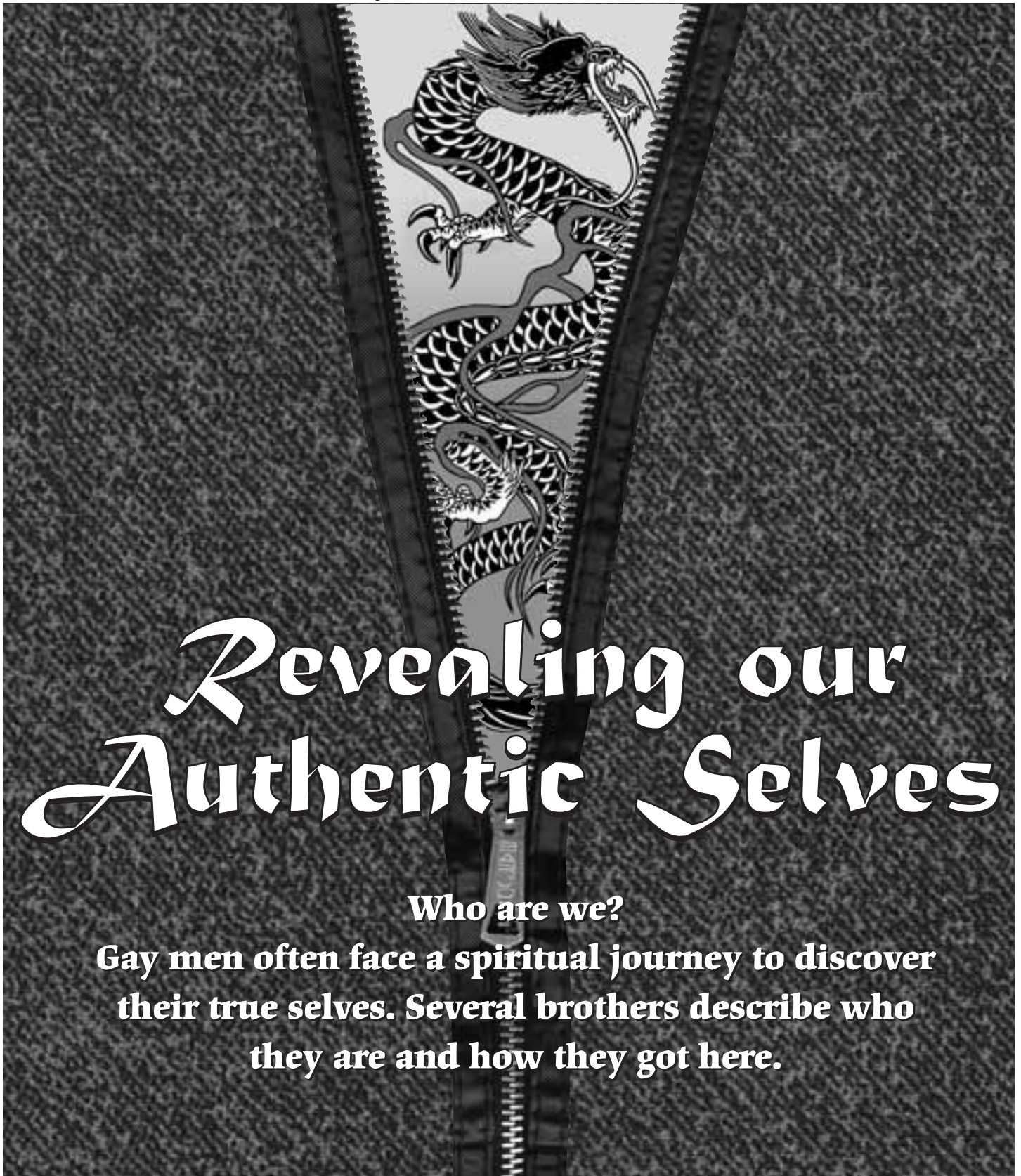


VISIONARY

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THE JOURNAL OF GAY SPIRIT VISIONS

Summer 2005



Revealing our Authentic Selves

Who are we?

Gay men often face a spiritual journey to discover their true selves. Several brothers describe who they are and how they got here.

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ELDER'S PITCH

Dear Gentle Brothers:

A few weeks ago I had the good fortune to travel home with two of my GSV brothers. Sharing my family of choice with my birth family is rare and a little Twilight Zone-ish. But I added a lot of Spirit and it became a joyful weekend of healing, celebration and power that I could not have imagined.



He's a United Church of Christ minister. As we planned this visit, involving a Lakota sweat lodge, he realized that his church had planned a discussion group that same weekend. (Yes, this church is very "Christian," which usually makes me nervous.) But this church was different, with a liberal, almost militant history. During the presidential election, they did something brave and visionary in response to the fear and hate that George W., the Republicans, and the religious right were whipping up. They made a T.V. commercial, an expensive and potentially explosive move. It begins on some church steps with a skin-head security guard, who blocks two men holding hands from entering. He says "No, not you." They are followed by a white, Waspy hetero couple, whom he gestures in. They are followed by a Latino man, whom he blocks and an Asian woman whom he also stops and so on. In the end, there is an old Gracie Allen line: "Don't put a period where God put a comma. God is still speaking." As you may have guessed, the commercial opened a hornet's nest within their church. So that weekend, this group wanted to discuss homosexuality. Mark asked me to tell my story. I was flattered and accepted. As this serendipitous weekend unfolded, my beautiful GSV brothers joined me in that circle.

We began with our first memories of "being different." For me, it was a crush

on a cartoon character (Give me a break. I was only 4.). We described our teens and how feelings for our buddies grew deeper and how thoughts of touching, talking or sharing somehow was wrong and would have scared off these friends. When I acted on these feelings, my friends did run and I learned to hide. We discussed feeling lost to the church, how at least for me, everywhere I turned was "hell bound," with no one to talk to. We talked about our dreams and fantasies, like marrying a man in front of all the world in some beautiful, sacred place, with our loved ones beside us.

Someone asked, "Why do straight men feel such fear and hate toward gay men?" "Why are gay women more accepted/invisible?" "Did something happen to us as children?" In the end we spoke of how, despite the bigotry and drama around our sexuality, our lives have been extraordinary, rich, exciting and so unique. We said that we are here as we have always been, for a reason, to live and express our special gifts. We told them that among indigenous peoples, before the church washed us away, we were honored and celebrated.

That night I was honored and celebrated in the church. We three were held in the utmost regard by my family and a circle of loving strangers - heterosexuals who wanted to hear the living truth. We touched, talked and shared. We told our stories and they didn't run.

Gentle brothers, tell your stories. Share your gifts. They are so special. I have learned, again, that Spirit works in surprising ways. It takes us places we can't imagine and when we give ourselves up to it, we get to peak at what heaven must be like.

GSV brothers, (you) have shown me, taught me, celebrated me in Spirit ways I have only begun to see.

Your brother, sister, friend and lover,
Craigalee

Craig "Craigalee" Cook is a long-time Atlanta resident.



THE REAL ME

By JENNINGS FORT

At a job interview a few months ago, an interviewer asked me "Tell me about yourself. What are your interests outside work?"

This was the third and final interview. I was nervous because I really wanted this job and knew this interview had to go well. But I'd always carefully edited my answers to (straight) interviewers because I was afraid to let these strangers know too much about me. But this time, I thought "Why not? If I get the job, they'll know it sooner or later anyway."

I took a deep breath and began. I told him I sang with the Atlanta Gay Men's Chorus. Gardening was another passion. I told him that I'm a member of the Georgia Native Plant Society and that we do plant rescues. We go out to the woods about to be bulldozed for construction and dig up ferns, bushes and other plants and bring them home. "I really enjoy walking out in the woods and digging around in the dirt," I said and laughed.

He laughed too. So there I was – pretty much the real me: the gay, singing, plant-digger.

The truth was out.

It reminded me how hard it still is to be my authentic self in a world where not everyone will like or even accept the real me.

And for me it usually takes a long time – months or years – to get to know (even gay) people well enough to show them the real me. It's not even a choice really. I have to feel an unspoken comfort level and before my walls slowly lower themselves and reveal my real personality. I can't force it. Most people who just meet me think I'm quiet and passive. And that's true for a part of me. But there's more. I have to know that people won't hurt or humiliate me somehow before they can really know me.

This issue of the *Visionary*, with the theme "Revealing Our Authentic Selves," explores showing the world the real us – gay spiritual men. Three of our brothers describe who they really are and how they feel about themselves. They tell

the stories of the journeys that brought them to who they are.

It's not easy showing the world the real us – without fear. But in today's world maybe the best thing we can do is to learn to show our authentic selves. Our spiritual selves, our passionate selves, our beauty-loving selves, our gentle selves, our talented selves, our funny selves, our compassionate selves. Maybe then these same people can know that there's a lot more to like about us than to fear and hate.

After that plant-digging episode, I was lucky enough to get that job. And, I'm glad to say, things are going pretty well. I'm still not completely comfortable enough with my co-workers to let them see the full me yet. But I'm working on it. The other day, I took my boss pots of jack-in-the-pulpit, New York fern and partridge berry. She seemed to like it OK. I hope I can let them see more of the real me soon.

In the meantime, as my true self to many of you, I'm Jennings - Red-Headed, Dirt-Shoveling, Sometimes-Angry, Compost-Loving, Sometimes-Quiet, Wine-Drinking, Dry-Witted, Elbow-Hurting, Occasionally-Scared, Star-Gazer, Sometimes-Bitchy, Bird Listener, Fern Keeper.

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



GSV potlucks in Atlanta, are held the fourth Saturday of the month at 7:30 p.m., unless otherwise noted. **GSV potlucks are drug- and alcohol-free events.**

GSV Heart Circles are held the second Sunday of every month at 7:30 p.m., hosted by Wendell Johnson and Lem Arnold. For location and more information, contact Wendell at louis8@hotmail.com or Lem at lem1951@mindspring.com

Gentlemen, please note...

that we don't have hosts for the August and November potlucks. Hosting a potluck is a simple and effective way to serve GSV. Please let us know if you can host.

Contact Ben Linton at benlinton4@bellsouth.net.

August 27 – No Potluck planned yet.

September 24 – GSV Potluck Hosted by Craig Cook, 450 Allgood Circle, Stone Mountain, GA. Contact Craig at 404-213-1084 or itscraigalee@yahoo.com

October 22 – GSV Potluck Hosted by Patrick Mitchell, 2781 McClave Drive, Doraville, GA. Contact Patrick at 770-451-6158 or TheGardenRetreat@mindspring.com

November 26 – No Potluck planned yet.

December 24 – GSV Potluck Hosted by Doug Caulkins and Mikel Wilson, 535 Watergate Ct., Roswell, GA. Contact them at 770-993-9959 or snakeowl@yahoo.com



GSV YOUTH PROJECT 2005

Recognizing that "Youth" are the next generation and our future, the Council of Gay Spirit Visions introduces a project to reach out to the youth within our tribe. Young men face unique issues in our world today – rising HIV infection rates, drug use, disconnected relationships. We offer an opportunity to experience a "sense of spiritual connection." Our goal is to sponsor up to 10 gay men ages 21 - 30 to attend the GSV Fall Conference in September.

Please send the name(s) of candidates to Chase Robinson gchasejr@aol.com. Include information on how to contact these men. This is an ambitious financial undertaking for GSV. If you would like to contribute to this project, please mail your tax deductible check to:

Gay Spirit Vision
PO Box 339
Decatur, GA 30031

*Please indicate that this donation is for
"Youth Project."*

Gay Spirit Visions

Our Mission Statement

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 Internet-based communications for men who love men.

Join us for our 16th annual GSV Fall Conference



Abound! Gather Around the Cosmic Campfire! Sept. 15-18, 2005

At the Mountain Retreat and Conference Centers, Near Highlands, NC

Our keynote

Chris Glaser has been a gay Christian activist and author for 30 years. A graduate of Yale Divinity School, he served as Director of Lazarus Project, a ministry of reconciliation between the church and the lesbian and gay community in Los Angeles, funded by the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). He has published nine best-selling books including *Uncommon Calling - A Gay Christian's Struggle to Serve the Church, Come Home! Reclaiming Spirituality and Community* and *Coming Out to God - Prayers for Lesbians and Gay Men, Their Families and Friends as Gay Men and Lesbians*.

See www.gayspiritvisions.org for registration information.

Submission of workshop ideas for Fall Conference 2005

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

Our conference will focus on the concept of "community." Please write a brief description of your workshop idea (200 words or less) as it relates to this theme. Describe your workshop and what you hope to accomplish. Workshops should last 1 to 1½ hours.

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

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

You may also e-mail the information to: workshops@gayspiritvisions.org

Our deadline for workshop submissions: Aug. 1, 2005.

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

HOLINESS IS WHOLENESS AND INCLUDES SEXUALITY

(An excerpt from Daniel Helminiak's *Meditation without Myth* [pp. 20, 76-77, 65-67], based on his presentations at the 2002 GSV Winter Meditation.)



BY DANIEL A. HELMINIAK

During my religious upbringing and even through many years as a priest, I believed that a relationship with God was the key to spiritual growth. Supposedly, because of my prayer and good living, God would grant me "spiritual favors." I would become holy and might even be given unusual gifts—like visions, healings, and enraptured states of bliss. But despite my best efforts, none of these spiritual favors seemed to be coming to me. Besides, nobody I knew and nothing I read seemed to explain the spiritual life. Everything was a "mystery," and I was supposed to "take it on faith."

Over the years, my attempt to understand spiritual growth led me to this realization: the human spirit itself is the key to spiritual growth. The spirit is the self-transcending dimension of our human minds. By tapping it and unleashing it, we "grow spiritually." Certain mental exercises and lifestyles can gradually restructure a person's psyche. Then the spiritual capacity within the human mind can more and more take the lead. This process of human integration—wholeness, genuineness, authenticity—is the sum and substance of spiritual growth. So the task is not to prevail upon God to grant us spiritual favors. God is already doing His/Her/Its part. The task is to foster the working of our own spirits within us.

Comfort with one's sexuality is important for spiritual growth. During meditative practice sexual feelings and images often arise. Sometimes as a regular turning point along the way to a deep meditative state, gentle sexual arousal occurs. I once spoke with an elderly nun who knew this phenomenon well. Fully in accord with the principles of meditative practice and fully comfortable with herself, she said that, when sexual arousal occurs during her prayer time, she

thanks God for His good blessings! And then she gently lets go of the feelings and moves on with her meditation. But a person up-tight about sex would be thrown for a loop by sexual arousal during a spiritual practice and would probably stop meditating, fearful of sex, fleeing "temptation," running from "the devil." In fact, it is not sex, but sex-negativism, that is the enemy of the spirit.

Another facet of sexuality is sexual orientation. Because I originally prepared the material in this book for presentation to a weekend retreat for gay men and because sexual orientation is, in fact, a matter of concern to everyone, I want to address this other question: What do these matters have to do with people who are gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender, or intersex?

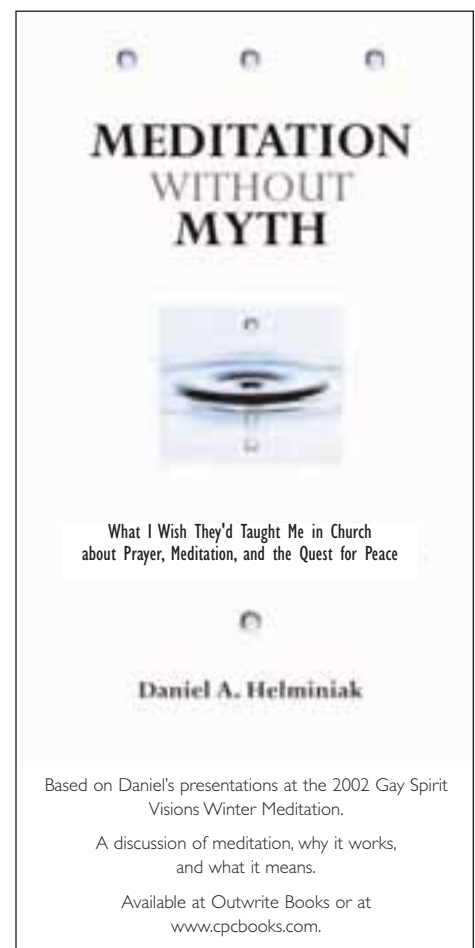
The simple answer is that these matters apply to everyone equally regardless of his or her sexual orientation or gender identity. When the human core of spirituality is understood, it becomes clear that one achieves spiritual integration, not to the extent that one follows the rules of some particular religion or other, but to the extent that one makes peace with oneself. The spiritual challenge is to bring into harmony all the facets of one's inner self and one's outer life. When such harmony is increasingly achieved, one grows spiritually—simply because one facet of one's self and the master unifying principle is the human spirit.

There is nothing pathological or in any way unhealthy about homosexuality. The bulk of scientific evidence overwhelmingly supports this conclusion. As best we know, sexual orientation depends on a combination of genetic, prenatal hormonal, and early environmental factors. In most cases sexual orientation is certainly set by adolescence and probably by preschool childhood. Homosexuality is a normal variation. So lesbians and gay men will find spiritual enlightenment to the extent that they accept their sexuality and make something positive of it. To the extent that they are in conflict over their homosexuality, their lives and their selves will be fragmented—obviously!—and their personal integration and, therefore, their spiritual growth will be blocked. Obsessed with sex, the religions and

many societies are so very mistaken about these matters! Here is one clear instance wherein a scientific understanding of spirituality allows us to criticize religion.

That same conclusion applies to everyone else. The situations of bisexual, transgender, and intersex people will be more difficult, more challenging, because our society, unlike others, is so narrow in its understanding of sexuality. Still, one standard holds throughout: spiritual growth depends on one's ability to integrate all the facets of one's particular being. The explanations of spirituality and the techniques that I present in this book are equally applicable to all.

Daniel Helminiak teaches psychology and spirituality at the University of West Georgia. Author of What the Bible Really Says about Homosexuality, he is also a theologian, lecturer and former Catholic priest.



JESUS AND MYSTICISM

BY STEVE POLLACK



The recent "Reclaiming Jesus" issue of *Visionary* moved me to feel compassion for the wounds inflicted on gay brothers by homophobic Christians who don't understand Jesus' unconditional, infinite love. It evoked the wise words spoken by a priest to a friend: "Always keep Christ separate from Christianity."

Aside from the son of God and savior, Jesus to me was a brilliant rabbi, mystic and kabbalist. The ruling religious classes of his day saw him as a threat because he taught secrets of Jewish mysticism and meditation. They feared a rabbi who actually shared meditation techniques gave people higher knowledge.

Mysticism is a direct experience of ultimate reality. Meditation, in the classic sense, stills the mind and allows the heart and third eye to open, revealing divine inner planes of consciousness leading to ultimate reality.

I had no real understanding of this until, through sheer grace, I was given a brief mystical experience in 1984 by a meditation teacher from India. (You may wonder how an Indian teacher relates to Christian mysticism. Yet many believe Jesus studied in Persia and/or India during his early years.) My Indian teacher inspired me to start a daily practice of sitting effortlessly in loving, silent contemplation of God's light within everything. For several months I spent 30 minutes a day meditating on this blissful light, before dashing off to a stressful job where I slaved under glaring fluorescent light.

I remember one meditation during which a circle of golden light appeared directly in front of me. I felt drawn by its beautiful glow, its warm, inviting radiation. My consciousness moved forward and suddenly I entered the light, completely engulfed. For a few moments I reveled in a pool of pure joy. I felt as if my every atom glowed with infinite love for every other atom of creation.

Then, just as quickly as it had

appeared, the light receded and I returned to my body. I sat there, overjoyed, yet stunned. I wondered if this was like the light Jesus gave so freely.

This direct experience gave me the conviction that my soul's essence is pure love and bliss. When I saw the golden light, I understood what I believe Jesus' disciple Paul meant when he said, "I die daily." I had "died" to my physical body and through focused attention and grace, entered naturally and effortlessly into a sublime consciousness.

In the process, I realized death is a beautiful transition, especially uplifting if mastered through meditative practices. What a relief to let go of the primal fear of death!

Another time I was fortunate enough to die to my ego – the way I imagine Jesus must have done to a far greater degree. For me this "death" lasted long enough to see how a quiet mind and open heart can transform stress into compassion. I had attended a meditation gathering where I'd enjoyed an intoxicating meditation. As I drove home, a speeding driver blasted his horn at me. Usually I'd feel irritated or angry, but my ego had stepped down and my heart was open. Instead I felt only love and compassion. My peace of mind wasn't disturbed one iota. It was deepened and expanded through compassion.

Another memorable experience occurred during grocery shopping after my usual two-hour meditation. I noticed a childlike openness and wonder all around me. I saw extraordinary beauty in every orange, every apple I touched. They virtually glowed with a golden aura. And from the joyful smiles I received, maybe I was glowing too. I felt a deep love and gratitude for everything and everyone I saw, even strangers.

For all I know, these could be the same experiences of those who studied mysticism with Jesus or any other master, prophet or saint. My spiritual mentors are clear channels of divine love and wisdom, much as Jesus was an expression of the Christ power for those who knew and loved him.

Following their lead, I simply focus on remembrance of God's light in my beloved teachers and myself. But everyone can find his own deeply loved teacher, image or icon to meditate upon. The Persian Sufi mystics practice what they call "remembrance" of the divine. Remembrance is a recurring theme in the study of mysticism, which is simple by nature.

Unfortunately, some clergy have misinterpreted it as difficult and complex. An online book by James Arraj outlines the misunderstandings that obscured Christian mysticism over 400 years ago. John of the Cross and Saint Teresa of Avila helped to revive the Western tradition of Christian mysticism and some of my gay friends feel drawn to their writings.

Many gay men feel a heart connection with Maulana Rumi, the famous Persian mystic transformed through the madness of love for his master, Shamas Tabrez. Both Rumi and Tabrez had mastered meditation, a fact often overlooked by aficionados of Rumi's mystic-love poetry.

If you believe meditation is difficult, consider this from Sant Rajinder Singh: "In the paradox of effortless effort of meditation, we attain wisdom and bliss."

These lines, adapted from an old Irish prayer, also inspire me:

*Take time to pray, it is talking to God
Take time to meditate, it is listening to God,
and a source of infinite power.
Take time to work, it is the price of success.
Take time to play, it is the secret of perpetual youth.
Take time to read, it is the way to knowledge.
Take time to be friendly, it is the road to happiness.
Take time to laugh, it is the music of the soul.*

Steve Pollack is a writer and yoga and meditation teacher in Miami, FL, who embraces a spiritual path oriented toward mysticism. Originally from the northeast, he's lived in Florida since 1973 where he met his spiritual mentor in 1983. He is working on a novel about world transformation through heightened spiritual awareness among the masses.

Revealing our Authentic Selves

WHO I AM

Preface: An axiom to remember while reading this: Truth, if it exists, is irrelevant. Only my perception of truth affected and affects who i am.

Who i am was largely determined by early experiences. i was born into a family at war. My parents were constantly arguing. i was in the middle of these fights. i learned that i was wrong in all cases, because i could never be right with both



parents. Despite this situation, i accepted most of the moral precepts on offer. i was routinely accused of violating these precepts, unjustly in my opinion. From this, i learned to do nothing, because no action was right. i avoided family meals, where i was routinely chewed out. i learned not to be a social eater. i was overweight, a crime in peer groups. i was a lousy athlete, a higher crime. i did exceptionally well in school, the highest crime of all. i learned to avoid people, partly because i was terrified of fights (read: pain). i still tend to be aloof and asocial in most settings. i slide around problems, using my intellect to avoid confrontations even at the cost of avoiding accomplishments. i don't know if i learned depression or inherited it, but symptoms were in place before age 10. i learned laziness at school, among other places. School was trivial, so i neither learned how to learn nor how to work.

i was brought up as a Christian Unitarian, a non-fundamentalist who didn't trisect God. My pastor was a saint. i regret not knowing him, but i was incapable of knowing people then. i lost religion when i returned from a campout in time to make the service but not in time for a shower. i learned church was a social club and i was asocial. My spirituality lingered in my endeavor to be truthful and to avoid doing bad things to others and to the planet. Perhaps the truth-

fulness was a dodge: i am a lousy liar. Perhaps the "goodness" was also a dodge: it reduced the probability of conflict. Shortly after graduating from MIT, i bumped into Lao Tsu. The philosophy of non-confrontation fit perfectly. i didn't see myself as a Master. i did justify my being's slipperiness by the thought that i was working with the flow of the world. Perhaps i was.

My sexuality is operationally nonexistent and has been nearly so all my life. i learned that homosexuality was evil before i had any idea what it was. Then, as i hit puberty and discovered the meaning of homosexuality and the fact that i was attracted to cute, young men, i rationalized that homosexuality was fine for others, just not for me.

Fear of getting bashed was surely part of the dynamic. i came out at age 30, in grad school at Penn State. i decided i had two alternatives: come out or kill myself. i chose the less-bloody option. At the same time, i started pumping iron, figuring correctly that queer-bashers were cowards looking for stereotypes and would thus avoid me. i had my first adult sexual experience in D.C. while on a work-study program with the Feds; it was lousy. There was an eight-year gap of self-medication and failed careers between my MIT graduation and acceptance at Penn State.

i am scientifically and mathematically inclined. My college training was in meteorology and computer science. i considered my quantitative aptitude my principal deviance, although my principal deviance is actually my asocial nature.

i have been seeing shrinks off and on since around 1970. The first visits concerned my sexual orientation. i went back to psychiatrists during the 1980s. i was fired from my federal meteorologist job and jailed as a terrorist in 1997. i copped a plea after five months in jail/prison because i didn't want to face trial in rural western N.C. as a gay man ("Objection sustained. The jury will disregard."). i was also judged to be insane and was placed on disability. i do not believe in the American system of justice, nor in the

honesty of the U.S. government. i used to think insanity was better than homosexuality; at this point, i don't care. i can live on \$22K a year. i am un-American: i avoid waste. i flit from interest to interest. i was never really interested in my work, although i think i did it well. i developed an avocation of taking pictures in the late 1980s. This died an unnatural death, along with my salary, in 1997. i drifted into teenage-rant poetry after attending a poetry slam in 1995. Some of my rants were good. My style is orthogonal to "accepted" style. The interest faded around the turn of the century and is now gone. Pottery drifted in around 1998. This is the oddest interest i have had, since i had always been a theoretician with little or no artistic or manual ability. i got pretty good at making the easy stuff. A year or so ago, the interest disappeared one morning. Soon thereafter, i started playing duplicate bridge.

i am now reasonably happy on a proper mix of meds, in a rut of pumping iron, playing bridge, listening to Public Radio and reading trashy spy/cop novels. i am skeptical of an afterlife, yet i don't live this life. i accept the Universe as Deity, but i am weak on the ceremonial aspects of faith. i don't really believe the Universe hears me. Energy i send to others works as well as a placebo: i.e., remarkably well. Despite all the whining and groaning, i love GSV and would have difficulty living well without it. GSV's precepts, including living one's own life as a unique gay man and the love of and responsibility for the planet, have slowly seeped into me. The Radical Faeries have also done their part.

i am an oxymoron but i suspect i am not the only one.

Art "Cassandra" Polansky lives with the TribbleCat and the chipmunk she caught and failed to dispatch, in an old house in Asheville, NC. He spends most of his time playing duplicate bridge, reading lousy spy novels and admiring his weed garden. Eventually, he will climb a mountain.

Opening to the

Flow

When I go inside and contemplate embracing and revealing my authentic self, I feel some trepidation. I notice hesitancy in exposing my inner self and reluctance to express myself without editing what I say or how I act. For so many years I've tried to get approval from others to try to make me feel better about myself or feel more important.

BY COREY SCHOFF



At the same time, I sense a powerful centeredness, a stillness that extends into the world. I feel myself present with this moment, having no expectations, okay with who I am, just the way I am. As I notice how

I have used struggle and conflict to avoid unfelt needs and emotions, I find myself living my life more freely.

For the last few years I've been delving into the places where I have been blocked to gain awareness and free those areas where I had been holding aspects of myself captive. I've noticed part of me works to protect myself from those painful emotions and realizations, while another part yearns to let them go, to be wide open, to dance. Not to "dance as if no one's watching," but to dance without the slightest care about whether anyone's watching or not.

I've dived many times into my childhood and past life experiences and am amazed to watch the life changes that occur when I embrace feelings I had previously blocked or closed off. A major theme has been feeling emotions relating to my parents' inability to simply accept and value me for being me.

Somehow I knew at an early age that my being gay wasn't going to be okay with my parents or with the world. Feelings of worthlessness emerged as I felt that I wasn't good enough and that something was wrong with me. I

assumed the reason I didn't feel enough love in my world stemmed from my being different. So I started "performing" instead of "being."

I learned how to get others' attention to cover my craving for unconditional love. To survive, I tried to fit in and clamped down my inner being's expression. I tightened the flow of creativity because I thought that if I let that out, my folks would see the truth that I was gay and reject me. I kept a strong check on spontaneity; I feared that if I let myself go free, I might let out my bad "secret" and feel the pain of not being accepted.

As I immersed myself in these previously unfelt emotions, I became conscious of the hopeless dilemma I had to face as a child. As a boy, I knew that my desire for a man came from deep within. But if that desire was deemed wrong, how could I trust anything that came from within?

As I revisit and embrace the parts of myself that had shut down, I experience a shift. I've noticed immediate and beautiful changes in my interactions with others. I'm allowing myself to express my inner self more fully, whether that means skipping down the sidewalk or making love with my lover.

It feels like I've tapped another level of creativity, watching it pour into my work

and into my life. I've become much more comfortable sharing about being gay. I've noticed that if people assume I'm straight, I typically correct them. As I do, I may still feel a twinge of fear but it's overcome by a growing sense of empowerment.

I'm also beginning to realize what it takes, when necessary, to freely disappoint another to be true to myself. There are times I still care too much what others may think. I also notice many areas of my life where I teeter between what seems authentic and what may be my attempt to fill an unfelt need.

Once I open up and fully feel what I've been afraid of, I'm amazed at the long-term effort I had put into avoiding fear. What used to feel overwhelming and difficult becomes enjoyable. When I let myself feel in the moment as things come up, and I breathe through them without restraint, life becomes much simpler and easier.

Corey Schoff lives in Asheville, NC, (with Superkitty, a master of authenticity) and shares life with his partner in Nashville. He designs custom homes and landscape architecture and occasionally facilitates workshops on discovering aspects of our authentic selves.

Yoga to benefit you and
our community.

GLBT Yoga • Sundays 6:00 pm
Donation only class benefits YouthPride

Jai Shanti Yoga

1630-D Dekalb Avenue, Atlanta 404.370.0579 www.JaiShantiYoga.com

DANCE OF THE CHURCH

I danced at a dance
that the Church had staged
to display itself to the world.

There were singers and dancers
dressed in dazzling
ballroom costumes
black and white, and royal blue.

Since I was late
I missed my turn
to compete for the prize.
How my heart ached to be recognized.

I danced with a girl
a small blond dwarf
in a pale pink dress,
that flowed when she walked
like air possessed.

She grew tall in my arms
casting off the shame
of lies that said
she would not be loved
for her lack of frame.

So loved, she grew tall and beautiful.

Growing weary I retired
to a corner bench.
Then people came to
harass me.

"Get up," they cried.
"Keep singing, dancing-
Our party might fade
without you!"

My rejoinder sharp, I quickly replied,
"Why do some of you
want me to die?"

I looked and laughed at the classes
of children who made
funny signs with their hands
in front of their faces,
Who looked at me as if
to ward off my words
of hurt and pain.

Then their teacher appeared

In a soft beige dress
revealing cleft of ample breast

on her head a matching wimple.
Her gracious face,
red with anger she said,
"I am hurt and I grieve
to hear you don't believe.
I pray with heartfelt love
for all my children!"

Stung, I looked and saw
Bright young faces glow-
Flourish full and whole-
From tireless love bequeathed
from Spring till Snow.

Then she saw my eyes
and realized
Maybe one she'd missed
hidden in the mist
And softened her visage to receive me.

Tight we clasped and embraced.
Long we wept face to face.
And I said,
"How I wish I had known you!"

- Ben Culmyer

My sister read this poem and said it was a fair summation of my experience. We grew up in a Missionary Baptist preacher's home and I have dealt internally with issues revolving around "church-ianity" all my life. This poem touches on some of them and



I'd like to describe their impact.

First, some background. According to modern reincarnation theory, as I understand it, a soul plans a life on this physical plane, sets up challenges for learning, is born, forgets where he came from and then spends whatever the allotted time working things out, or not. All I can say is – what was I thinking? While my challenges may not have been the worst, there have been some doozies. I was born a small child in 1950 and mostly lay around and wonder where I was. Sometimes, I still wonder, as my partner, Ron, can attest. I feel as if my greatest challenge has been incarnating as an off-the-scale introvert burdened with

extreme sensitivity. I came out as gay 15 years ago but that was easier than coming out as an introvert.

Two books, *The Introvert Advantage*, by Dr. Marti Olsen Laney and *Party of One: The Loner's Manifesto*, by Anneli Rufus, describe my nature better than anything so far and have helped me gain a sense of self-worth. Among the points these books discuss:

1. The majority of people are extroverts who erroneously label introverts as anti-social, weird and nerdy;
2. Introverts have nervous systems that are wired differently – instead of gaining energy from constant socializing, introverts experience an energy drain;
3. Introverts find it difficult to think and talk at the same time unlike extroverts who think out loud (this makes introverts appear socially slow);
4. Introverts enjoy being alone and socialize better one-on-one;
5. Meditation is a natural and comforting energy recharge for an introvert;
6. Introverts in general make better thinkers, writers, musicians and artists.

This is me. So to all you social butterflies out there – be kind to a wallflower.

About my family of origin – my father had an outwardly passive, but inwardly fiery personality and always had to be at the center of everything. In public he did a lot of good by influencing backwards preachers in the American Baptist Association to modernize and reduce their ignorance. In private he was erratic, vacillating between loving and abusive behavior and his presence at home often felt to me like salt to a slug. My mother was complex – quietly beautiful, reliable, loving, socially retiring, penetratingly intelligent. Yet she was high-strung so you knew that, when she went off, it was for a good reason. Our family constantly attended church functions. I didn't feel personally supported and emotional ties to my family, however deep, felt distant. All the attention was focused on the ministry – and on us kids to BEHAVE.

So there I was, a sensitive, intelligent, introverted gay child who loved music, books, beautiful things and occasionally dressing up, plopped into this funky East Texas family, force-fed the King

Continued on next page

James Version almost daily, whipped within an inch of my life, driven to crowded Sunday school and prayer meetings and revivals all over Texas and Arkansas and taught that, yes, Jesus saves but homosexuals are going to hell. Whew! As an adult I was rather wrecked and made a lot of ill-considered choices, including two failed marriages to women, a stint in a commune and a string of subsistence-level jobs.

By age 40, I guess God decided I had had enough and eased me out of this religious mental prison, by stages, and into spiritual self-realization and healing. The Truth really does set you free. It would take too long to mention all the people and modalities God has used for this. But GSV friends have played a big part and many truth-filled books, including the ones mentioned above. These have expanded my awareness and the Holy Spirit and spiritual guides continually help me integrate it all. (For a full list, e-mail me at mculmye@emory.edu.) Oh, and don't forget, the kindest man I've ever known, my partner, Ron, who has greatly contributed to my stability and has shown me that I am truly loved.

About the poem – I feel that Western religion is highly unbalanced, due to being run (into the ground) by men and by the generalized Roman-style idea that heterosexual men should control it all. Usurpers, I call them, especially after a study of ancient history has convinced me that early societies designed along matrilineal lines were more harmonious, productive and respectful of nature, upon which we depend for life itself. My experience in a masculine body running feminine energy makes this conclusion possible, even obvious. Masculine shadow traits with which I take issue include: hyper-awareness of public image (the church seductively displays itself as the best spiritual party going), competitiveness, insistence on conformity, intrusiveness and denigration of healing and nurturing. Shadow men scarcely acknowledge feminine contributions, without which there would be nothing to run. Growing up, I needed that nurturing and sorely missed it.

Gay men and women, I believe, have much to say about balance and harmony, ideals that Western religion desperately needs to adopt and that we should point

out. By so doing, we claim our natural place as bridges between masculine and feminine, heaven and earth, spirit and nature. I know I'm preaching to the choir and maybe a little late. I plan to make up for this by entering an Atlantean Mystery School ordination program and begin practicing Reiki healing.

Ben Culmyer lives at 335 10th St NW, Atlanta, GA, and works on staff at Emory University.



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A scrapbook from the 8th annual
GSV
Spring Retreat
 April 8-10, 2005



Photos courtesy of Blue



Lower right: King Thackston Memorial Fund — After the Spring Retreat, several GSV men and Mountain representative Julia Jamieson planted a native azalea at the Mountain labyrinth in honor of King Thackston, a GSV Elder and dear friend, who passed on last year. GSV's King Thackston Memorial Fund raised a total of \$1,650 to enhance and maintain the labyrinth, a long-time interest for King.



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 —J. S. Hall, *Bay Windows*

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