

Queer Lives and Spiritual Leanings:

*Gay men talking about how we stayed connected,
or got re-connected, to spiritual practices and
religious values under challenging circumstances*

by Charles Jasper

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How do queer people stay connected or get reconnected to spiritual practices and values when the religious communities they grew up may have been powerfully rejecting of gay, lesbian or queer lives? This paper includes the stories of a number of gay men who grew up in Christian communities and describes their journeys in relation to matters of spirituality. The author also provides a framework that could be used to structure similar explorations with lesbian, bisexual, transgender or other queer folk.

Keywords: gay, queer, spirituality, religion

Interests in meditation, spirituality and theology have been with me from as early as my first sexual encounters. While my incessant reading in the area of meditation, accompanied by the burning of incense and the lighting of candles, was tolerated by my family, and my attendance at church functions and seminars was supported, my sexual interests and activities were hidden and unsupported. Rather, sexuality was a foreign activity, shrouded both by shame and the unexamined assumptions of a narrow heterosexist culture. My earliest boyfriend, a heart-throb from afar, shot and killed himself one summer afternoon. After that, my liaisons were perfunctory.

The effect on me was to produce an imbalanced life, one filled with ideas but few experiences of connection or community, and the nurturance these might have offered. Upon the dissolution of my marriage, and the birth of my daughter, Thea, in my early thirties, I began a formal and serious study of Vipassana meditation, and experienced the benefits of increased compassion, experiences of forgiveness and periods of a general felt happiness, despite the context of the heterosexist assumptions of my conservative Hindu teacher. Meanwhile I made occasional forages back to the Presbyterian church of my upbringing, but found it as profoundly empty as I had during my youth. Isolation continued to accompany me into intimate relationships as well.

Ten years ago, I began combining Vipassana meditation and yoga – seeking to advance happiness of the mind by grounding it in action. At about the same time, studies of the narrative therapy perspective convinced me that it was possible, indeed necessary, to turn my gaze back to my own culture. Rather than only pursuing the religions of other cultures, I began to explore the spiritual knowledges and skills that generations of my forebears engaged with. Within this context, I discovered the Metropolitan Community Church of San Francisco (MCCSF), a queer oriented church. Convinced that I had found a spiritual home and acceptance of sexuality in one place, I undertook to dissolve years of isolation.

Soon after joining MCCSF, I proposed to the senior pastor that I offer a yoga class based upon the mindfulness traditions of Buddha, the principles of alignment found in Anusara yoga, and upon perspectives and conversations found in narrative practice.

This paper describes a project in which I interviewed several members of this yoga class, regular student attendees, about their experiences of dealing with a sexual orientation of an unpopular nature within religious and spiritual communities. Our conversations have also begun speculation as to whether the metaphor of Inviting People In (see Hammoud-Becket, this issue), as opposed to Coming Out, might be a useful strategy for many similarly-situated people.

The following questions guided our conversations/interviews:

- Did you come out, or attempt coming out, in a community that was not supportive of your sexual identity? What was that like for you?
- Do you have any thoughts or ideas about how you have maintained a connection to spiritual and/or religious values during those times of disqualification, attack or challenge? Or, if that connection was lost at some point along the way, how you have gone about re-connecting with spiritual practices?
- Was there anyone in your life – a friend, family member, teacher, neighbor, or a character from a story who taught you spiritual values and how to be connected to those values?
- Who were they, and what lessons did they offer you?
- Did you ever, instead of being silenced by disapproval, take up or consider taking up a friendship with silence? Could you say more about that?
- What impact did those experiences of coming out in non-supportive communities have on you?
- What is it that you hold precious and valuable about your faith? What would you call that? Or, how would you describe what it is you give value to in relation to your faith?
- Could you describe how it was that you made your way to, or found MCCSF or other gay friendly spiritual communities or groups? Could you illustrate this with a story about what that was like for you?
- Were there significant differences in your experience of yourself as a spiritual and/or

religious person prior to, and after, finding a queer friendly community? If so, what were those differences?

- What are the main consequences, do you suppose, to you as a spiritual and/or religious person of having come to a queer supportive church such as MCCSF, and/or this yoga program?
- How do you think that things have been different for you because you are queer?
- What thoughts, hopes or skill sets would you like to pass on to any young person who might be a witness to our conversation, with the intention of assisting them in their struggles?
- Some people have found that having to 'come out' as the only way to be authentically gay resembles what has been called a 'Game of Truth' that they don't necessarily find useful or supportive of their preferred ways of being. Does the alternative metaphor of 'Inviting People In' (see Hammoud-Beckett, this issue), as opposed to that standard of Coming Out, have any relevance to you? Does it resonate with your interests in any way?
- Does the closet that one is supposed to 'come out of' contain any treasures that you would like to remain connected to? Could you describe how?

THE THEMES THAT EMERGED

I have collated the material that was generated in our conversations into six themes and have included these here:

- Facing prejudice
- Coming to terms with sexual orientation
- Those who provided comfort and validation
- Reconnecting or staying connected with spiritual practices and religious values
- What it means to us now to be gay and to have a spiritual home
- Messages to the next generation of queer folk from religious backgrounds.

Some of the material has been slightly edited to assist with the ease of reading.

FACING PREJUDICE

For all of us, experiences of coming to terms with sexual orientation were fraught with difficulties: from harassment, to social pressure, to loss of jobs and church community, to being told to leave the family home. These experiences of prejudice had serious effects, especially in the early days.

A struggle emerged between our felt attractions for members of our own sex, and the dominant, negative messages that permeated our cultures about being gay. As one of us described, 'If you were gay where I grew up, you were seen to be either a prostitute or a child molester'. These sorts of attitudes have had real effects on our lives:

'Coming out did not work for me. It was sad, frustrating. People said bad things about me and stopped talking to me. I thought of suicide a lot.'

'My mom simply said, "Get out", and I left.'

'I came out to myself and kept it to myself. I had a girlfriend. We were watching *How to make an American Quilt*, and in this film someone said, "If your husband had an affair, would you want to know?" So I asked my girlfriend the same question and she said yes. I told her I had experiences with men. She was pretty hurt and we prayed together. From that moment I started living a double life. In my work life I was straight and in my personal life I was gay. Then, my boss of eight years, who I thought was my friend said to me 'I feel like I don't know you'. That could only mean one thing, so after several months I took her to lunch and told her I was gay. This started an unfortunate adventure. As I was getting tearful, kinda emotional, she just looked at me. Finally, she said 'I feel called to tell you, you are living the wrong life'. I realised I had made a terrible mistake. After eight years of excellent job evaluations, my next evaluation was awful. I lost everything. I lost my job, my church. And I almost lost my family. These three things are what are important in my life. Through this experience, I learnt that people can be mean.'

'People's attitudes to my emergent sexuality was my downfall. I went from being on top of the social order to the very bottom, all because of being gay, being perceived as gay. My mother said that 'you will

never be happy unless you get married and have children.'

'I was not out in graduate school. I lived a straight life because of social pressure. I was told and believed that I would not be happy unless I was straight and had children.'

'The fear and the harassment at high school were relentless.'

COMING TO TERMS WITH SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Despite these social pressures, we all continued to find ways to come to terms with our sexual orientation. Rarely did this prove to be a safe, easy or simple. At its best, it took the form of questioning, 'Is it okay to be gay?', and then reading, doing research, perhaps followed by a fortuitous conversation, before the decision was made to take the position of being gay, and to face whatever prejudice surrounded us. More typically, the path of coming to terms was less clear. There were many dilemmas that arose in relation to our experiences of sexual attraction and the barrages of negative messages we received from the faith traditions in which we had been raised. Throughout the process, there were turning points that made a difference.

'There was a time when my older sister went with my parents to see the church pastor and I had to go along and wait in the library. During the 2 – 3 hours in this library I read everything I could about homosexuality. I learnt that since the Kinsey report homosexuality was not a disorder. I can still remember what it was like to read this.'

THOSE WHO PROVIDED COMFORT/VALIDATION

When people offered support, it was invaluable. Sometimes experiences of support, comfort and/or validation came from friends, family, or other significant individuals:

'It was really hard, but I had friends and cousins who were there for me. They took me out to clubs and it was like, "Oh, wow. There are gay people here". Life in the city was very different from where I grew up and I started to make a new life.'

Those who assisted us to reconcile with our spirituality were particularly significant:

'A counselor at a camp said to me: "You can work this into Christianity. It's okay to open up and share". This helped a great deal.'

'After being told in front of the entire congregation that I was not welcome, a lady came up to me in the parking lot and said, "If you ever need anything, call me".'

For some of us, acceptance of our realities as gay persons came through connections to God, the spirit of life, and experiences of spirituality:

'After I was thrown out of my community, I got depressed and angry at God. I yelled at Him for a couple of weeks, but no matter what I yelled He was still there. I retained my faith, and some key friendships.'

Several of us found that the churches of our upbringing could no longer provide us with support of our realities as gay persons. And for many of us, praying was not enough. We undertook journeys. Leaving our congregations of origin, so to speak, was necessary, at least for awhile. But all of us have found ways to reconnect or stay connected with spiritual practices.

RECONNECTING OR STAYING CONNECTED WITH SPIRITUAL PRACTICES AND RELIGIOUS VALUES

Finding a way back to spiritual traditions and practices has been significant to us:

'Although I had come to accept my sexuality, I was starting to get depressed and I realised that this was because there was no faith in my life. I had moved away from the church in order to embrace my own sexuality but then realised I also had to undertake a spiritual journey. I became involved in yoga, a spirit-based yoga practice. The depression was related to a loss of faith, and as I immersed myself back in the spiritual realm, the depression lifted.'

'For many gay people it's very difficult to connect to religion because of the prejudice we have faced from the religious. I overcame this. Initially, I abandoned the Catholic Church and immersed myself in Buddhist/Hindu belief systems. But I never lost my faith in Christ. I never abandoned my faith in Christ as a healer, which has always been very important to me.'

We discussed what spirituality means to us. For some of us, spirituality and religion are associated with experiences of 'presence':

'Spirituality for me is that experience that someone is there. I am not alone. There is a connection. I've experienced God's presence several times. I was lying in bed one night feeling really lonely and depressed. I asked for God's presence and I felt as if another blanket was put on top of me. I physically felt something there. It's very real to me, it's not a book.'

For others, spiritual practice is linked to learning and service to others:

'For me, practicing medicine and my faith in God are linked, because I am a person of service. There's more to me than my sexuality. There's always more to life, more to learn.'

'Coming out in the 1980's, as an Asian male, there was no role model and there was plenty of racism. That's something that I struggled with. It was volunteering for a very active gay Asian HIV project that helped me along the path of accepting myself. It helped me develop where I was and where I was going. That is where I found acceptance. It was the start of feeling some kindness for myself.'

While some of us turned away from churches and embraced other spiritual traditions (often Buddhism or yoga), others have found ways to continue our original practices:

'I still went to church on Sundays. I would go by myself and pray. I took religion my way. It was something that I felt comfortable with, even though I knew that the church didn't agree with my sexual identity. As I prayed, it was my way of not blaming myself and I kept trying to stay connected to the aspects of Catholicism I treasured.'

'I pray all the time. In my culture we pray for everything! First I prayed for God to make me straight, but this didn't work. It took me four years but finally I realised that I'm not a bad person and I could go to church without blaming myself. I still pray all the time!'

'I accepted Christ and in turn I feel Christ's acceptance. My world had changed from this. I'm gay and God made me.'

Undertaking this journey of reconnection to the spiritual has not always been easy:

'The journey to a gay spiritual community has been difficult at times. I separated from a long-term relationship from a person who did not identify with any spiritual interests.'

These journeys have now come full circle as some of us have started to make links between our sexuality and spirituality:

'In the beginning, it seemed as if sexuality and spirituality were in opposition to each other, but over time I've come to see sexuality and sensuality as spiritual. When you are being intimate with someone it's about connectedness. Maybe that's what spirituality is about, being connected to your own species!'

WHAT IT MEANS TO US NOW TO BE GAY AND TO HAVE A SPIRITUAL HOME

Speaking about what it now means for us to be gay was the most exciting and powerful part of these interviews. Every one of us is now happy being gay. After passing through hard times, we are now within what we call a 'new world of beauty'.

'There are things about being queer that I experience as a blessing. Being part of the 10% is something I am now proud of. Being queer offers me a different experience of myself and I can connect with others differently. I can connect with others who know what it means to be stigmatised. In some ways, being gay is like being singled out by God. God made us and we have a role to play.'

'Because I'm queer, I've looked for answers about life. There's been a greater wish for spiritual community. Being gay is a sensibility that is not defined by sex.'

'Being queer meant my network changed so I learnt a lot about connection and community, sharing and family. Finding a queer community has made all the difference.'

'Being in a gay supportive church has been extremely helpful in giving me a reason to be more out about who I am. It was one thing to be comfortably 'out' as gay before, but now that I am in a gay spiritual community, I know that me being 'out' helps others. I have routine reminders how this is the case. It gives me added courage to be out in all areas of my life, especially at work.'

'Having a spiritual home really helps to give you a shield, some armor against the stress of life. Having a spiritual community also takes the pressure off your intimate relationships. A spiritual home protects us, you have a home to come back to for guidance. If you are dependent only on a relationship, it is risky to your mental health.'

'This is how I'm supposed to be. I'm gay but this does not define me. It's only one part of my life. I'm constantly getting stronger and more confident. It feels now as if I am holding hands with all of that which is God.'

'There are amusing sides to this too. Despite living an openly gay life, I often appear to others to be straight. Maybe that's God's sense of humor!'

MESSAGES TO THE NEXT GENERATION OF QUEER FOLK FROM RELIGIOUS BACKGROUNDS

'Inviting people in to our lives as gay people, rather than coming out to the world seems a great idea to me. It's a safer route if you come from a background like mine. We can test the waters, do it at our own pace, in our own ways.'

'The idea of inviting people into a closet as you would a treasure chest is a good one. Like in *The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe*, you can invite people in to a new world of beauty.'

'I'm a survivor. My first world was taken from me but I have built another one and now I'm in a better place. To young gay people I would say: "You are okay. Go find your place".'

'To young persons who are struggling with sexuality in unfavorable circumstances, we would say: "Keep going. Being gay does not prevent us from having a

relationship with God. And this means we are never alone".'

SITTING IN CEREMONY TOGETHER

One Sunday afternoon in October of 2006, four of us met for a definitional ceremony (White 2000). I interviewed one person while others watched and acted as outsider witnesses¹. Several of the themes which had emerged from our earlier conversations were recounted again. New discoveries were also made.

For instance, to our mutual surprise, we learned that each of us had girlfriends earlier in life. Coming to terms with our sexual orientation had been aligned with principles of honesty and integrity and for some of us our former female partners had played an important role this. One of us remarked: 'After I came out to her, she came out to me!'

Importantly, we spoke together about how the place and time in which we live, San Francisco, 2007, is relatively free of heterosexist bigotry. This is in stark contrast to other places and other times and reminds us of our responsibilities to others:

'My college coach always said: "Get back into the game". This philosophy reminds me of my responsibilities. It's important for us to get back into our community, to play our part. I've been working with gay youth. A lot of them are not making wise decisions. Perhaps we can help them along by sharing our experience, like we have done with each other here today.'

SERVING OTHERS – CONCLUDING COMMENTS

This was an exciting and challenging project and there are several themes of experience that I'd still very much like to explore. One of these concerns the spiritual knowledges that gay men in San Francisco may have in relation to the losses due to HIV/AIDS. During the 1990s, our church, MCCSF, was often holding five to six memorial services per week for congregants who had died of AIDS related illness. At one point during that decade, our church membership shrunk from 600 to less than 60 people². I didn't manage to explore this area of questioning during this initial stage of the project but hope to in the future.

This phase of the project involved gay men. Another phase could involve conversations with women who arrived at realisations about their sexual preferences in difficult circumstances, and who are

still aligned with practices of faith and spirituality. I hope that these conversations can take place and if any readers are interested in initiating them I would offer any support that I could.

I have learned a great deal during this project. Several times I had to take breaks from listening to the interviews when I felt quite overwhelmed with new understandings about what it means to be gay in this society. Each person interviewed had survived losses of family, home, friends, personal safety, jobs and/or churches. Each person also spoke of significant journeys they had undertaken to create happy and fulfilled lives as gay men in supportive communities. And we all spoke of 'service to others' being a powerful motivation for speaking about our lives in these ways. I have found inspiration in participating in this process of story-telling and re-telling. I hope that our conversations may help others in similar situations to see themselves as one among many of God's creations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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NOTES

- ¹ This conversation lasted over an hour and was filmed and put on DVD. This DVD is now available at cost either through www.mccsf.org or by contacting the author.
- ² MCCSF now has several hundred members once more.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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OTHER RESOURCES IN RELATION TO SEXUALITY, RELIGION, AND SPIRITUALITY

Ralfs, C. (2002). Who am I? Who are my people? And where do I belong? In D. Denborough (ed.) *Queer counselling and narrative practice* (pp.261-265). Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications. (A paper by an Australian lesbian woman, who was raised Christian, and is seeking to develop spiritual practices that are congruent with her life and beliefs.)

Levinson, J. 2002: 'An open house in the Holy City' In Denborough, D. (ed) *Queer Counselling and Narrative Practice* (pp. 253-258). Adelaide: Dulwich Centre Publications

(This paper describes the work of the Open House, an organisation in Jerusalem open to secular and religious, Jewish and Arab, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender folk. Website: www.worldpride.net)

Trembling before G-D. www.tremblingbeforeg-d.com
Trembling Before G-D is a feature documentary that questions assumptions about faith, sexuality, and religious fundamentalism. Built around intimately-told personal stories of Hasidic and Orthodox Jews who are gay or lesbian, the film portrays a group of people who face a profound dilemma – how to reconcile their passionate love of Judaism and the Divine with the drastic Biblical prohibitions that forbid homosexuality.

Metropolitan Community Churches. Metropolitan Community Churches exist in many different countries and aim to provide a spiritual home for lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender Christians. Search for 'Metropolitan Community Church' on the internet for your nearest congregation.

Queer theology. For those interested, it is also worth looking up 'queer theology' in Wikipedia (the free internet encyclopaedia: www.wikipedia.com) and then following the links. Most references are to Christian queer theologians.