

GRATEFULNESS AS A SPIRITUAL PATH

Truly, it's hard to build a spiritual path around being pissed off.

A lot of us have tried. Marginalized folk who sometimes feel pushed outside society can find feelings of alienation, anger or hurt. Life can certainly be mean, but if we are going to be real, we must admit that it's more than that. Choosing to acknowledge our anger and our joy can cause us to feel a little like a juggler sometimes, but it frees us to practice gratefulness for life itself even when we experience pain within that life. For that reason, a spirituality of gratefulness is a particularly subversive act for queer people.

I'd like to discuss what I believe are six keys to developing gratefulness as a spiritual path.

Some of us come to a new sense of gratefulness after a peak experience: a birth or a death, a turning point in our personal growth, the realization of a long-held goal. Other times the catalyst is commonplace: the full moon on a clear night, an orgasm with a lover, a piece of music. Something pops; suddenly, we're awake! Our hearts are delighted. Our need to express our gratitude feels almost physical.

What a surprise!

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BY JOHN BALLEW
M.S., L.P.C.



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ELDER'S PERCH

These are my reflections, based on my GSV participation since the first Conference in November 1990. You aren't required to accept them as true. They're simply ideas to



By TREEWALKER

focus my own experience. Imagine trying to explain GSV to someone. Not to recruit him, but in the context of why I attend our different events. I'm excited at the prospect of knowing your questions and answers.

What is the essence of GSV?

Our mission statement proclaims that we create safe, sacred space for men who love men to explore and celebrate our connection with the Divine. We welcome men from all spiritual paths and traditions. This is our essence.

What does this mean?

The essence of welcoming someone to GSV includes being present to each man in a way that honors who he is at that moment. We believe there is something sacred in us that wishes to connect to what is sacred in our brother. And so we listen with our hearts and with our minds. His path, beliefs and practices, history, future, Divine connection, though outwardly different from ours, is another facet of Gay Spirit in the world. In this way, Gay Spirit is made present in the world. These connections are sacred events.

Our listening, receiving the sacred, is part of our feminine energy. It's our most valuable activity, akin to sacred sex. As we actively listen to our brother, we feel the rhythm of his efforts to share. We encourage him as he struggles to express the Divine in himself, to discover his part of Divine Spirit. We receive the love that desires to dance among us. We share in the Bliss that is the climax of our connection.

On the masculine side, we risk disclosing our spiritual journey. We struggle to express Gay Spirit in our lives. We take a stand. We dare to be who we really are. We express the love that desires to dance among us. We discuss our struggles and struggle with each other. We discuss our wants and needs.

Our dance with feminine and masculine energies is sacred. I believe these are Gay Spirit energies that move through us into the world. We must choose to participate in this dance. I find it helpful, challenging and interesting to pay attention when I am actively engaged and when I'm not. Is this an active participation or an attempt to withdraw?

When I consider all this, I wonder how well I'm doing. In my role as Presiding Elder I view my purpose as holding a vision of our safe, sacred space. I measure my performance by these reflections. I try to model these behaviors by listening and sharing. I pay attention to the listening and sharing around me. I try to answer these questions: *How is Gay Spirit unfolding in this moment, among these men who love men? What are their visions of safe, sacred space?* I have learned to trust Gay Spirit. I have seen these questions answered countless times. I believe these other men — you, my sacred brothers — hold a similar vision of safe, sacred space and have an experience of the Divine unfolding in your life. That you seek solace and comfort from that Divine essence. That it discloses Gay Spirit to you throughout your life.

Now if only I could hold this vision when I'm stuck in traffic or struggling to understand my job and meet other people's expectations. Or negotiating the intimacies of love and friendship. I have more questions now than answers. Thanks for dancing with me. Would you care to lead next time? ▼

Martin "TreeWalker" Isganitis is currently presiding elder of GSV. He has been a member of the Planning Committee since 1992. He is single and lives in Decatur, GA.

FEELING CLOSE TO SPIRIT

I want to be a spiritual person. So it makes sense to me that I should have a daily spiritual practice. I've pondered this often, thinking other GSV people must have satisfying daily rituals that make them feel one with Spirit. In this *Visionary*, we've collected several articles in a section called "Spirituality in Everyday Life." Our GSV brothers describe things they can do to deepen their spirituality. In addition, we have descriptions of altars.



BY JENNINGS FORT

I have an altar on our bedroom dresser. There are framed photos of my mother, sister and late father. My partner, John, and I are in a photo, taken on top of the fire tower at a GSV Fall Conference. I have photos of my dear friends Mark Clinard and Doug Parrot, three of my grandparents, and my uncle Jennings who died in World War II. I have a lapel pin of One Voice Chorus in Charlotte, NC, where I sang for nine years. This gay chorus was a gift from Spirit that has helped me along my spiritual path. In the middle is a candle. I have it in a small clay cauldron my friend, Larry Jackson, gave me. Underneath, there's a tile that says "I am my beloved's and my beloved is mine" John gave me when I first moved in with him. Sometimes I burn incense there, but not often. Between work, the gym, errands and just veging out, I feel guilty that I neglect my altar. Sometimes, I'll add a card from a loved one or something just to change it a little.

Nearly every morning, I meditate. It's transcendental meditation that I learned 25 years ago. You'd think by now I would have reached some kind of cosmic consciousness, but I really haven't. I've meditated off and for years. It's a way of easing into the day. After 20 minutes of reciting my mantra, I pray, thanking Spirit for my life, for John, asking that I don't expect too much or too little from him, for my mother and her health and the well-being of Mark and Doug. Then I ask for help to let go of anger that I have about my father, who drank himself to death eight years ago. Even if my meditation isn't the best, I still offer my prayers to Spirit and I think Spirit listens.

One of the most spiritual things for me right now is making compost. I love gardening. It's a passion handed down by my mother. I collect all the coffee grounds, banana peelings, eggshells and rotten things from the refrigerator in a brass bowl on our kitchen counter-top. When it's full, I take it to the back of the yard under a dogwood tree. In this shady, green place, I pour the food scraps, rousing the flies and gnats. I stir the pile and take in the sweet, rotting smell. Sometimes I'll grab a handful of compost and feel it between my fingers, thinking about how this will nourish the flowers we plant. I'll linger a moment, watching the insects and the worms, just enjoying the quiet. It makes me feel good to think I'm helping the earth, even in this small way. But the best part is the quiet. Maybe between my altar, meditation and composting, these few quiet moments are enough. Then, at least, I feel the warmth of Spirit beside me. ▼

Jennings Fort lives in Atlanta and can be reached at jenman@mindspring.com.

Gay Spirit Visions

A Mission Statement for Our Second Decade and A New Millennium

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

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

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

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



GSV potlucks are held the fourth Saturday of the month at 7:30PM unless otherwise noted.

GSV Heart Circles are held the second Sunday of every month, hosted by Matt Huff, and on the fourth Sunday, hosted by Bill Bernitt, both at 7:30PM. For location, contact Matt Huff at 404/248-9649, or e-mail at pretzelulu@aol.com; Bill Bernitt at 404-876-6197, tobillbern@aol.com

GSV Planning Meetings are held the second Saturdays of the month at 10 a.m. at the Friends Meeting House, 701 Howard St., Decatur, GA.

June 23 – GSV Potluck Hosted by Marc Pimsler, 1445 Monroe Dr., # C-26, Atlanta, GA 404-685-8975, mvpimsler@aol.com

July 28 – GSV Potluck and camping event! Hosted by Jim Jones, 45 Tanglewood Rd., Newnan, GA, 770-304-0120, moonxdragon@earthlink.net

August – GSV Potluck Hosted by David Lender, 850 Piedmont Ave NE (The Dakota) #3327, Atlanta, GA, 404-607-0171, dlender@mindspring.com

September 29 – GSV Potluck (Note: 5th Saturday) Hosted by King Thackston, 370 Loomis Ave. SE, Atlanta, GA, 404-688-8234, wingofmen@mindspring.com

October 27 – GSV Potluck and Costume Party October 27, Hosted by Ramon Noya, 1385 Lively Ridge Rd NE, Atlanta, GA, 404-634-2221, ramonanoya@aol.com

CLARIFICATION

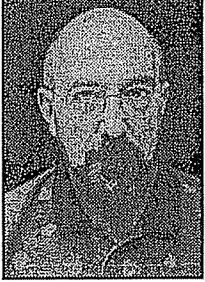
In Harold Cole's "The Role of Gay Men in the Evolution of Spirituality" in the Sping issue, we should have mentioned that this article was based on Toby Johnson's *Gay Spirituality, The Role of Gay Identity in the Transformation of Human Consciousness*. We regret this omission.

How do we approach Spirit on an everyday basis? Through prayerful meditation? In doing good deeds? By offering a smile to the overworked clerk in the grocery check-out line? These are some thoughts on the subject from several GSV brothers. With this topic are some reflections about altars, spiritual focus points in the homes of many of us. We hope you find these stories helpful as you move down your own spiritual path.

Ever since I saw Rebecca Wells' book, *Little Altars, Everywhere*, that's how I tend to think of my home. There are literally little altars, everywhere!

I assembled the main altar in my bedroom a decade ago after my first GSV Conference. But I had been a "closet-altar-kind-of-guy" for years. For a long time the centerpiece was a bronze statue of Kwan Yin, the goddess of mercy but she has moved to the mantle above my bed. Now the center is an oriental wooden temple with

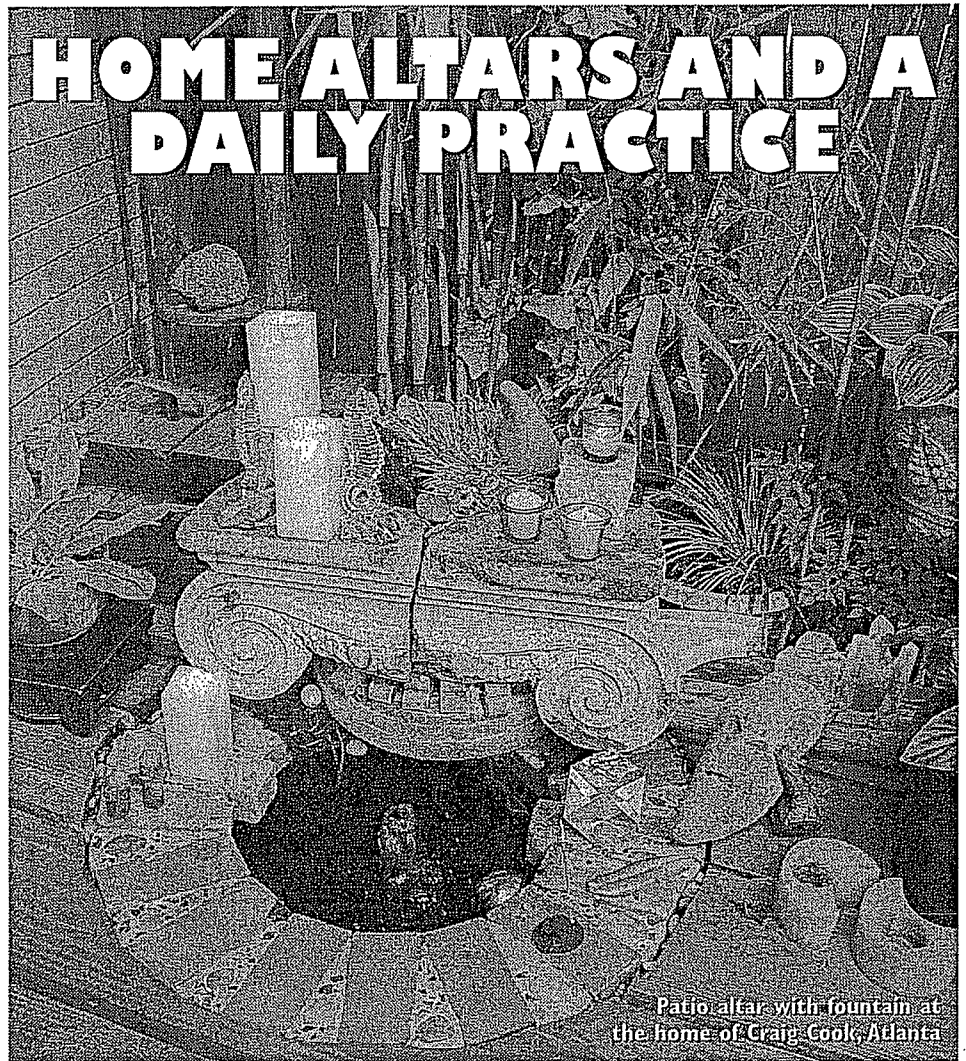
BY KING THACKSTON



a small statue of a wise man on the porch. There is an ever-changing array of candles, blessed water and oils, stones and talismans. The constants are a drawing of the word "love" as if it were written in water and a picture of "The Green Man."

Above my drawing board is a photograph of a formal Japanese Garden, some hand-made brushes and pencils, a bas-relief of the Egyptian owl, Horus, and a print of the first Zen patriarch/follower of Buddha, Bodhidharma Daruma. He had his eyelids removed when he was caught sleeping during meditation!

On my living room mantle is a candle I light each morning and extinguish each evening before bed. The flame is a remembrance of the spirits of friends who are no longer with me on this plane and a reminder of the gift of life. It reminds me how precious each second is. There is also a small chime that I ring when I light and put out the candle. I also ring it when I leave the house to remind myself to have a safe journey, to accomplish the task successfully and with ease and to have a safe return home. I began this ritual after seeing the Dalai Lama do this before a jour-



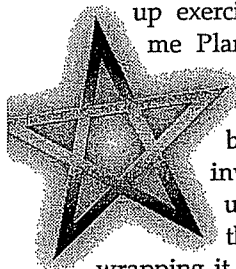
Patio altar with fountain at the home of Craig Gook, Atlanta

ney in the movie, "Kundun." I also think it alerts my guides and angels that I am leaving and reminds them to protect my home and cat, Oskar. A have a toy dome of the ocean with animated dolphins that swim serenely through the sea when you push a plunger. It reminds me to "swim" through the currents of the world and not fight them. Silly, perhaps, but it really puts me in a better frame of mind when I leave my "world" and face the other one outside. This simple act lets me swim/dance with the world instead of

pushing against it.

My daily practice is Yoga, breathing, Chi Gung, meditation and Planetary Acupuncture. Decades ago I studied Yoga with the Pierce Program in Atlanta with Martin Pierce's first Men's Class. Then for several years I attended a "Wellness Workout" taught by Jean Dunham that combined breathing, stretching, Skinner Releasing and dancing. Here I was also introduced to the Tao Animal Exercises in which you "become" different animals to energize different body systems. Around

this time at an early GSV Fall Conference, George Miller taught me ChiGong wake-up exercises. Rocco Patt taught me Planetary Acupuncture at another GSV Conference. This is a series of



breathing exercises involving breathing the universe down through the top of your head and wrapping it around your heart. You breathe it out, down into the center of the Earth. Then, repeat in reverse, breathing the Earth up into your heart and then out the top of your head into the universe. Finally, you pull the third breath into your heart from both directions, wrapping it around your heart and then breathing it out in all directions. Now I do my own routine, mostly, based on all these sources.

It doesn't take long for a daily practice to become a habit, especially when the benefits begin to appear and it feels integrated into my life.

During the last year, I have learned and benefitted from the regular GSV Yoga classes taught by Rocky Beeland and Sterling McVay. ▼

King "Wing of Men" Thackston, GSV Archivist and member of the Council of Elders, has been living with HIV for 20 years and attributes a great part of that life to his daily practice and learning from GSV about what it means to be living.



The small wooden chest beside my bed comes from a Danish Modern wall unit that my father and his second wife purchased in the mid 1960's. I got it in 1975 when I moved to my first apartment in Brooklyn. The vertical supports didn't reach the ceiling of my hundred-year-old Brownstone so I put them out on the street, along with all the bookshelves. But I kept the chest and it's been my meditation altar ever since.

A succession of objects have sat on top of this chest, with only one constant feature: a pair of brass Sabbath candlesticks that my mother's mother's mother brought here from Russia.

MY LITTLE ALTAR

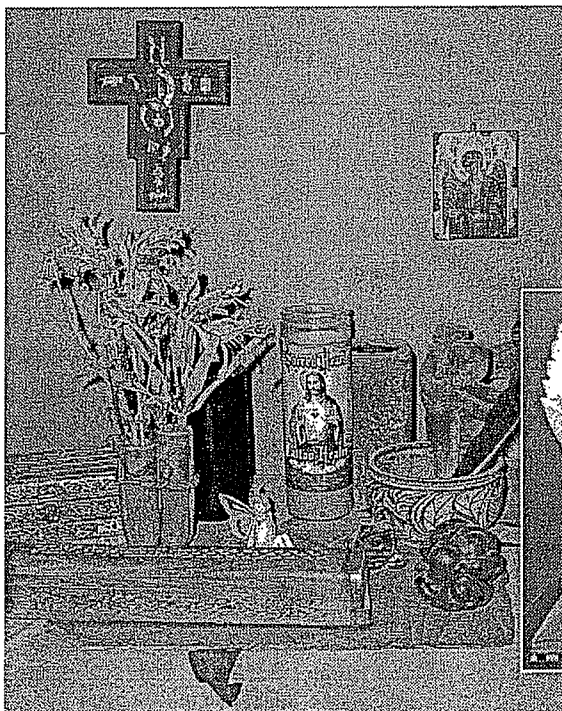
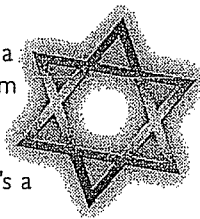
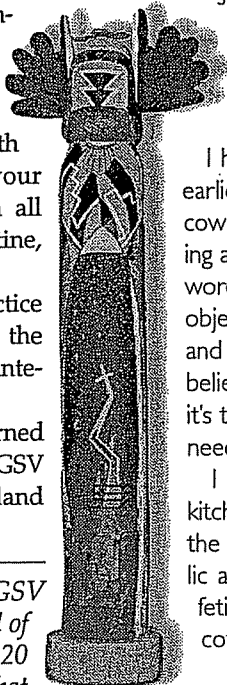
BY ANDREW RAMER

Around and between them have been crystals, feathers, shells, beach rocks, post cards, photographs, icons, statues of goddesses, gods, animals, angels and often — nothing. Today a glass hand sits between the candle-

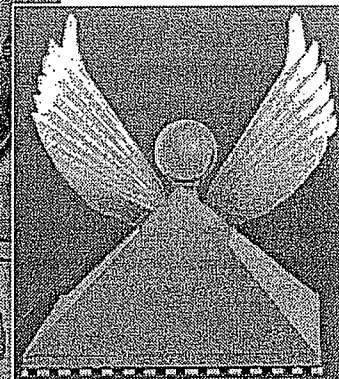
sticks. To the right of it are a brass egg, a crystal on top of a polished lapis disk my mother gave me and a statue of two metal flute players sent to me by Sister Who. To the left are the silver kiddish cup my father's father sipped his wine from on the Sabbath, a tiny glass globe of the earth, and a plastic deer that I bought in Cliff's hardware and variety store on Castro Street for \$2.29.

I have always had altars, since long before I knew the word. In the middle of my earliest altar, created when I was 5, were two ceramic figurines I was in love with, a cowboy and an angel. They no longer exist, except in a blurry photograph. Arranging altars has always been calming and focusing for me. Long before I ever heard the word "meditation," I would sit in front of my altar, tuning into ...something. The objects remind me of things that are important, the burning candles still my senses and the blank white wall behind the altar has always been a source of rest. As a firm believer in disorganized religion, I do not sit and meditate every day at my altar. But it's there all the time, generating an energy field that I can slide into when I need it.

I also have altars on top of both of my toilet tanks and on a kitchen shelf. In the living room, on top of two larger chests from the same old wall unit my bedroom altar came from, is my public altar, covered with icons, kachinas, menorahs, Buddhas, Zuni fetishes, rocks and more candles. Some of my friends think it's a coffee table and put their cups on it when I have a party. ▼



Left, Multi-cultural altar and below, "Eye of God" altar piece from a meditation by Mike Goettee, Atlanta



ALTAR BUILDING REDISCOVERED

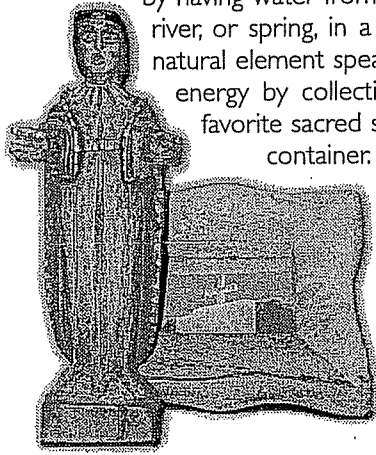
BY CAMI DELGADO

The ancient art of altar building has made a comeback and it's no wonder. Altars nurture and uplift our souls, support prayer and meditation and remind us of an invisible world we can't see.

Building an altar can be a creative, energizing, affirming experience that celebrates you and everyone who has enriched your journey. In your living room, it creates an atmosphere for soulful sharing. In your bedroom, it accentuates the sacredness of love-making.

Be bold and juxtapose contrasting power objects. On my altar, Quan Yin, shamanic rattles, Merlin the magician, an Om symbol, ceremonial feathers, sacred bells, a celtic urn and Jesus, all live harmoniously and celebrate the diversity of my spiritual sources.

Bring nature into your altar by including stones, minerals, sea shells, and live plants. Call forth the cleansing power of water by having water from a very special ocean, lake, river, or spring, in a sacred vessel and let this natural element speak to your soul. Elicit Earth energy by collecting sand or earth from a favorite sacred site and keep it in a sacred container.

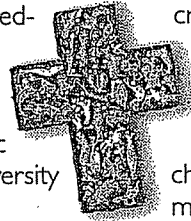


Personalize your altar by honoring special beings who have inspired you, walked the journey with you or enriched your inner life. Images or quotes from your favorite spiritual mentors, elders

and teachers add inspiration. Particularly honor special gay men whose presence or written word have inspired you along your path.

An altar that celebrates all that you are would include a celebration of your gayness and sexuality. My altar includes rainbow flags and pink triangles. I'm still searching for a self-standing phallus. Others honor a loved one by placing his pubic hair in a sacred pouch. Images of the naked male body placed amidst sacred objects speak to the harmonious integration of spirit and body.

Enhance the self-expressive character of your altar by creating special objects you have made. Hand painting spiritual symbols onto rock, fabric, candles or wood is a way of creating your own personalized, unique sacred objects.



My altar also includes the goddess Psyche (I'm a psychotherapist), Chinese Foo dogs, Native American medicine beads, Greek Orthodox icons, Buddhas, yin yang symbols, a spiritual colonial Mexican painting, Tibetan and Hindu mala beads, sacred stones, 1 Ching coins, two plants, a rain stick, a Khabbala tree of life, an African goddess, a Lalique angel, 14 candles, my country's coat of arms, and other personally meaningful items. It mirrors, expresses and supports essential aspects of my inner world.

These ideas awaken your intuition and inspiration. Let your altar be a genuine expression and celebration of your soul's richness. Use the gift of your imagination to create a visual reminder of the potential that lies within you and of the sacredness of being gay!

Do it joyously! ▼

Cami Delgado is a psychotherapist living in Miami. He practices soul-centered psychotherapy mostly with gay and lesbian clients.

GRATEFULNESS

Continued from page 1

Being open to surprise is perhaps the first key to walking the path of thankfulness. Some undeserved and unexpected surprise happens and we experience connection with the essential abundance of the Universe. We are startled into wakefulness. This is different from receiving something we are "owed." Walking through life feeling a sense of entitlement leaves us bitter when we're disappointed. Understanding that there are good things all around us – just because that's the way life is – opens us up.

Gratitude for life is a powerful act for a people whose lives are often undervalued. It's an act of self-validation and an affirmation of our connection with our Source.

All spiritual paths support a grateful approach to life. Wiccan rituals often include expressions of gratitude for light, for harvest, for the season – for all living things. Buddhism teaches awareness of life's change and impermanence in life and calls for gratitude for each instant of existence. Jewish and Christian liturgies often include the affirmation, "Thanks be to God." In her book *Remember My Soul*, Lori Palatnik quotes the Jewish prayer

Modeh Ani: "I am grateful to God, for giving me another day, and another opportunity to use it wisely."

A second key to the path of gratitude is the invitation to slow down and pay attention. Some traditions describe this as *contemplation*. It's the advice we've all heard: *Count your blessings*. Contemplating life's blessings can seem deceptively simple. It's actually a deep prayer, especially if it forms the foundation of our spirituality. We acknowledge the goodness of the universe, express our thankfulness for gifts such as good health, loved ones, and all good things. When we practice grati-

Continued on page 8

FEEDING SPIRIT

(Excerpts from comments presented at the Spring Retreat, March 30-April 1, 2001)

One of the functions of Gay people on this planet is to act as *spiritual intermediaries* – those who create the bridge between human and spirit consciousness. It's a vital job highly regarded



By JOHN STOWE

in many Earth-based societies – and one that, not surprisingly, is all but forgotten in modern culture. For we live in a culture of taking. We've declared the Earth – the living being of which we are all part – to be dead. Then

we turn around and consume everything around us until we're on the verge of fulfilling our own self-destructive prophesy. In all the discussions of conservation and economics, even among the most well-intentioned, the concept of spirit comes up rarely if ever.

Contrast this world view with another. In many societies, usually those deemed "primitive" by the modern world, spirit is intimately woven into every aspect of life, from the highest ritual to the most ordinary tasks. I remember reading the words of an elderly Hopi man who spoke about his people's relationship with the corn. In order to help the plants survive the harsh desert environment, the people would sing to them. That's right. Sing. They'd sing to honor the corn spirit and to ask its help in growing a healthy harvest. And the corn grew, with very little water. This man lamented that with the advent of modern ways, nobody sings to the corn any more. And the corn doesn't grow so well. What's worse, though, is that as people forget to sing to the corn, *the corn is forgetting how to listen!* Try explaining that to the county extension people.

The essence of the connection between humanity and spirit is relationship – and successful relationship is always a two-way process. It involves commitment and work on both sides. It involves communication, giving and receiving, honoring the other as you honor yourself. Successful

relationship develops over time, as partners learn to relate ever more deeply. In our society, we're too often taught to mine spirit the way we mine the Earth. "Me, me, me," we pray. "What can you share with me?" Like a little kid asking for the tit, we ask for guidance, for help, for ease, for enlightenment. It works well enough – Spirit wants the relationship as much as we do, as far as I can tell. Yet how much more meaningful and powerful life becomes when we start asking how we can support the Spirit in return. If we want a world in which Spirit is alive and active, we have to start feeding spirit in the world. That's up to everyone. But as Gay men, it's one of our special roles.

How do we, living smack dab in the modern world, feed spirit? In his books, *Secrets of the Talking Jaguar* and *Long Life, Honey in the Heart*, Martín Prechtel, a Guatemalan shaman/teacher, offers a clue. He discusses the yearly cycles of ritual by which the traditional Mayan peoples nurtured their deities and "brought the world back to life." His people understood that their gods and goddesses are nurtured by "eloquence and beauty," in word and deed alike. Sadly, this way of life has been most-

ly destroyed by government and religion in a way familiar to most native peoples.

How can you feed spirit in your life? With prayer. With gratitude, refreshed each day. With mindfulness in each moment – of your breath, of this wondrous world, of your intention to live in alignment. You can treat yourself, spirit and everything as alive, aware and sacred. You can witness the beauty in the world around you, the gentle promise of each morning, the intelligent power of the landscape, the exuberant unfolding of the seasons. You can feed it by bringing forth beauty in your own being, by blossoming into the radiant individual you were born to be. You can feed spirit by relating to yourself and to each other person with compassion and respect.

Feed the world in which you live, so that it lives strongly. Feed spirit each day, so that it feeds all in return. Not only will you enrich your own life, you'll enrich the world as well. And the world – spirit and human together – needs every bit of blessing you have to share. ▼

John R. Stowe is author of *Gay Spirit Warrior* and very happy to be part of the GSV family.

This summer... what are you planning to do with your one wild and precious life?

Gay Spirit Camp

- 4th of July Celebration • June 29 - July 6
- Soulfully Gay • John Stasio • July 6-8
- Rainbow Sangha • July 8-13
- Orgasmic Mindfulness • Joseph Kramer • July 13-15
- Awakening Body Wisdom • Joseph Kramer / Joe Miron • July 15-20
- A Weekend With Our Brothers • July 20-22
- Nice Jewish Boys • Andrew Ramer • July 22-27
- Naturist Gathering • July 27 - August 3
- Gay Spirit Warrior • John Stowe • August 3-10
- Massage & Bodywork Training • John Stasio • August 10-12
- Tribal Tantra • Sequoia Thom Lundy • August 12-17
- Exploring Chakra Energy • Sunfire • August 17-19
- Gay Catholic Clergy & Religious • August 19-24
- Coming Out Vocally • Jamie McHugh • August 24-26
- Coming Home To Our Body • Jamie McHugh • August 26-31
- Labor Day Celebration • August 31 - September 3
- www.gayspiritcamp.com • 1-800-553-8235

A LETTER FROM

marthaspirit

BY CRAIG COOK

Hello!

Martha Spirit here! I am so happy to bring to the *Visionary* my ideas about making spirit at home. As we continue to explore our own paths of understanding the essence of life, God, spirit, chi or whatever you may call it, the spaces in which we live are powerful spirit sources. These spaces can attract spirit – or confuse, confound, and overlook it.

There are many spirit formulas out there. Some may speak to you; some may not. They all contain a basic format. The formula I like is simple and can be used in many situations. *Tradition brings ritual. Ritual brings spirit.* Your intention is the fire or fuel. “Well, Martha,” you ask, “what does that have to do with my house, my

kitchen, my patio?” Everything! The simple daily traditions we practice without thinking, like making coffee at 7:15 a.m., letting the dog out at 7:25 a.m., then drinking coffee at 7:35 a.m., is *tradition*. Does this bring spirit to your morning? If it brings ritual, yes! “Well,” again you ask, “making coffee is tradition and brings ritual? What ritual, Martha?” How shall I explain?

As we go about our morning traditions, our senses are at work. Our eyes look at the clock. Is there a sweet, joyful koi pond or fountain for them to rest and play upon? Is there a pot of red geraniums or a beautiful painting to fall into? *Ritual!* As the teakettle screams, our ears wonder to the coo of a mourning dove, the splash of water over rocks or a breeze through the swamp cypress. *Ritual!* As



the coffee steeps and its aroma entices, so does the dewy, clear morning air, the honeysuckle, your favorite candle. *Ritual!* All these spots of beauty pull us further into spirit. Add intention, like the first sip, and our ritual is building momentum. What a great way to start the day!

So, you go, girl. Plant those geraniums, build that deck off the kitchen and fill that awkward corner with a fountain – no, not sheets from K-Mart. Hey, surrounding ourselves with beautiful spaces is our classic queer tradition. We are good at this. So until next time, remember, “It’s a gay thing.” ▼

Spiritually yours,

marthaspirit**GRATEFULNESS***Continued from page 6*

tude, we remind ourselves of our connection with all that is.

Contact with the natural world is a third key to this spiritual journey. Nature inspires gratefulness because we know it’s the province of something beyond ourselves, majestic and distant or ordinary and close. This spring there has been a blue jay nesting under our carport roof. I delight in the way she looks alert, proud and still, while warming her eggs. I feel like an expectant father!

Art does something similar. It takes us beyond ordinary consciousness; it startles and moves us. Artists offer fresh and new ways of seeing and bring deeper understanding. They bring beauty to our lives and remind us of life’s sacredness.

Cultivating a grateful heart opens us to loving relationships because we are freer to delight in others and to be ourselves. We learn to celebrate life’s little joys: a garden growing, the joy of dancing, a well-cooked meal shared with a friend. When we reflect on these gifts we

increase our capacity for happiness. We also become more resistant to depression because we’re less prone to isolation and helplessness.

We can also cultivate gratefulness by sharing our appreciation with others, a fourth key to the path of gratefulness. Allow yourself to express thankfulness for the friendliness of the supermarket clerk or the hard work of the letter carrier and all of those who contribute to our lives. We complain about rude expressway drivers. Why are we slow to appreciate the everyday kindness around us?

Walking the path of gratefulness lets us experience joy in simply being. We can savor a breath and notice how breathing changes our awareness. Instead of coping with stress by shutting down and growing smaller, we learn to flow with life. We gain access to who we are and what we feel. We can experience each breath as a gift and allow ourselves to be thankful.

When we literally and figuratively stop holding our breath, we relax into the mystery of life and walk this ecstatic path, feeling everything in its time and place. **Conscious breathing is an important fifth key.**

A client of mine once defined ecstasy as “feeling everything.” I think that’s a good definition. Ecstasy doesn’t require feeling happy all the time. It’s possible to feel “ecstatic sadness.” There is a Buddhist saying that we don’t fully grasp happiness until we find the kernel of sadness within it. I remember a character in *Steel Magnolias* who remarks, “Laughter though tears is my favorite emotion.” **Allowing ourselves to feel our emotions without shame or judgment is a sixth key to our path.**

And so I share my gratefulness with you, my brothers. I’m grateful for a body that breathes and lives and loves, in whatever age, shape or condition. I’m grateful for the gift of this day and for life, however long or short it may be. I’m grateful for the natural world, full of wonder and beauty. And I’m especially grateful for the gift of community that provides company on life’s journey. ▼

John R. Ballew, M.S., is a licensed professional counselor in private practice in Atlanta. He specializes in issues related to coming out, sexuality and relationships, spirituality and career. His website: www.bodymindsoul.org.

**GSV TO CELEBRATE
ATLANTA GAY PRIDE**

BY MATT HUFF

**BEING ONE
WITH THE GREEN**



Oneness

Being one with the green is what it amounts to for me. The more I investigate a way out of this mess our society is in, the more important it is to spend time with nature. I've always gardened. My grandfather and grandmother on my father's side (Yes, I'm



Southern.) raised and sold irises. I remember having to reach up to sniff them. It's a fragrance I still associate with safety and contentment. My mother let us plant flower seeds when

we were toddlers – nasturtiums with large seeds for small hands and marigolds which ask only to be patted into loose soil. At 6 years old, I took over weeding and watering all our flower beds.

So I guess it's no surprise to find me now tending a two-acre garden. The difference is that I've come to appreciate weeds. It's become harder and harder to pull up anything. How do I know that a weed isn't the best possible plant to grow there? And if that's so, who am I to



change things? I have found by deep, consistent observation that nature takes care of things – balances things – keeps everything on its toes. Usually when something looks its best, it has, in truth, begun to decline. Or maybe more like the show is nearly over – until next time. I don't really have borders any more. I just let everything grow everywhere and make lots of paths. It really upsets some visiting gardeners. They can hardly stand that it isn't neat and tidy. But really it is. They're just looking at it wrong.

I should point out that I do fertilize, but sparingly every three or four years because I water very little. I've been living with a well and that makes you mindful of watering, especially if the

well goes dry and there's no water to flush with! We aren't really used to looking at what we do as being sustainable or renewable. I expect that we'll change because it's becoming obvious (at least to gardeners who don't water and fertilize) that things have changed. The stakes are getting higher. How much do you pay for gas? Did you know most of your food is transported 3,000 miles to your grocer? This also uses a lot of fossil fuel. And so I think it's important to live in closer connection with the soil.

I have found that in times of trouble and worry, the most soothing thing I can do is work in the soil – divide and plant flowers, gather seeds, pick herbs and join something much bigger than I am. The more I immerse myself in the humming of the bees, singing of the birds and rustle of the leaves, the calmer I become. I gain a perspective outside of myself. A lot of what bothers me drops away. Sometimes when the problems are real, I gain insight into a better way of handling them. To me that is spirit.

So... I think we all need to grow things—as much as possible. To be a part of it all. ▼

Jim Jones is ... and lives on six acres in Newnan, GA, with two dogs and many plants. Visitors are welcome. 770-304-0120 or moonxdragon@earthlink.net.

Atlanta Gay Pride is June 22-24 and Gay Spirit Visions will be there sharing our unique vision of pride throughout the weekend.

I and the ingenious Craig Cook are the org-nizers for GSV's presence during Pride weekend. We need YOU, though, to make the new millennium's Pride be the most fabulous yet! Here's how to get involved:

March with GSV in the Pride Parade on Sunday, June 24, at noon. Come dressed for ritual. Bring drums, rattles, other musical instruments and/or whimsicals to march and dance. We will gather at the start of the parade, the Civic Center Marta Station, between 11 a.m. and noon. More details about our placement in the parade are to come.

You can also help us create our sacred space in Piedmont Park. GSV will be encamp on the lawn in front of the Pride Stage. This will be a space for gathering and sharing our spirit. (Note: We will NOT have a market place booth this year.) We need your help in the construction and destruction of our temple. Since we can't leave items, we need help on Saturday and Sunday morning AND early evening to help move and store supplies. The more help we have, the quicker we can all enjoy the other festivities—such as the potluck on Saturday night at Marc Pimsler's home!

If you are interested in GSV's Pride experience this year, please contact me. If you are new to GSV and have wanted to get involved, this is a perfect chance to become an active part of our community of men who love men. ▼

Contact Matt Huff at Pretzelulu@aol.com.

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ECSTASY

THE NATURE OF

KRAIG BLACKWELDER

Ecstasy (the state of being, not the drug, thank you very much) is an integral part of many — if not most — spiritual paths; even Christianity — a religion that may seem bland to those who grew up with it — has a long tradition of ecstatic experience. Those unfamiliar with the more esoteric or mystic elements of religion (both their own and others') may not understand what ecstasy is or its role in spiritual practice.

First, it's important to clarify what ecstasy is not. Despite what marketers may imply, ecstasy is not simply a fancy word for joy, delight or sexual pleasure. Ecstatic states aren't necessarily even enjoyable (the notion of ecstasy feeling good didn't even evolve until the 17th century).

From an etymological perspective, ecstasy is, at its heart, the experience of being outside of oneself or, as some have defined it, out of one's head. In a mystic context, this sense of displacement is generally brought about by being forced out of control through an intimate experience of the sacred. Spinning, dancing, chanting, drugs and meditation have all been used to bring about ecstatic states, and the practice is ancient. In ancient Greece, wild women called Maenads, (literally, "frenzied ones"), worshipped the god Dionysos, and they were often described as being in a state of ecstasy that granted them the strength to rip apart wild panthers and bulls to offer to their god. Likewise, mambos (high priestesses) or houngans (high priests) in the Vaudun (Voodoo) tradition dance themselves into a state of ecstasy as a means of allowing the loa (gods or spirits) to speak or act through them. Speaking in tongues is an example of ecstasy in the Christian tradition. A state of ecstasy is frequently seen as a prerequisite for other manifestations of the sacred or divine, including healing, prophetic speech and myriad other miraculous phenomena.

Again, from an etymological perspective, ecstasy has a lot in common with enthusiasm, which means, literally, "to be filled with god."

In a state of ecstasy, the self gives way to something much grander than itself, allowing the sacred, however the subject defines it, to speak or move through him. One way of

perceiving ecstasy, then, is as a spiritually induced loss of control. Note: this isn't always a good thing.

The average American is made a little uncomfortable by the notion of ecstatic experience; voluntary loss of control doesn't jibe well with his comfortable bourgeois sensibilities. Ecstasy, like sex and death, is one of those "edge" topics that Americans would rather talk around or avoid altogether, preferring to stay far from the edges, where it's safer.



And that's just fine.

Ecstatic experience is heady, strange and sometimes quite disturbing. Like opera, blue cheese and homosexuality, it's not for everyone. However, for those on a spiritual path, having an understanding of the nature of ecstasy — if not firsthand experience of it — is a necessary step in understanding of the sacred. ▼

Kraig Blackwelder, right, with significant other, Bill Cronick, is a freelance writer and editor and, for the time being, lives in Atlanta.



Hidden Hollow

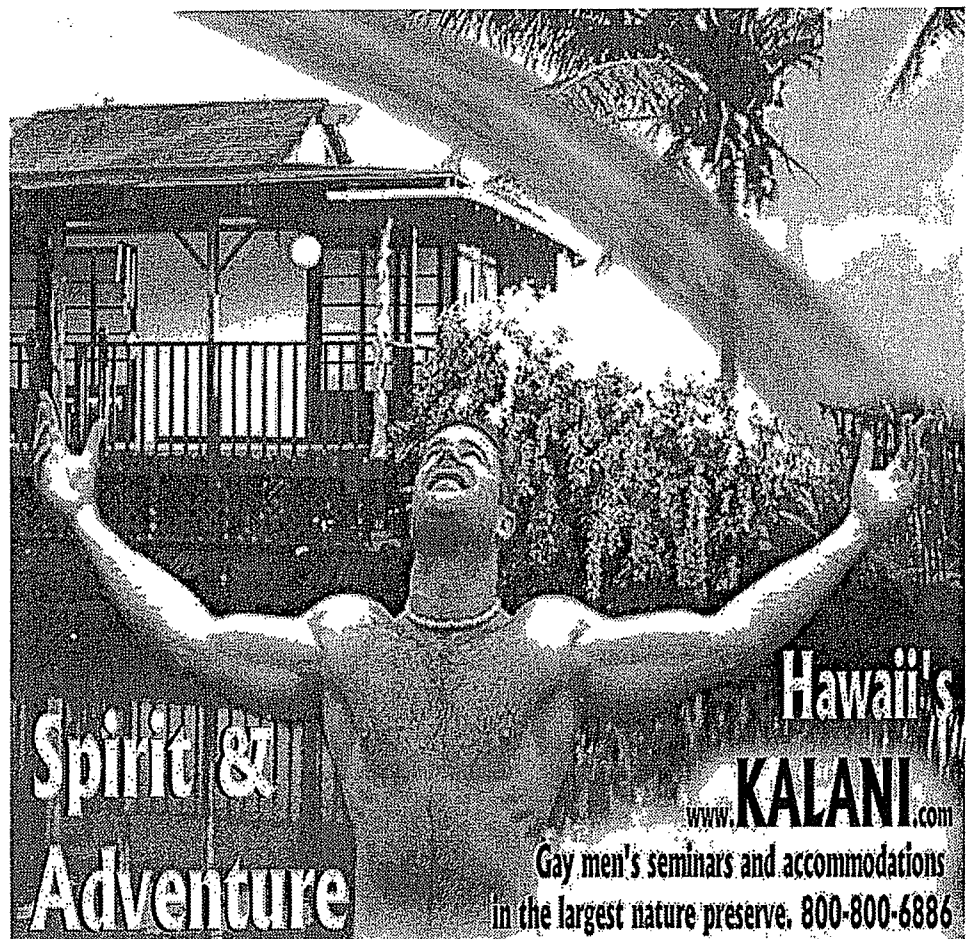
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Planning ahead

Our first GSV Winter Retreat

We are delighted to announce that the first GSV Winter retreat is scheduled at the mountain the weekend of Jan 25-27, 2002.

The weekend will include the cozy lodge fireplace, an opening and closing heart circle, and at least one session of silence.

We're still in the early planning process of this event. If you are interested in volunteering by contributing your ideas, the use of your 4-wheel drive vehicle, or to help organize this winter retreat, please e-mail David Lender at dlender@mindspring.com or Marc Pimsler at mvpimsler@aol.com.

GSV FAR AND WIDE:

Charlotte Tribe turns 5 in October

BY DAVID WITT

Five years ago, at the Fall Conference, a group of men who value the GSV brotherhood returned home vowing to organize similar support in the Charlotte, NC, area. This group was too far removed, unfortunately, from Atlanta to benefit from the monthly potlucks and heart circles. Thus they formed the loosely organized GSV Charlotte Tribe.

On May 18th the group gathered at the River's Edge in Dewy Rose, GA, with some Atlanta-area brothers for its 4th annual "Camperama." We were excited to learn that the GSV Planning Committee has discussed adopting this event as a GSV Summer Retreat. Although the Charlotte Tribe has always had some brothers to join us from Atlanta, we look forward to celebrating with a larger group.

Many in the Charlotte Tribe attend the Fall Conference and have traveled to Asheville, NC, for a joint weekend meeting with Man Spirit, a similar group of gay brothers. Two very important times in our calendar are "The Yule Ritual" held near Christmas and "The Beltane Ritual," usually celebrated during The Camperama. During the rest of the year, we stay in contact to love and support one another on our various journeys. We try to hold a monthly potluck and heart circle.

Although the Charlotte Tribe can't hold anything as large or grand as our parent group, we work to keep the GSV spirit alive between the Fall and Spring Conferences. The elders of the Charlotte Tribe are Larry Jackson, Joe Kiser, and David Witt. For information about our activities, please e-mail Larry Jackson at golden_one@prodigy.net or David Witt at LionheartOne@aol.com.



FALL CONFERENCE

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Andrew Ramer,
Author of *Two Flutes Playing*

A conference brochure will be mailed soon.

SUBMISSION OF WORKSHOP IDEAS FOR FALL CONFERENCE 2001

Brothers, if you feel moved to present a workshop at the GSV Fall Conference September 19-23, 2001, we welcome you and ask that you send us your ideas.

Please write a brief description of your workshop idea (200 words or less) as it relates to our theme of Grateful for Being One. Describe your workshop and what you want it to accomplish. Workshops should last about 90 minutes.

Send your proposals with your name, address, phone number and email to:

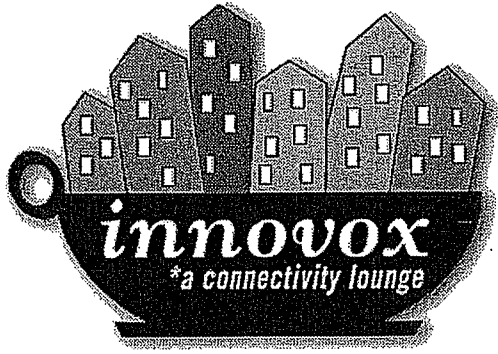
Fall Conference 2001 Workshops

GSV
P.O. Box 339
Decatur, GA 30031-0339

You may also e-mail the information to:
gayspirit@mindspring.com with "workshops" in the subject line.

Our deadline for workshop submissions: August 1, 2001.

The GSV Planning Committee will contact you after August 15 about your ideas.



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