,
Atlanta Friends Meeting House

—GSV Potluck, Dandelion's house,
683 Crespan Court, Lawrenceville
770/972-8028, DadsBadBoy@aol.com

Note that the June meeting and potluck have been moved to the first Saturday in June, so as not to conflict with the Clark/Ballew fundraiser

June 11-13—*Truth and Desire: Intimacy, Communication and Eros*, a workshop by Don Clark & John Ballew—a fundraiser for GSV. Call 404/292-1965 for details, or to register.

July 10—GSV Planning Meeting, 10AM,
Atlanta Friends Meeting House

—GSV Potluck, Lee Orr's house, 2855
Royal Path Ct. in Decatur, 404/284-
4186, LeeOrr@mindspring.com

July 17—*Living with Power: the Path of the Dancing Shaman*, a workshop by John Stowe—a fundraiser for GSV. Call 404/292-1965 for details, or to register.

August 14—GSV Planning Meeting, 10AM,
Atlanta Friends Meeting House

—GSV Potluck, Gary Kaupman's house,
218 Lansdowne Dr. in Decatur
404/373-0426, GKaupman@aol.com

September 4—GSV Planning Meeting,
10AM, Atlanta Friends Meeting
House

—GSV Potluck, King Thackston's house,
370 Loomis Ave. SE, in Atlanta
404/688-8234, no e-mail

Note: The September meeting and potluck have been moved to the first Saturday, so as not to conflict with Jewish High Holy days and our availability to meet at the Atlanta Friends Meeting House.

October 9—GSV Planning Meeting, 10AM,
Atlanta Friends Meeting House

—GSV Potluck, Ramon Noya's house,
1385 Lively Ridge Rd. NE in Atlanta
404/634-2221, RamonANoya@aol.com

FROM THE OTHER SIDE OF THE PANEL

BERNIE MORIN

Bernie's participation in last year's fall conference was for many a profound energetic experience.

Here are his thoughts on how his unique panel presentation came together, and how it felt to be on "the other side" of the panel. —Editor

Gay people, gay men in particular, occupy a very specific and unique place on the planet. As humans, we are beings who resonate with a very high vibration. If you look at our occupations, many of us are involved in the high vibration arts — music, art, design, performance art, writing, landscaping, healing etc. Those of us who are not so apparently involved in high vibration arts, I feel, are responsible for bringing this vibrational essence into our work, the workplaces and the residential areas we inhabit.

Our bodies are particles held together by energy, an energy I know as light. In fact, spiritual healers often refer to themselves as lightworkers. All gay men, in my experience, are lightworkers. We are responsible for stewarding this light vibration on the earth. Additionally, spiritual healers are often called upon to step down incoming spiritual energies so that they can be received and utilized in a less chaotic way by others, in much the same way that electrical sub-stations handle electricity from power mains. This is not always an easy or welcome task but I have found that it comes with the territory when you commit your life to this work. As stronger vibrations of energy meet us, it forces us to clear a channel. So, we often find ourselves moving through our own personal emotional work at a rather relentless rate, not always at socially convenient times. Such was the case with my presentation on the panel.

Over the past three years at this particular GSV gathering I have become aware of a strong spirit energy which has been trying to express through me. As it moves through me, I often experience great difficulty talking. As I sat waiting for my turn to speak on the panel, I felt the energy rise through me trying to clear a channel. As it rose through my throat it jammed at my jaw mostly because of a history of lives (lived and living), outside of linear time, each of which experience(d) trauma trying to express the truth of this spirit energy. As I waited, I was aware that I would be unable to speak freely or casually but would instead, have to

force the words through my clenched jaws. For a few moments, my ego struggled with the difficulty of being a presenter who couldn't talk. I considered whispering my introduction to Gerry Mitchell, whom I felt would understand what was happening and could then speak for me. I realized, however, that the best and highest good for the clear expression of this work would be to allow my vulnerability to be present with this issue on behalf of all of the life histories, and to speak through it. Usually, the most effective venue for this energy is shamanic, especially physical rituals (such as dancing) because we are working with an energy for which words and language are at times, impossibly inadequate. I persisted because I felt that this piece of work first needed to be gently introduced to a group, some of whom barely knew me, before they had an experience of it. So, with clenched jaw and a thousand volts ready to roar, I started.

We are all able to sense energy with sensitivities which lay beyond our immediate notice. If you raise your hand to the wall in front of you, with your eyes closed, and move it slowly back and forth you may find that you can identify areas of heat, cool, roughness and softness. Feel the difference between the ceiling and the floor, for example. If you then pass your hand in front of a window and decide to sense a particular tree in the distance, you will notice the branches and the spaces all reference themselves at the palm of your hand. In this way, our bodies can also sense and relate to our physical universe with a subtlety that often escapes our normal consciousness. With your mind and your intention you can project your sensitivity wherever you elect to. As you become aware of these vibrations it becomes easier to vibrate in consort with them. As we vibrate at a higher rate the limitations of the ego dissipate somewhat opening a door to spontaneous healing.

In order to demonstrate this further, I asked everyone to stand with eyes closed, then hold their hands out noticing the dif-

ference between the sensations at the palm facing downward and the back of their hands facing upward. I danced around the room with a large African gourd rattle raised above my head to enliven and prepare the energy of the room. When used for healing purposes, rattles have the ability to change the 'held' or restrictive energy of thoughts, trauma, life and limiting beliefs. The difference in the "feel" of the room, as witnessed by the new sensations around the hands, after the use of this particular rattle, was quite dramatic. I then set shamanic protection in place, and summoned the loving energy of Reiki to fill the room encouraging healing changes wherever needed. As the new energy started to express through me and thereby raised the vibration in the room and within us, we became free to create changes in our perceptions of ourselves.

A few years ago I started noticing that specific words when spoken out loud in a particular sequence can actually shift or neutralize restrictive beliefs. One of those beliefs, common to gay people, is that we are not worthy of God's love. It's an old belief structure usually inculcated in childhood especially by certain religious indoctrination and it is reinforced by social factors. It's not true, of course. It is, however, held as true by the memory within the cells of the body as well as in the mind in spite of whatever subsequent beliefs we may have embraced about ourselves since childhood. The effect of this restrictive belief is a thickening of the protective screen over the back of the heart chakra between the shoulder blades. Many of us have experienced this feeling of tightness in this area at times when we are being spurred on to higher spiritual awareness. It feels like someone is pushing us forward with a finger poked between our shoulder blades. This chakra is the entry point in our energetic bodies for the love of Spirit/God/Buddha/Allah or whom-ever you may deify and hold most high.

In order to clear this restrictive belief and thus clear the chakra, I asked those of us in the room to repeat the following phrase: "I forgive myself for not believing that I am worthy of God's love."

We repeated this phrase at least three times. In most cases, the brain will interrupt the short-term memory and create gaps in our ability to repeat this relatively simple phrase. With each repetition, the short-term memory returns and the structure of the outmoded belief is broken down. Although this process can elicit emotional responses, they are usually experienced as flashes and not larger cathartic releases. Also accompanying the repetition of these phrases will be dull moving pains within the body, usually in the head or across the forehead moving toward the temples. It is also not unusual to feel a tightening or lump in the throat all of which clears by about the third repetition. Having cleared the old belief, we then started to "re-program" (I am uncomfortable with this word but it is the best description I can think of) this issue of worthiness in the beliefs system by repeating the following phrases three times:

"I am worthy enough." (Meaning: No one else can tell you that you aren't worthy.)

"I am God enough." (Meaning: If God is out there in everything beyond me, then I, too, must be an expression of God.)

"I am love enough." (Meaning: I am all the love I need: I am a living expression of love: I am not outside or separate from love.)

"I am complete enough." (Meaning: I

lack nothing. I am a complete celebration of humanity.)

"I am always enough." (Meaning: This change is permanent and irreversible.)

It is most common to feel light-headed and spacey after a clearing of this nature. However, on this occasion, the energy in the room after this work was so high I felt that we were floating in a cloud somewhere in the sky above Little Scaly Mountain and at the same time deeply connected to the core of the earth. In fact, I have never been at a gathering of individuals at any time, where this energy was so high. We are a remarkable group.

The effect of this work is quite subtle. It may take a few interactions with this particular area of your beliefs to realize that a shift in your normal knee-jerk reaction has occurred. It also takes some self-examination to determine that although you may now feel worthy of God's/Buddha's/Spirit's/Allah's love, you are still left with feeling unworthy of your own love and therefore you will feel unworthy of someone else's love. All of this can change. It takes a certain tenacious ability, courage and willingness to discern that part of us which still does not resonate with the purity of this vibration we carry.

Our path is not easy – it isn't supposed to be. The responsibility of this light falls to us because we are able to steward it. We

were chosen and we agreed to it.

I elected to speak very little about this "event" so that our rational brains wouldn't become engaged in trying to understand (i.e., control) what had just happened.

I then sat down. My jaw began to release and with the questions that ensued from the group I found my voice returning, although somewhat raspy. Obviously, part of my own personal work this year will be giving the energy as clear a channel as possible. As a lightworker, I really have no choice. When I returned home I was asked to chair a week-long conference for 175 Reiki Masters in 1999. There are no accidents. And I can tell you, it can't be seven days of lockjaw!. Many of us should have experienced changes as a result of this work. I am curious to hear feedback from my brothers who sat in sacred witness of this work.

It gave me great joy to express this for us. For me, it was an occasion full of grace and gifts.

I thank you all.

Sorry, I forgot whom it is I'm talking to...

Thanks y'all! ▼

Bernie can be reached at
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CALL TO JOY

Continued from page 1

I'm sure Chinese practitioners would recognize as deficient *shen chi*. The toll of not being able to make strong, satisfying, open connections with others of our kind was costly. Granted, the pictures may be slanted and not entirely accurate, yet look around. How many of us can see echoes of those same haunted eyes in pictures of ourselves growing up, or in our brothers still struggling to make peace within themselves?

Compared to where we were fifty years ago, Gay men are richly blessed with the ability to nurture our *shen chi*, our Joy. Gay Spirit Visions and other organizations feed the deep connections we need to be truly healthy. The opportunity to share not only eros, but also heart, mind, and spirit are invaluable—and still too rare. We should make honoring and strengthening them one of our highest priorities. And we should do whatever we can to help extend

the same opportunities—whether by example or by direct action—to other men, especially queer youths, who don't yet have them.

How can you increase the joy in your own life? One way is to open to the joy around you. Take moments to slow down and appreciate the beauty in your surroundings. Maybe there's a flower. Or the forearm of a handsome young man. Or the lines in an old woman's face. Take time to appreciate your relationships. Hug your lover. Spend time with friends. Get out of the house or the office and commune with the natural world. Go to places that feed you. Breathe deeply.

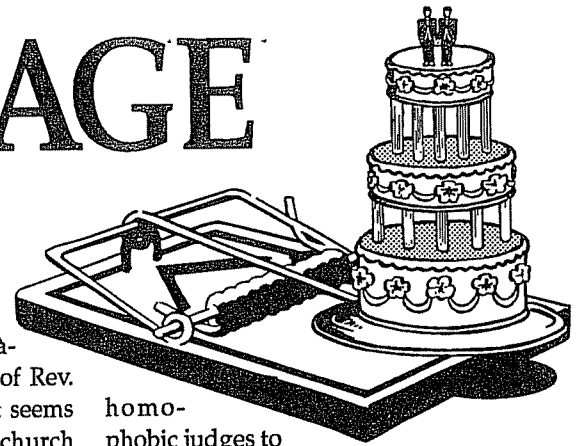
To nurture your relationship with yourself, there's a tool I love to share—the Joy Journal. The concept is a gift from a wonderful artist and teacher named Paulus Berensohn. "There's enough pain and grief in the world," he told our class. "Do yourself a favor. Save and savor every bit of Joy. This is what feeds you!"

Start each day by filling a page in your journal with whatever gives you Joy. You might copy a poem. Sketch the fresh daffodils along your driveway. Record the words to a song that moves you or glue in a photo of your newborn niece. Can't think of anything? Problems too big to feel joyful? The Buddhist monk Thich Nhat Hanh, suggests an antidote—start by giving thanks to your eyes. Take five minutes to appreciate the gift of vision. Then your ears. Then your hands. Then the air. A few minutes is all you'll need. Joy is here, all the time, and will answer your invitation.

It's easy to feel joyful in springtime, so start now. Journal your joy. Feed your relationships. Listen to the wisdom of your flesh. Start habits that let you call up a piece of this gorgeous, erotic, love-filled season any time of the year.

John can be reached at
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THE MARRIAGE TRAP



BY DANDELION

The right to legal marriage has been enthroned as the next Big Battle in the so-called Gay Agenda. Both sides are firmly entrenched, skirmishes are occurring with weekly regularity and martyrs are dutifully being lauded for their valor and sacrifice. As much as I would like to think otherwise, I just keep wondering if this is a battle we really want to win. As the saying goes, "Be careful what you pray for. You might get it."

For starters, the success rate among straight couples who have the enviable privilege of marriage is dismal. Almost fifty percent of marriages end in divorce, infidelity is rampant, and countless other marriages grind on in mutual dissatisfaction held together only by parental responsibility, financial dependence, or a sense of religious obligation. On the other side of the coin, Gay men who are perfectly able to form long-term monogamous relationships, in spite of a lack of legal acknowledgment, display an overwhelming lack of interest in doing so.

Certainly there are some Gay marriages; I know of a couple who just recently celebrated their twenty-fifth anniversary, another has been together twenty years, and at least half a dozen have been together for more than ten. My own relationship is seven years old. Like any group of couples, some of these relationships are more successful than others and all of them have had their ups and downs. I would guess that only a few of them were blessed by an official ceremony and they are neither better nor worse for it. However, along with these, I know of half a dozen triads, several group "households" and more men in open relationships than monogamous ones. The success of a relationship is based on the love and friendship of those involved, not its form or the blessings of church or state.

The Rev. Gregory Dell is the most recent casualty in the Gay marriage battle. He is being defrocked for blessing the union of a

couple in his congregation in Chicago. Thirty percent of the members of Rev. Dell's church are Gay or Lesbian. It seems hypocritical that the Methodist church doesn't object to these people filling the pews on Sunday morning, singing in the choir, tending the nursery, mowing the church lawn, or putting their money in the offering plate. No, the denomination has not told this church that its tithe will be reduced in proportion to its Gay membership because their money isn't fit for God's work. Gay and Lesbian dollars are fine, only our love is unholy. As hypocritical and repugnant as this may be, the legal recognition of Gay marriage on a state, or even national level, won't do one thing to fix it. The leaders of this, and every other, church have the legal right to be as hateful, judgmental, and cruel as they want to be. As long as they don't take their beliefs out of the sanctuary and try to impose them on the larger community, I have to support their freedom. I don't suppose that the reasons why their Gay and Lesbian members tolerate such treatment is anyone else's business.

The right to marriage is being touted as some sort of magical panacea by those in our community who are ever desperate for a short cut to the badge of respectability. Somehow the legal recognition of our relationships will cause the church to embrace us, our neighbors to adore us, and our parents to invite us home for the holidays. The fact is, it will only provide a handful of legal perks that will primarily benefit the mainstream middle class men and women who make up our community leadership. It will make things like inheritance and power of attorney easier to obtain, but these things aren't impossible to get now. It would force reluctant companies to provide access to spousal benefits, assuming that one qualifies for them anyway, but these, too, are becoming more and more available despite our lack of legal marriage. It might provide a legal advantage in cases of child custody or adoption, but one shouldn't underestimate the ability of

homo-phobic judges to find loopholes for their prejudice. On the other hand, it would qualify us for marriage penalties at tax time, complicate the end of our relationships with expensive divorces and the possibility of alimony, and largely end the possibilities of commitment ceremonies without legal marriage. Rather than fighting for the right to marry we would be better off protesting the inappropriateness of bestowing exclusive legal privileges on a religious contract, but that would play into the hands of those who already condemn us for not abiding by their moral dictates. This battle is all about proving we are as holy as they are.

I think one of the great virtues of our community is its flexibility, authenticity, and the creative ways that we have found to live our lives. However, many Gays and Lesbians aren't comfortable celebrating their difference and uniqueness. They long for the staid comfort of social acceptance. Legal marriage is their latest attempt to grab the brass ring of respectability. In their refusal to accept being among the outcasts of mainstream society they overlook the fact that the marriage issue is just an excuse for bigotry. If they manage to gain the right to marriage, homophobes will simply find other reasons to justify their criticism. As long as one is in thrall to respectability, one is a slave to those who guard the gate. Marriage is both the carrot that lures us close and the stick with which we are beaten.

I have a straight friend who is a seminary student and very active member of Straight But Not Narrow. He is a very vocal supporter of Gay Rights and has paid a price for it. I deeply admire his conviction and willingness to risk his career and sacrifice his personal comfort on behalf of a cause that many others easily ignore. Not long ago we had a heated discussion over the right to marriage. He correctly pointed out that nobody would be forced to get married. As much as he supports our commu-

nity, though, he is not part of it and one of the things I don't think he understands is the way in which political correctness twists and distorts even the most well meaning attempts at social engineering in the community. I don't doubt that the same week we gain the right to marry we will be lectured on our obligation to marry. Blithely ignoring the wide range of motives, both good and bad, that Gays and Lesbians have for forming the variety of relationships that they do, our community leaders will voice their expectation that we pair up two by two and report to the nearest chapel like animals boarding Noah's Ark. Having won the long, hard battle for access to legal marriage, we will be expected to use it and heaven help those who might give fuel to the opposition by voicing any reservations about the total joys of monogamous bliss.

Esquire magazine usually displays a testosterone quotient much too high for my taste, but I have a free subscription so I flip through it. The May issue includes an article on the heterosexual polyamory movement. It seems there is a quiet, but growing, underground community of straight peo-

ple exploring open marriage, group marriage, and the wide range of options that one can imagine for expressing sexuality and affection. They have magazines, websites, support groups, and conferences around the world. Surprisingly, in a magazine that tends toward machismo, this wasn't merely a winking sexploitation of wife swapping. This was a serious look at one couple's awakening interest and exploration of group marriage, with as much focus on the pitfalls of jealousy, insecurity, and communication as on the hedonistic pleasures of multiple partners, but they weren't simply dismissed with moralizing judgment either. The subjects of this article are sincere people whose lives are documented with sensitivity and respect. It is exciting to see straight people opening their eyes and seeing the possibilities that Gay men have been exploring for the past forty years.

A Gay couple I know will be holding their commitment ceremony soon. D_____ was partnered with W_____ when he met M_____ and they became a triad. W_____ died of AIDS and now D_____

and M_____ are getting married. It is a way to regroup and honor the love that remains between them. However, it doesn't mean an end to the regular circuit of house guests and playmates that spice up their lives and relationship and I think when the right guy comes along they will be three again. In the meanwhile their wedding invitation reads, in part, "The greatest gift we could receive would be a donation to our church to endow a pew in the memory of our former partner W_____." The problem with Gay marriage isn't that it's a bad thing, or that we don't deserve it, or that there aren't a lot of men and women who desperately desire it. The problem with legal Gay marriage is that we need to open our eyes and realize it is like an older brother's hand-me-down coat; as a community, we've already outgrown it before it's even ours.

Congratulations to Dandelion, who last month was named Mr. Atlanta Eagle 1999. Dandi can be reached at DadsBadBoy@aol.com

IMAGINE THAT

Common Boundary, the nation's foremost magazine on spirituality and psychology, said this about Cliff Bostock's soulwork, a modality of personal growth that is an alternative to psychotherapy:

"Bostock, who trained as a psychotherapist, says he now practices soulwork – helping clients 'live soulfully, from a place of deep imagination.' This process calls for...a restoration of the soul's aesthetic function and a rediscovery of the heart as an organ of perception. The purpose of doing soulwork is not to be 'cured,' but to deepen experience and to discover one's destiny...Most participants report changes beyond what one would experience from therapy."

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Franklin Abbott's
MORTAL LOVE

never do we speak
 from our hearts
 and go unheard
 (from "Truth's Consequences")

When it is good, poetry is passage into the locked rooms of the heart. Even as it portrays something or someone specific—a balloon man, an often-caught fish, snowy woods—the poem moves also through more abstract spaces of meaning, like mortality, ecstasy, yearning for respite. These multiple layers give a poem its power to illuminate, and they are created by the poet's perspective and by precision of language.

There is much very good poetry, and I think some great poetry, in Franklin Abbott's *Mortal Love: Selected Poems, 1971-1998*. The particular subjects are those that would be expected to engage a spiritually conscious gay man during the final decades of this century: AIDS, aging, homophobia, androgyny, sexual expression, love, communion and community, and the interplay of such things. Those themes and others are distilled through a unique perspective: one of a Radical Faerie psychotherapist with roots in a poor rural county in the South—a place and condition recounted in detail in the poem "Turner County Breakdown." Subjects and voice are blended in a subtle alchemy to yield poetry that expresses precisely and on many levels the joy and pain of the

... stupid, useless, ridiculous habit
 of loving anything
 that can die" (from the poem "Mortal Love").

This collection is imbued with the fabulous energy that swirls around the Gay Spirit Visions conference and family, fomenting and abetting all sorts of rampant creativity. (Or perhaps "we are just remembering who we were and who we are," as suggested in "Openings".)

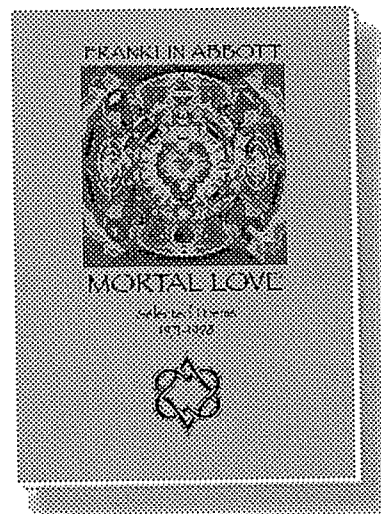
Franklin has been a participant in the GSV process, and its precursor gathering at the Running Water farm, for years. He also enlisted several GSV brothers to help with the book's production. They include King Thackston, creator of the beautiful cover mandala, portrait photographer Roger Weinstein, and Cal Gough and Al Cotton, who helped prepare the manuscript.

These beautiful rooms are brimming with treasures. One I particularly love for its imagery is "What Holds the Poem Inside," a meditation on how, when the poet's mental grip is persuaded to relax, sometimes

a poem will come to surface
 sweet and wet transparency
 pulled from a deep well
 dark in the bucket
 waiting to catch the shine in my eyes
 to spell it backwards
 and never lie.

There are several other poems for which I feel a particular affinity. "In Memoriam" is a beautiful and moving threnody on the poet's remembrance of someone "ten years dead" and the gifts they exchanged. The love song "Never Again as Strangers" is lyrical and quite sexy. "In the Absence of Our Fathers" describes a journey beyond the loss of one important kind of male relationship into a community of "...brothers / whose eyes are bright and open / whose caring never ends."

That community is further celebrated in "Seven Cycles: Running Water", which speaks of the Faerie gatherings at that North Carolina farm and their energy, and in "Ascent, Lament, and Admonition." This poem deals with the dilemma of returning from such a gathering to "walk the city streets / expected to be the same." It sounds like the problem some men describe after a GSV conference, but Franklin observes that despite being back in the day-to-day



world, "... I am now a better lover / my gentleness refined, aligned / and dangerous".

The difficulties of loving that which is mortal are dealt with most directly in a central chapter of the collection that concerns the AIDS epidemic. The long poems "We All Fall Down" and "Mortal Love" confront the disease with an unsparing honesty and elegant craft that reminded me of Anne Sexton's works. Like the reality of the illness they address, these poems are laden with pain and sorrow and great loss, but also with the stubborn courage of one willing to

... rattle my rattle
 pound spirit into drumhead
 ring demon chasing bells
 chant my made-up chant
 loosen my collarbones
 and yell through the top
 of my head (from "Mortal Love").

There is much hope-filled and loving writing to be found in the pages of *Mortal Love*. In the prefatory poem "Another Covenant," an iris shifts in form and meaning from a warlike spear into "a cup for the wind / and rain", and an empty hand is transformed as it

becomes a vessel
 deep enough to harbor
 what is needed to fill a life
 the space it redefines
 is not a void
 but a promise.

Continues

The lovely poem "Tequendama," titled after a deity of northern South America, opens with the lines

broken you, broken me
not a bullet proof heart in the house
no one will sing for our troubles
we sing for ourselves
when we do
we sing for each other.

In the collection's final entry, "Life-savers," Franklin offers up some prescriptions for those drawn into loving anything perishable, ending the poem

and the book with the caution that "sweet is now / not bye and bye."

The poems mentioned here are only a scant and arbitrary sampling, and none of the extracted quotations does full justice to the poem it inhabits. *Mortal Love* offers up a feast from a wise, open and love-filled heart that speaks its truth and does not go unheard. The collection also includes prose poems, chants, invocations, fables, travel journals, and meditations. To enter its pages is to return for a little while to the enchantment of the Mountain, to move among the ancient white oaks

with gentle men
whose loving
knows no purpose
but to kindle
in our hearts
the quiet light
of peace (from "Koan").

Mortal Love is available for \$16 (shipping and handling included) from RFD Press, P.O. Box 68, Liberty, TN 37095. ▼

Bob can be reached at
DamnDawg@ix.netcom.com.

UPDATE FROM THE MOUNTAIN

Continued from page 3

out! Wolf Song is a Peace Conference started 10 years ago by Grandmother Twylah Nitsch, an elder of the Seneca Nation's Wolf Clan. Each year, a different group of 13 indigenous elders from around the world convene to hold an open summit on peace.

There will be a continuous heartbeat

drum throughout the weekend and an uninterrupted council fire in the firepit (thanks again, GSV!). The elders arrive earlier in the week to council and decide what specific talks and teachings will happen. This is an international event. Local elders that you may know include Jim Yellowhorseman from the Atlanta area, and Ted Williams from North Carolina.

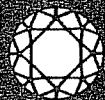
Our Spring African Drum and Dance Retreat in March was a huge success;

there were close to 100 participants and more drums than that, all booming! You can come to the next on September 19-22, the weekend before the Fall Conference; classes range from beginner through advanced. To register for any of our upcoming events, call *the mountain* office at 828/526-5838. ▼

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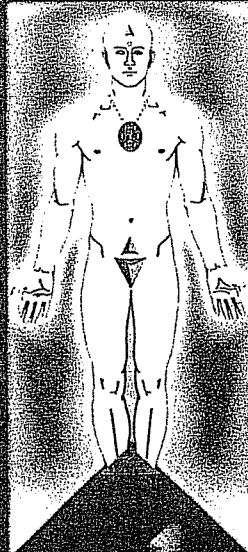
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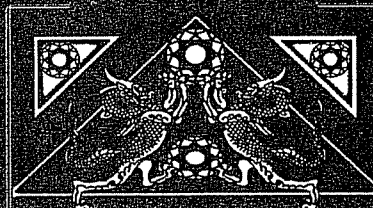
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JOHN R. BALLEW

A dear friend—bright, loving, sexy and sophisticated—informed me the other day that he had recently had unprotected anal sex with a stranger. A client told me the same thing later that day. In fact, several clients have told me the same thing over the past several months. These are not stupid men. They were not seeking out “bareback” sex. Rather, they found themselves in an erotic encounter with someone who turned them on and decided not to stop it.

A former safer sex educator in Atlanta recently charged that gay men care more about their next orgasm than about their own lives. He expressed deep frustration over his lack of success in “educating” men to make other choices. Is he right? Are there things we gay men don’t know about safer sex? Are we such pleasure-seekers that we lose sight of our own well-being in the process?

Organized religion, God knows, has been of no help whatsoever in helping gay men cultivate a workable sexual ethic. Worse than that: it has been a destructive force that has often sought to keep our sexuality criminalized and our relationships unsupported. Small wonder that conversation about sexuality and ethics or morality makes many gay men highly defensive.

But a crisis is in bloom within our community. Call it the confluence of protease inhibitors, internalized homophobia and unclear thinking about responsibility. After years of safer sex education, infection rates may actually be going up in our community. We’ve not had much conversation about this. We fear seeming judgmental. It is hard to admit that we are sometimes confused. Yet it is increasingly costly to let our anger at traditional moralists keep us from reflecting on our lives.

My experience is that few of the men having unprotected sex are “barebackers” in the sense that they have gone out specifically to have no-condom sex with a partner. (Of course, others do seek no-condom sex.) More often the decision to use or not use a condom seems a small decision in the heat of the moment.

Take the messages from years of homophobic indoctrination that the lives of gay men are not worth much. Add in naive optimism about the complex realities of life with HIV. Toss in some denial and a generous heaping of horniness. Stir and serve. The result of this “cocktail” is risky sex and more HIV.

In 1999, most men know how to use a condom properly. (If you don’t, please don’t be embarrassed. Contact an AIDS service organi-

INTIMACY, ETHICS AND SAFER SEX

zation and find out.) The issue here is not education. The issue is: what do we truly believe about ourselves and about our brothers?

Masculine sexiness is often divorced from intimacy in our culture. Emotional sophistication and the capacity to nurture are not highly valued in men. Fashion ads and gay porn, two agents which define our community’s sense of what is hot, portray the combination of physical beauty and a certain aloofness as the model of the sexy man.

Think about how this plays out in conversations (non-conversations, really) about safer sex. To avoid shame about sexuality or about our uncertainties, some men turn to crystal, ecstasy and other drugs which turn up the volume of sensation while dampening the voices that cause us to second-guess the erotic encounter. Or we simply try to avoid making sexual decisions, hoping the other person will take the initiative. If he doesn’t, we’re too distracted by the conversations in our head to do so ourselves.

Thus is created much wishful thinking. One HIV-negative friend told me, “He was such a sweet guy. So caring. We didn’t talk about it, but I knew that he must be negative or he would never have fucked me without a condom.” Another friend, this one positive, told me about a similar encounter: “I knew the guy I was boinking had to be positive. I mean, it was a sex club! We didn’t even have to talk about it; he just wanted it.” In the absence of conversation, we imagine whatever supports that which we want to do anyway.

We are accustomed to hearing ethics and morality connected with sexuality only in terms of “Thou shalt nots.” We need a sexual ethic that guides us instead toward having good sex. Good sex is sex that you feel good about while you are having it, *and good about it afterwards*. Gay men deserve good sex. Unfortunately, many of us don’t believe that. We have grown up in a culture which beats into us—sometimes literally—that we are worth less than non-gay men, that our sexuality is an abomination (and often a felony), that our lives are destined to be unhappy and that disease is our lot in life. Our relationships are

trivialized and recognition of them outlawed. This takes its toll. Most of us don’t buy into this nonsense consciously, but it is difficult to avoid picking up foul odors when we are living in a sewer of homophobia.

Imagine a gay sexual ethic that starts with the premise, “It is morally good to love yourself.” It builds on this notion: loving yourself is good, affirming yourself as a gay man is good. It is good—that is moral, ethical—to act in ways which expand your love and care for yourself, other gay men and our gay community.

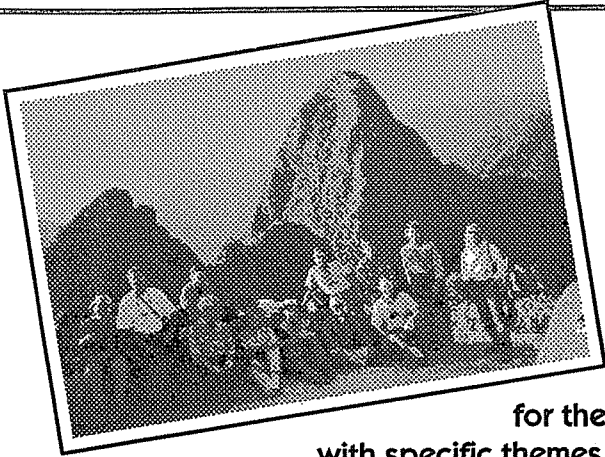
Sexuality is powerful, but it is neither good nor bad in and of itself. It can be a fabulous way of enjoying one’s body, perhaps connecting with another person, or it can manifest pain through abuse, rape or betrayal.

What if the level of our consciousness in our sexual connections rather than the context became the way we assessed whether they were right or wrong for us? Good sex can be part of a committed relationship or outside of it, but sex is sufficiently powerful that it is always relational. Perhaps you and I just met on the dance floor and we are now headed back to my place. **Imagine a sexual ethic which acknowledges that because we are both men who love men, any sex we have is taking place in that context.** I will not treat you thoughtlessly. I will do my best to treat you as a sacred being, and will do my best to allow no harm to come either to you or to myself.

This is very different from models of morality presented by either the American church (“Sex is immoral if it doesn’t take place in the context of marriage”) or the prevailing gay male model (“Sexual morality is a private matter and not that important.”) In this new ethic, I acknowledge that I am not only attracted to your physicality, but also to the way in which you are a reflection of myself. I like what I see when I look at you, and I would be devastated at the thought of bringing harm into your life or my own.

Loving men is good, and being gay is good. We need to make our community *more gay* by learning to treat one another with concern and to place the other’s welfare on a par with our own. It is possible to speak our pain and concern without condemning our brothers. We need to stop being silent in the face of behavior that objectifies other men or reinforces the idea that the lives of gay men are not worth all that much. ▼

John Ballew, M.S., is a licensed professional counselor in Atlanta. He can be reached at jballew@mindspring.com.



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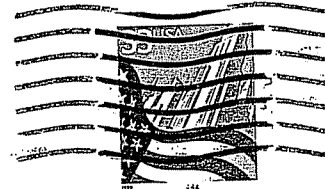
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