

RAINBOW SPIRIT: Roots of Lesbian and Gay Spirituality

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It is a tradition among lesbians that the process of getting to know each other includes sharing coming out stories. When did you first discover or admit your sexual identity? Was it a gradual or sudden realization? Who was your first lover? Some of us came out to ourselves long before we acted on it or told anyone else. I think there is a similar process in coming out spiritually.

Spirituality is a really over used word and is often used synonymously with religion. For the purposes of this discussion, I want to distinguish between spirituality and religion. The word 'spirit' is derived from the Latin word *spiritus* meaning "breath." In its broadest sense, it refers to the incorporeal or nonmaterial aspects of our self - what is called "the spirit within." Spirituality has to do with our connection to our true inner or authentic self. Depending on our beliefs, we may also use the word 'spirit' to refer to any nonmaterial being such as angels, devas, the spirit of the wind, higher power, God or Goddess. Being spiritual means being connected to our true self and having a personal connection to the world of spirit, however we define it.

Religions grow out of peoples' attempts to describe and name their spiritual experiences and beliefs. Religions often provide practices or exercises to help people develop their spiritual nature just as academic institutions provide exercises to help people develop their mental nature. Carol Parrish says that spirituality is like a staircase and religion is like a railing. Some people choose to use the railing and others don't but we are all spiritual beings.¹

Our spirituality is an innate part of being human, as necessary as breathing and as natural as our sexuality. To quote a saying common these days in spiritual circles: "We are spirits having a human experience."² Coming out spiritually, experiencing our connection to the world of Spirit, claiming our identity as elements in a greater whole, can be as confusing as coming out as gay or lesbian. Both are about identity and authenticity. Who am I and how can I be who I am?

Part of growing up in a society involves learning who you are and where you belong. I was taught that I was white, female, American, Christian, heterosexual - not "colored,"

male, foreign, homosexual, and so forth. It was hoped that I would be good, intelligent, and feminine. I grew up to believe that there is a certain established social order and in order to function "normally" in this society, I had to be clear on what I was category by category.³

For the first 28 years of my life I tried to fit into the categories I was told were appropriate to me but the older I got the more unhappy I became without knowing why. I didn't feel real, I felt like I was play-acting most of the time. From the outside I appeared "normal," but I felt "weird" inside. I became increasingly depressed. I started drinking and smoking cigarettes as a teenager and by the time I was 28, I had a drinking problem, chain-smoked, was divorced, in psychotherapy, and had attempted suicide.

On Good Friday, April 11, 1966, I got drunk and drove my car into a parked car. After the doctors sewed up my head I was sent to mental hospital for three weeks. While I was there, I got sober, met some interesting women who weren't "normal," and came out changed in ways I am still coming to understand.

Within a month I met Shireen, and something came alive in me, I found my Soul. Shireen was Bodacious, Amazon-like in her courage. She was unselfconscious, assertive, gentle, curious, independent, and had a beautiful voice. I fell in Love, and came out to my Authentic Self. Although I didn't know to call it that at the time, this was truly a spiritual experience. My true nature, that inner spark of divinity, came out. Everything changed - I found myself in a New World, literally. The colors were vibrant, I felt joyful no matter what I was doing, and I felt re-born. I experienced the spirit within. It was clear to me that this was who I AM - Lesbian. In the two-column list of categories I had learned previously, spirituality and sexuality were on opposite sides, but I know without a doubt that they are profoundly connected.

I have always been bothered by the definition of Lesbian or homosexuality as a behavior. As Judy Grahn points out, scratching is a behavior, homosexuality is a way of being, one that can completely influence a person's life and shape its meaning and direction.⁴ That's certainly what happened to me when I came out. Up until this point my life was largely directed from outside, now I was following my heart, my spirit, my soul.

I believe that being lesbian is a soul choice, and my early attempts to keep this information out of my conscious awareness so that I could be "normal" used up a tremendous amount of energy making me depressed, crazy, soul sick. I was using my life

energy to keep the fact that I am Lesbian in my unconscious, depressing my self and limiting my experience of reality.

Not only did I come out to my true self in my relationship with Shireen but I came out into a whole Gay World, "The Life," as it was called in the '60's. My first introduction to The Life was in the Gay bars and after hours parties in Detroit. For the first year I was out, I continued teaching at a junior college by day and explored the Gay World on the weekends. The following year, Shireen and I quit our teaching jobs and explored the Gay World across Europe. Shireen wanted to write a book about being Gay and had made up a questionnaire, which helped us meet many lesbians and a few gay men in England, France, Germany, Spain, and the Netherlands. We returned home in 1968 and settled near San Francisco where we felt at home with the culture and music of the "flower children." We didn't realize it then but many of the characteristics of the hippies came from our ancient Gay roots.

Shireen led me to a whole world existing almost invisibly in the background of the dominant culture. It is a Gay culture with it's own special words, ways of dressing, special colors, drag queens, butches and femmes, and age old customs. It's a place where the categories of the dominant culture have little authority. I came to the realization that the worldview or paradigm held up to be The Real World is actually just one version of what is possible. I learned that I could move between worlds. I never believed that the Gay World is the right and true world and the dominant worldview is the wrong and false one. But I believe there are many worlds or worldviews and that by learning about our roots as Gay people, we can get in touch with our Authenticity and find our place in the universe - which ultimately is One.

The underground Gay World, which has grown and changed since I came out in the 1960's, is a remnant of an ancient Gay culture in which at one time, Gay people played important acknowledged social and spiritual roles. In most indigenous cultures today this is still true.

Just as many of us as individuals have been suppressed and consequently suffered psychologically and physically so have we been suppressed as a culture. Because Gay culture is so invisible, we appear to be merely a reaction to or an imitation of heterosexual culture. Living in the closet does not eliminate Gay sex or lifelong Gay relationships, but it does hide Gay culture from view, channeling it into a closely guarded and psychologically

dangerous, underground.⁵ What gives any group of people distinction and dignity is its culture. This includes a remembrance of the past and a setting of itself in a world context whereby the group can see *who it is* relative to everyone else and everybody else can observe the group's contributions.

Judy Grahn traces the roots of Gay culture to ancient times in her book Another Mother Tongue. According to her research, Gay culture is tribal and it has spiritual roots.⁶ Gay culture is extremely old and continuous. The continuity is a result of characteristics that members teach each other so that they repeat era after era. Judy Grahn traces a number of these characteristics and I would recommend reading her book in order to get the full impact of what I am presenting here. Two of the characteristics passed down to us today are the identification of Gays with the rainbow and the color purple. The rainbow as a symbol for Gays is very ancient as is the special significance of the color purple. The words, *Gay*, *Lesbian*, and *Dyke* (originally *Dike*), which we in the Western world use to name ourselves, are also ancient.

The name *Gay* comes from Gaia, The Living Earth or Earth Goddess of Greece who was loved and respected long before the patriarchal invasions overthrew and replaced her. Western homosexual people have kept her name alive for 30 or 40 centuries after her fall from grace.⁷

Lesbian comes from the island of Lesbos that was made famous and infamous by the woman-loving poet/priestess Sappho. *Dike* means balance, the path, or Justice. Dike was the granddaughter of Gaia. Her social function was natural balance, the keeping of the balance of forces.⁸

The rainbow is a symbol of transformation as is the color purple. In stories from many cultures, people walk under a rainbow in order to transform themselves or follow the rainbow to another world, or a pot of gold. "Purple represents, brings about, and is present during radical transformation from one state of being to another. Purple appears at twilight and at predawn. It stands at the gate between the land of material flesh in one world and the land of the spirit or soul in another world and is present in the envelope of energy that surrounds the body, usually called the 'aura'."⁹ The rainbow and the color purple are just two of the many symbols associated with Gay people that point to our spiritual roots as agents of transformation and change.¹⁰

Gays and Lesbians play unique spiritual roles in all indigenous cultures as bridges between worlds. Native American shamans were often Gay and lived openly, even marrying members of their own sex in some tribes. Instead of seeing homosexuality as a deviance from heterosexuality, the American Indian people saw it as a choice of Spirit.

In order to understand what this means, according to Paula Gunn Allen, a member of the Laguna Tribe, we need to understand that the Indian's ways of thinking stem from a spirit-based system. For American Indian people, the primary value is relationship to the spirit world. Spirits, gods and goddesses, metaphysical/occult forces, and the right means of relating to them, determined the tribes' every institution, every custom, every endeavor and pastime. This was not peculiar to inhabitants of the Western Hemisphere, incidentally; it was at one time the primary value of all tribal people on earth.¹¹

Human beings, according to Native tradition, live in a universe that is alive, intelligent, and aware, and the spirits have as much to say about it as the humans do. A number of spirit people belong to one's family and one or more of them act as a person's personal spirit guide. When these spirits tell a person (often in adolescence), through dreams, or visions to form a relationship with someone of the same sex, the person does so. Not to follow the guidance would mean a serious breach of the cultural value and a danger to oneself.¹²

Records indicate that those having a Gay nature created a pool of initiates from which certain shamans drew their apprentices, both male and female. Describing a Gay female shaman, who she calls a "ceremonial dyke," Allen says that the initiate is "required to follow the lead of spirits and to carry out the task they assign her."¹³

The trip into the Spirit world by the shaman takes tremendous effort and is described as a "death" or deathlike trance from which she finally returns, transformed and powerful. After such events, she no longer belongs to her tribe or family, but the spirit teacher who instructed her. When I first read this I was reminded of my automobile accident, a "death" experience which transformed my life and led me away from the worldview and values of the family and society in which I was raised.

These Lesbian shamans are said to be the daughters (that is, the followers/practitioners) of *wila numpa* or Doublewoman (pronounced Weeya-Noompa). Doublewoman is a spirit/divinity who links two women together making them one in Her power."¹⁴

The patriarchal view has historically defined Lesbians as not really women, as less than truly female and Gay men as less than men. The traditional Indian view of the Gay person, on the other hand, sees them as having more of themselves than others do, not less, as being in effect double persons.

"Doublewoman" is also a figure in Plato's account of creation in the Symposium:

In the ancient times there were three kinds of beings, each with four legs and four arms: male, female, and androgynous. They grew too powerful and conspired against the gods, and so Zeus sliced them in two. The parts derived from the whole males are the ancestors of those men who tend to homosexuality; the parts derived from the whole females are the ancestors of women who incline to be lesbians. The androgynes, who are nowadays regarded with scorn, gave rise to men who are women-lovers, and to women who are man-lovers.¹⁵

According to ancient teachings, the archetypal Lesbian, the pattern from which we are made, is the whole female, and gay men are made in the image of whole males, whereas the primordial heterosexual is bisexual.

There are two accounts of the creation of humanity in Genesis. In the first account, God creates humanity as male and female in the Divine One's image. In the second account, the creation of man and woman forms a narrative frame within which the rest of creation takes place. Creation begins with the molding of man from the earth and concludes with the creation of woman from man as his partner.

One midrashic interpretation of these two accounts attempts to harmonize them by claiming that when God created Adam, the primordial human, he created him bisexual, male and female, back to back. The appearance of Eve is the result of the splitting of the primordial Adam into two separate people.¹⁶

Genesis only includes the androgyn or bisexual, the male-female. The other two types of beings - doubleman and doublewoman are left out. This is used to support the claim that only heterosexual relations are "normal" and "natural."

What does all this mean to us today? Can we take up the sacred roles of our Gay ancestors and make a difference in the world today? Do we who fly the Rainbow flag have the ability to act as agents of transformation and change, are we potential mediators between worlds? What relevance does the Lakota story about Doublewoman, or Plato's account of creation have for us today?

The worldview based entirely on dualism and opposition, is a world of subjects and objects. It is difficult to describe Gay love within this world whose language itself is one of subject/object. Within the subject/object world, people perceive each other as separate and not-the-other. This alienation makes domination possible and creates a dominance model of human relationships.

Gays are subject-subject people in a subject-object world.¹⁷ That was what was so startling about my relationship with Shireen. I perceived her as I perceived myself, as subject. When I was still under the illusion that I was heterosexual and my girl friends and I talked about our boyfriends, they were always objects, the Other who one never completely understood, who it was often necessary to manipulate, lie to, treat like an object - even if a loved object.

Harry Hay says that the subject-subject consciousness as experienced by gay men explains why they often have such constructive and loving relationships with heterosexual women. "It would not be because of the hetero-male stereotype that we are half-women ourselves....but because we faeries see our women friends as subjects *in the same way as women perceive themselves as subjects*; and the women know this and luxuriate in the mutuality of sharing."¹⁸

In the subject-object world, heterosexual coupling parallels the currently accepted scientific metaphor of electro-magnetism - *that of supreme complementarity*, where unlikes attract and likes repel. But in the world of our Gay sensibilities, in the subject-subject consciousness, we do not seek or yearn for our complimentary opposites - we seek instead others like ourselves. *We seek supplementarity or mutuality.*

Subject-object consciousness is not bad, but it is not all there is. The one-sided rational technological development which was made possible by subject-object consciousness has perpetuated power-over relationships and has led us to the brink of total disaster. Right relations with each other and our world requires, and generates, mutuality as its basis - a way of relating, subject to subject with each other, and all living beings. Perhaps it is time to recognize the sacred role of Gay people once more.

We have been here from the beginning. We are not a deviation from "normal." Those of us who realize that who we are in this life is a soul choice must allow our soul to come out, to be who we are in the world. To be soul-infused Gay personalities. We are a necessary

part of the Whole; we have sacred roles to play. We perform a sacred rite by merely being our Authentic Self and claiming our power - "The power to create justice, to make right relation, to sustain mutuality, and make amends where we fail is sacred power... we bear sacred power in our connectedness with the whole of creation."¹⁹

Notes

¹ Carol E. Parrish, "Adventures In Awareness," lecture 1999.

² Christian de la Huerta, *Coming Out Spiritually*, Putnam, 1999, 5.

³ Carter Heyward, *Our Passion For Justice*, Pilgrim Press, 1984, 34.

⁴ Judy Grahn, *Another Mother Tongue*, Beacon Press, 1984, xiv.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 23.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 244.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 105.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 6-7.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 272-3.

¹¹ Paul Gunn Allen, "Beloved Women: Lesbians in American Indian Cultures," *Conditions*, Vol. 7, 1981, 70.

¹² *Ibid.*, 73.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 82.

¹⁵ Plato, *The Symposium*, 189E-191E.

¹⁶ John Eron Lewis, "Homosexuality and Judaism," in *Homosexuality and World Religions*, Arlene Swindler, editor, Trinity Press International, 1993, 106.

¹⁷ Harry Hay, "A Separate People Whose Time Has Come," *Gay Spirit, Myth and Meaning*, Mark Thomas, editor, St. Martin's Press, 1987, 287.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹⁹ Heyward, 87.