

Sacred FRIENDSHIP

Close, lasting friendship is a precious gem in our lives. Friends who support us through tough times, celebrate the good times with us and tell us the truth are a powerful spiritual gift. Several of our GSV brothers describe some of their experiences.

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ELDER'S COURTESY

Dear Gentle Brothers:

As I consider "sacred friendships" and who and what that means to me, I realize that the friends I first think of, my gurus, teachers and friends, are surely not the only spirit friends I have.

Of course the earth and all its diverse nature is a constant friend. The tiny black-capped chickadees in the holly bushes, the rosemary blooming in January and all the animals I have met and known, easy to spot, brimming with spirit, give me gifts of joy and wonder.

The friends who show up unexpectedly, bringing reassurance and friendship just at the right time and place may be a little harder to spot. With my eyes and heart open, believing, I can look around and see many surprise comrades. How about the Frigidaire repairman, who after a one-hour service call, presented

his bill and a receipt for further parts and repairs needed? My 15-year-old machines needed \$1,000 worth of parts and labor. In shock, I said: "I could buy new ones for much less."

"Exactly," he said. "Don't spend one penny more on these."

I realized after he was gone that he had in fact repaired both decrepit machines. I went from frustration at the prospect of buying new appliances, knowing they would be left behind with the sale of my house, to relief, happiness and gratitude for this angel. He and a \$59 labor bill had given me this gift, under the guise of a service call.

We can see spirit friends in recognizable forms all around us. But take a breath, affirm your divine spirit, know you are loved and look again. Spirit friends are showing up in unexpected faces, with surprise gifts, comfort and reassurance, joyfully, just when we need them.

Stay open.

In love and surprise,
—Craigalee

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

Gay Spirit Visions

A Mission Statement for Our Second Decade and A New Millennium

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

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

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

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



MY BEST FRIEND

I met my best friend, Mark Clinard, through the Charlotte, NC, One Voice gay chorus about 13 years ago. We each drove 30 minutes to the city looking for gay culture outside our textile town homes in Gastonia. We started car pooling and developed a quick friendship. I lived a sheltered little life then, venturing out to the Charlotte gay bars only once or twice a month. On the way to rehearsal, Mark described his weekend conquests, while I'd spent Saturday night watching "The Golden Girls."

"You make it sound so easy," I complained. "It's like nobody notices me."

"You just need to learn to cruise better is all," he said.

Mark showed me the unlimited fabulousness of being gay. He sold Estee Lauder cosmetics at a local department store and updated me on the latest fragrances and youth-extending breakthroughs. In his apartment, one kitchen wall had an unfinished ceiling border made of cut out logos from Krispy Kreme doughnut boxes. He showed me a snug red tartan kilt he'd bought at his store's juniors department with matching high-top red sneakers. He had photos from his years at the N.C. School of the Arts and as a featured dancer at The Lost Colony on the N.C. coast. He decorated his Christmas tree with his collection of small raisin boxes he wrapped with carefully chosen magazine photos of renaissance angels. In his bathroom were shelves of perfumes, colognes and cosmetics beside a Colt Studios leather calendar.

As our friendship grew, I had a few jealous moments, usually concerning boyfriends who took too much of his time, I thought. But I couldn't stay angry long. He often called me "Baby Jesus" because of my innocence about the gay world but encouraged me when I started taking chances and meeting men. Both from small Southern Baptist towns, we had become "Sisters in Christ."

During the '90s, we sang in lots of chorus concerts and went to the March on Washington. He introduced me to GSV and held me as I sobbed over my first romantic heartbreak. Soon after, I sobbed again when he told me that he was HIV

positive. I told him that my boyfriend problems were nothing compared to what he was facing.

"No, sweetness," he said quietly. "Your feelings are important."

We lived through T-cell counts, appetite enhancers, drug "cocktails" and anxiety over telling his family. I became increasingly protective of my best friend, fretting over his missed meals and late nights on the town.

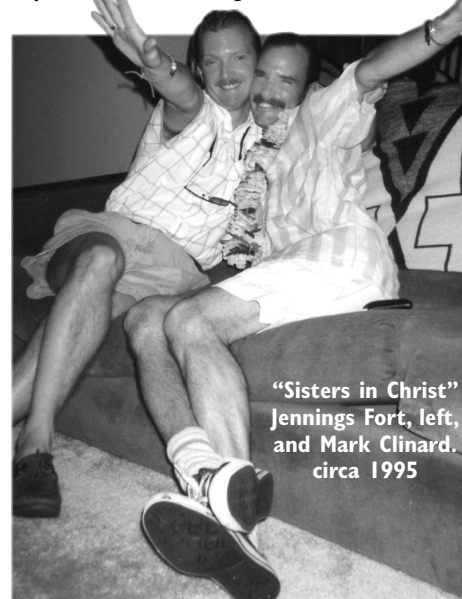
In Tampa we attended a gay chorus convention. I sat beside him outside a concert hall where he saw a pony-tailed guy waiting in line. They talked, attended the concert and continued seeing each other that week. A few months later, Mark told me Roger was coming to Gastonia to help him move to Denver.

"You aren't going anywhere," I declared. "What about a job and health insurance? This is crazy."

"I have to go," Mark said. "I don't think I'll get another chance like this. I love him."

But after a visit from Roger and calm answers to my tough questions, I realized Mark was right. He would be better off in every way. I had to loosen my iron grip on my best friend and let him go. I sobbed again the morning they drove away from my house, not knowing exactly when I'd see him again.

Luckily it wasn't long. I'm glad to say our friendship has withstood



"Sisters in Christ"
Jennings Fort, left,
and Mark Clinard.
circa 1995

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

GSV yoga in Atlanta. For more information, contact Jim Braden 404-627-2438 or buffalonimbus@yahoo.com.

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

March 27 – GSV Potluck Hosted by Patrick Mitchell, 2781 McClave Dr., Doraville, GA. Contact Patrick at 770-451-6158 or thegardenretreat@mindspring.com

April 24 – GSV Potluck Hosted by Miguel Molina, 1452 Funston St., Atlanta. Contact Miguel at 404-627-3903 or magic_miguel@hotmail.com

May 22 – GSV Potluck Hosted by Michael Goettee, 3263 Wynn Drive, Avondale Estates, GA. Contact Michael at 404-292-5825 or maxglitz@mindspring.com

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

tests of distance and time.

In this *Visionary*, we present a section on "Sacred Friendship." GSV brothers describe loving friendships that have enriched their lives. When we consider our best friendships, someone to support us at our best and worst, to give us the truth sometimes more readily than lovers or family, what can be more spiritual?

Over the years, I've realized that with his enthusiasm for living and generous, loving nature, Mark has been a spiritual mentor for me. Few people I know can handle challenges as gracefully as he can and I know my heart would be a little less full without him. With a partner of my own now, I don't think I would have come this far without him. Mark is a blessing from Spirit in my life and I'm grateful. But I have to admit, after all we've been through, it makes me sick that he can still fit into that red kilt. ▼

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

Sacred FRIENDSHIP

A FRIEND FOR LIFE

Doug and I have been best friends for almost 20 years. There is something rock solid, completely trustworthy for me with Doug. I know he's my friend, that he loves me and that we can depend on each other. He has my back and I have his. I learned what a friend is by watching Doug be a friend to me and others. He has all the qualities I want in a friend and there is little in this world more sacred than that to me.

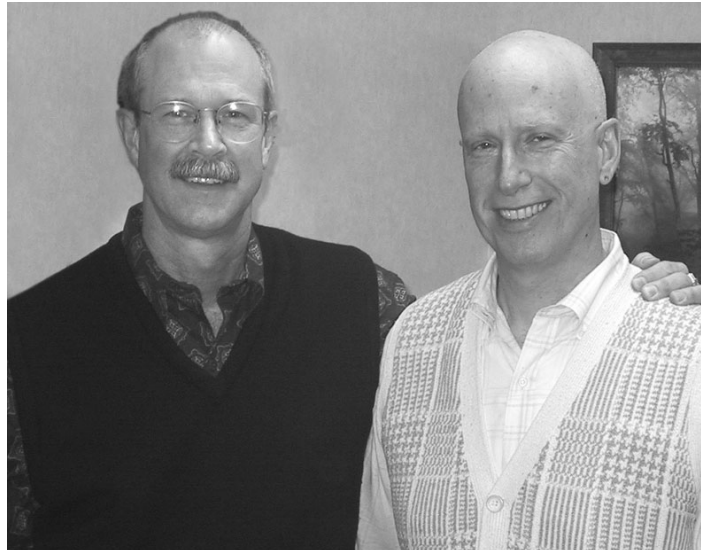
I first met Doug when I was marketing myself (a psychologist/therapist) to a company he worked for that provided counseling to employees. Later I heard that we shared a common interest in forming a new kind of men's organization and I called him. We began weekly lunches to discuss ideas that led us, with other men, to create the Men's Center of Raleigh (now 17 years old). We attended men's gatherings led by Robert Bly, Michael Meade, James Hillman and others. At the time I was married with two children.

In 1989 I changed my life. I came out to my wife and we separated. I became a single parent, in great conflict with my ex-wife, and Doug headed a group of friends who helped keep me grounded and sane.

In 1990 Doug, a therapist, and another close female friend and I formed a therapy practice. I'm blessed to have my friend with me every day at work. We've co-lead men's therapy groups and we occasionally co-lead couple therapy. We consult each other about difficult clients. Through my personal-professional relationship with Doug, I've learned to fight and to listen better and I'm better at

treasuring people for who they are rather than trying to change them to what I want them to be. Doug has stood firm in being himself in spite of considerable pressure from me to change.

My kids moved to California in 1990 to live with their mother and my grief was great. I don't know how I would have let my kids go without being held by Doug and other friends. Over the next decade, after our weekly lunches, we walked



around the block and he listened to my latest conflicts and grief. I named Doug as my kids' guardian in my will and we discussed whether we could each make the decision to end the other's life in a medical situation if quality of life was gone. I trusted Doug with my kids and my life.

When I first came out, Doug, a straight man, let me know straightforwardly that he loved me and that nothing had changed. He seemed ready from the start to deal with people who might be curious about my transition. He encouraged me to keep my heart open when I dated and risked falling in love with a woman on my path toward clarity of loving men. He was welcoming when I introduced the man I knew I would spend the rest of

my life with and he held me when this man and I parted three years later.

Doug has gay clients and consults with me regularly when he wants my views on behaviors and yearnings that aren't part of his sexuality.

Doug checks on me about important things in my life and he keeps up with what I'm doing. I've watched him model loyalty, consistency and presence. He is a gentle warrior for what is right in this

world and is my touchstone for what manhood should be. All my life I felt outside the circle of "normal" men; it's been enormously important to me that Doug, so normal, loved and accepted me.

Doug is my model for a Good Man. I know in my heart and soul that I've been through too much to be kind and good; I don't mean that I don't have kindness and goodness in my heart or that I don't act kindly to others. I mean that pain has warped me and I look at Doug and model his gentle kindness. He loves me and took a risk with me,

knowing I could be dangerous with my power. He has helped me balance my power with my tenderness.

In most of my gay friendships, there's been an element of sexual tension. I don't sleep with friends but am often aware of wanting to. With Doug there is the tension of brotherhood, sexual energy openly present and validated, keeping us vital and alive. He isn't threatened by my attraction to men; he celebrates it.

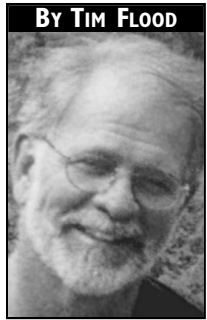
Doug has been present every step of my life journey. I am lucky and forever grateful. ▼

Mike Katz lives in Raleigh, NC, is the father of two grown children, loves to swing dance and counts his GSV brothers as great treasures in his life.

THE RISK

I remember hearing that the word "sacred" comes from a Latin root that implies "Warning!" Apparently, places designated as sacred would be posted as such, marked as more than just separate, but dangerous as well. Enter-at-your-own-risk, this sacred business.

The drama queen in me likes this, I must confess. Special, set-aside places where risks reap great rewards. This fits for me regarding GSV and GSV friendships. Marked as special. And a little dangerous, too.



BY TIM FLOOD

The "marked as special" idea gelled for me only recently. I was driving from Florida to The Mountain for the Winter Meditation. Snagged by a Friday afternoon Atlanta traffic jam, I decided

to call one of my oldest GSV friends, Lou Wolcott, who lives in Seattle. We jawed for an hour as we do regularly. As usual we discussed GSV and our gratitude for GSV as the starting place of our long friendship. We bitched about things we didn't like or didn't quite pass muster from our more jaded long-timer's perspective. We remembered the priceless look on the faces of newcomers who experienced a group of gay men in a positive light for the first time, and mourned how that same look can fade with time. But in this conversation we took a new turn.

"Why do we *always* talk about this," we wondered. And then the answer. "Because we so *want* GSV to be that special, separate place that it promises and tries to be."

With this, we realized that GSV holds a unique status in our lives as an experience *set aside* as something special and different. And that this *intent*, regardless of expression, was precious and important to us, worthy of our attention, concern and long distance minutes.

I realize now that not only is GSV a sacred, special and set-aside experience,

but so too is my relationship with Lou (and Mike, Mark, Andrew and on and on). These relationships are separate from the ordinary and while cherished, they are not easily or casually accessed. I go to them as I go to The Mountain, with anticipation, some regularity and always with a reverence for the specialness of the place, the set-aside place, the place of special intent, the place where something different happens. The sacred place.

Inside all this airy-fairy language lurks the danger zone promised by the word "sacred." (I was reminded at our Tampa heart circle recently that a simple typo of the word "sacred" yields "scared.") While there is a sort of safety to sacred friendship as I know it, it is found on the far side of risk, the far side of discomfort.

The warning sign, acknowledged, is passed by and the end of one pilgrimage begins another, with a decision. If things are going to be different here, then I must be different too. All this grand intention comes down to something that I have to do myself. I have to sacrifice my old and moldy defense mechanisms and become vulnerable to connect. This is the only ticket that gains entrance. Sacred zone, danger zone. Challenges ahead.

I'm guessing Lou or my other friends don't suspect I feel this way when I call. And I'm stretching things to make a point, of course. But I so value the dif-

ference in these communications, the different me that often shows up in these conversations, that I come ready to lay down in full view my quiver of poison-tipped arrows, among them comparative thinking, emotional grandiosity and competition, deflection through humor, my bottomless hunger for approval. Even, as Lou quite mercilessly pointed out in the conversation mentioned above, my tendency to whine. All my usual suspects, scattered under foot like so many dead leaves. The price I pay; I am willing to go first.

And the result? Not predictable! There are times of standing quite naked and needy and having to ask more explicitly for the TLC I expect. But that's ok; it's far more the exception than the rule. There are the countless other precious times when your sacred friend, with all his arrows broken and messy and mixing with your own underfoot, starts a silly kickabout and these dead things, fallen away at last, become the ground for celebration. Holy ground. Sacred ground. Holy play. Sacred play.

Sacred friends. Holy friends. Ho. ▼

Tim Flood is an organizational development consultant and executive coach based in St. Petersburg, FL. He is also an Enneagram instructor certified by Helen Palmer of the Trifold School, Berkeley, CA, and has attended GSV gatherings since 1994.



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FRIENDLY JUDGMENTS

Spirituality is a very serious matter with me and so is friendship. Put the two together –spiritual and sacred friendship – and it is as serious as a heart attack, at least to me.



By JERRY LOWERY

I wouldn't want to live without a spiritual life, nor would I want to live without friendship. Why, then, at the GSV winter retreat with the theme of silent mediation, did I have a light either go on or off concerning a friend whose spirituality I had struggled with for more than five years? I had judged him as being non-spiritual, as the good Southern Baptist I once was, because he didn't read the Bible, didn't attend church or pursue a meditation practice. To suddenly realize he was certainly spiritual and that the bubble had burst in which I had placed him was a lot

to comprehend. However, it was a relief to realize he had displayed all the characteristics which I judged a spiritual person should have – generosity, compassion, concern, caring, humility. At any rate, he was much farther along in some of these characteristics than I am, I'm sorry (or pleased) to say!

When Toto and I first met while trekking in Nepal, I thought I had inadvertently offended him and, always wanting to admit any wrongdoing right away, I hastened to apologize. He reassured me with a quote I've used many times: "It takes a lot to put me over the top!" Isn't that what a friend should feel for another friend? Isn't that what a spiritual person should feel for everyone?

Now that I have realized his spirituality, I'm anxious to admit another wrong in writing this article and to thank him for tolerating my judgmental, evangelical, pushy attitude toward him. This is for him and for all others I have judged, setting in cement what is spiritual and sacred. Hey, I will take anyone who wants to be an "It takes a lot to put me over the top" friend any day. Then to realize that person is spiritual too. I tell you, it's too much to ask of anyone, especially a non-

professing Christian like him.

The realization about this friend has caused me to ponder other sacred friends – Gene and Joe, who have attended GSV retreats with me. How dare I judge their spirituality because they didn't find each retreat as wonderful as I or didn't go to every effort to make sure they attend each retreat out of respect for our friendship. Am I expecting too much? You bet your bottom dollar I am! How dare I decide who is spiritual, how they must express it or when and where they must practice it.

I have a stone tablet in my friendship garden at home – a wonderful idea from my mother, who is now deceased. The inscription reads: "Hold a true friend with both hands." I think another tablet could read: "Hold a true spiritual and sacred friend with both hands and in your heart and prayers."

When you read this my dear friend Toto, I pray you will not judge me with the same measure I judged you. I am thankful and peaceful. ▼

Jerry Lowery, a pharmacist with his own pharmacy, makes times for daily prayer and devotions and has traveled to five continents. He lives on a farm in Benton, TN.

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I'm a member of the American Counseling Association, The Association for Gay, Lesbian, and Bisexual Issues in Counseling, the Licensed Professional Counselor's Association of Georgia and the Society for the Scientific Study of Sexuality.

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