

The Secret History of the Radical Faeries

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WHEN FUTURE GENERATIONS look back on gay liberation's role in the greater creation of human consciousness, and what ideas helped shepherd civilization from its most primitive tendencies to more noble evolutionary possibilities, they will, in my opinion, have to spend substantial time studying the Radical Faerie movement, which was launched in 1979. They will find it particularly informative, I imagine, to see how two competing historical accounts would emerge about who the Faeries were and what became of them: one gay-centered and psychological, the other seemingly gay-centered but covertly anti-psychological, focused on a sentimental and revanchist portrayal of how the Faeries were formed.

The Radical Faerie movement is historically important because it was the first large-scale effort to organize gay-identified men on an indigenously homosexual spiritual basis, unlike gay synagogues, churches, and so on, which rely on heterosexist mythologies and dogmas. At early Faerie gatherings, gay men came together as never before, as Harry Hay put it, "to throw off the ugly green frogskin of hetero-imitation to find the shining Faerie prince beneath." This unique cultural effort cultivated a profound gay-centering interest—the notion of an endogenous Gay Spirit—within our overall freedom movement. This has crystallized over the last thirty years into an ongoing tradition of homosexually-focused spiritual activities and literature (e.g., in the works of Christian de la Huerta, Toby Johnson, Mark Thompson).

The Faerie movement was organized principally by three individuals: Harry Hay (co-founder of the Mattachine Society in 1950), Don Kilhefner (co-founder of the Los Angeles Gay and Lesbian Center in 1971), and Mitch Walker (the first "out" gay author to be published in a Jungian journal in 1976). A fourth person, Harry's partner John Burnside, served as a supporting figure. This founding quartet issued "A Call to Gay Brothers" in the Spring of 1979 for "A Spiritual Conference for Radical Faeries" that Labor Day weekend, which was attended by an overflow crowd of 220 enthusiastic men, leading to the birth of a fresh cultural phenomenon that has since spread worldwide.

What is even more significant, in my opinion, than this "mainstream" origin story is a complex layer of history that's often left out and thus rendered "secret." A gay-centered psychoanalytic movement or revolution based on transforming unfinished family business, unexamined motives, and internalized homophobia into genuine gay self-realization, spearheaded by Mitch Walker, emerged from within the Faerie endeavor at its beginnings, forged through confrontation with psychological dysfunction among its core leadership, especially regarding Harry Hay, who was rabidly anti-psychological and who attempted at every turn to block any serious efforts in an analytic direction. Don Kilhefner eventually realized the profoundly healing value of Mitch's novel perspective, becoming convinced that the Faeries needed to take up gay-centered psychological activism. Don and Mitch, banding together and seeing no alternative recourse, resigned from the organizing circle during a climactic meeting in 1981, going on the next year to form Treeroots, a nonprofit corporation dedicated to psychologically-oriented homosexual self-realization.

What's disturbing about all this is that Don Kilhefner, in publications and talks over the last decade, has been promoting a peculiar Faerie origin story that avoids any of the developments I just related and reduces Mitch to an irrelevant footnote, while situating Harry with Don alone at the forefront, with nary a hint that Don

became allied with Mitch and his psychological focus and repudiated Harry's anti-analytic position. Don's most recent rendition of Faerie history occurred in this journal's September-October 2010 issue, where he recasts Mitch as a secondary figure who got into a mere scheduling dispute with Harry and then "washed his hands of the organizing process, though he did attend the first gathering." In fact, Mitch was equally involved organizationally with Don, Harry, and John before, during, and after the 1979 event, and it was only following much effort at consensus that Mitch and Don split from Harry and John in 1981.

I speak here not entirely as an innocent bystander, as I have personally known all of the individuals involved, first meeting each of them in the late 1980's, some years after most events described herein, and am presently Mitch's colleague at the Institute for Contemporary Uranian Psychoanalysis, the world's first gay psychoanalytic organization. But you don't have to trust my version of the past, because many particulars of this dramatically dishy, otherwise secret history about the founding of the Radical Faeries—and Don's subsequent alliance with Mitch contra Harry—are described in Stuart Timmons' 1990 biography *The Trouble with Harry Hay*, which lays out a basic story in which Harry and Mitch, not Don, are consistently the two key theorists and activists. Further, Timmons informs us that by the time Mitch first met Harry, he was already an advanced thinker in the area of gay-centered psychology, having written the early manual, *Men Loving Men: A Gay Sex Guide and Consciousness Book* (1977) and a master's thesis, "Gay Depth Psychology," from which was distilled "The Double: An Archetypal Configuration," published in *Spring 1976*, a groundbreaking paper that put homosexual love on an equal symbolic footing with heterosexual love (in terms of Jungian theory).

While Harry cultivated his important ideas about the Two Spirit person and the Feast of Fools, Mitch had been independently initiated through his own descent into the gay subjective underworld where he discovered a superhuman presence of phallic homosexual divinity. He subsequently fathomed how applying a gay liberation sensibility to Jungian analysis could better understand and advance this profound experience of archetypal love. Here we learn (in Timmons's book) that Mitch, at a lecture by Arthur Evans in early 1976, became so effusive in his gay-centered expressions of homosexual truth that a stranger spontaneously mentioned to him how he should track down Harry Hay: "You sound just as kooky as someone else I know. You should meet him. He talks just like you, and he's really old. He lives in New Mexico." Timmons reports that Mitch and Harry then corresponded, about which Mitch excitedly said, "we were already so much in harmony it was like meeting a brother, a twin."

Harry and John visited Mitch in San Francisco that summer, and Mitch went to New Mexico for an extended stay the following winter. Writes Timmons: "Meeting Walker was a critical link in Harry's development of a new kind of gay movement," as "the mythic, hidden aspects of gay identity that [he and Mitch] had studied separately suddenly converged, with a greatly increased current." In a way reminiscent of how Harry originated the Mattachine Society with Rudi Gernreich in 1950, "Walker and Hay formed the 'society of two' that grew into the Radical Faeries." Indeed, by the time Mitch returned from his New Mexico visit, it was clear that he and Harry were firmly united and "well on the way to starting" their movement.

Because he was "prized for his budgetary and administrative genius," Don was later invited onboard in 1978 by the two core organizers, who, with the addition of Don, became a three-person "cabal that would conjure the Radical Faerie movement" into living realization the following year.

Timmons goes on to describe how Mitch grew increasingly concerned about Harry's leadership and "worried that Harry's tendency to dominate decision making threatened the nascent Faerie movement with its ideal of collective process." In a 1994 publication that I have in my archives called *Anti-Fascist Faerie Dish Rag*, Mitch writes about how his idealism was often challenged by Harry's imperious behavior, even at their first meeting, where he says Harry aggressively "mouth raped" him while saying goodbye. Additionally, Timmons reports that Don as well "grew bothered by [Harry's] tendency to proselytize new Faeries on first

meeting, and to dominate conversations in and out of meetings.” Timmons illustrates how clueless Harry was about the need for basic psychological fluency around the problem of acting out violence as a leader: “He wanted to talk to me about my ‘leadership complex,’” Harry reported vis-à-vis that confrontational incident with Mitch that Don now says concerned a “timing” dispute. “And I didn’t understand, because as far as I know I don’t have one.” Such naïveté by Harry suggests a high level of denial in a man who was well known to vigorously demand allegiance to his viewpoint while promoting consensus organizing and so-called “subject-subject consciousness.”

Timmons then relates that Don began to “re-evaluate his allegiances,” feeling “the Faeries had become dogmatic under Harry’s influence, and that tensions in the La Cresta collective [where Don lived with Harry and John] signaled trouble for a larger community.” Indeed, Don became so disgruntled that he didn’t attend the second Faerie gathering in 1980, although Mitch did, developing the punning concept of “Faerie Fascist Police” with a set-off tent where those encountering Harry’s domineering manner could come to process their feelings.

Timmons shows Don moving ever more into a seriously involved union with Mitch and his ideas—later including the notion of jointly holding “Primeval Slime” workshops to address all that dark material being exiled by Harry and John—while simultaneously separating from Harry’s person and formulations, a sea-change in allegiance dramatically demonstrated at the culminating June 1981 meeting of the Faerie core group attended by Harry, John, Mitch, Don, Mark Thompson, Will Roscoe, and Bradley Rose, who described what happened to Timmons in this way: “Don began complaining of problems he was having with John and Harry. He talked about the accusations of Faerie Fascism, and said he believed Harry and John were power-tripping, especially Harry. He was not specific, but he eventually reached his point, which was that he was resigning, that his ‘heart was no longer in the project.’” A few minutes later, Mitch also resigned. Through this planned-out action, Don and Mitch together formally departed to create Treeroots.

It is significant that Don doesn’t even hint at any of this in his recent *Review* article. The sheer excising of such a major part of his own story, which also distracts the potentially curious away from those revolutionary innovations in gay psychological activism he once was strongly committed to, ethically connotes a bracing object lesson about the pernicious problem of the disruptive gay shadow in movement organizing. As it turned out historically, Don eventually also broke with Mitch to establish in the 1990’s his own rival, supposedly psychological organizations, Tumescence and then the Gay Men’s Medicine Circle, and now frequently writes articles doing his best to erase important historical and ideological dynamics.

If you look over Don’s *Gay & Lesbian Review* piece, you’ll see how he, a self-professed “Jungian psychologist,” says absolutely nothing about ideas like “psychology,” the “inner life,” or the “gay shadow” that he once promoted. His present attitude is purely extraverted, disregarding those currents of the gay psyche previously championed with Mitch. Near the end of his *Review* statement, Don proposes answering “a critical need for a national, if not international, gathering of Radical Faeries,” but this strikes me as a fruitless prospect because it would take us sentimentally backward three decades to a whitewashed Faerie origin, thereby setting things up to repeat the same psychological mistake that has, I believe, severely limited the Faeries’ ability to help gay men to achieve authentic self-actualization. Contrast Don’s sterile revanchist sentiments with the much more lively, progressive approach posed by Mitch’s work in the last three decades, as seen in his recent *Gay Liberation at a Psychological Crossroads* (2009), which explores how and why gay activism must systematically embrace psychological self-development to address homophobic trauma more effectively.

Don’s article is notable not only for its erasure of important aspects of gay history, but also for its rejection of a psychological approach to gay-centered individuation and community building in regard to humanity’s future. I would argue that Don is colluding with the gay community’s—all of humanity’s—present collective dissociation, which regressively blocks the key importance of personal psychological responsibility,

that is, the fundamental problem (and potential) of the gay shadow, from mainstream movement discourse. I suggest that all of us, myself included, possess a fiercely anti-gay and anti-psychological “complex” that grievously evades conscious detection, camouflaged under rampant addictions, compulsive extroversion, assimilationism, and so on. Instead, what’s needed is Faerie support for those who courageously face the darkness in their own personal psychology to better expedite Gay Spirit.

Jungian analyst Erich Neumann (*Depth Psychology and a New Ethic*, 1990) proposes that humanity is reaching a fateful disjunction between an “old ethic” in which the aggressive shadow of disowned trauma is endlessly mishandled through repression and collective scapegoating, and a “new ethic” in which the shadow is claimed individually as we embark on a reorganization of social and political life. Likewise, in a recent book (*Awakening Our Faith in the Future*, 2008) psychologist Peter Dunlap urges a necessary social advance from political liberalism to *psychological* liberalism, whereby traumatic emotions of pain, rage, and shame are no longer kept “secret” but are instead overtly grappled with. Mitch Walker has suggested for 35 years that homosexual folk have a special capacity for psychological responsibility if internalized homophobia can be countered.

The issue at heart in this entire matter of Radical Faerie history and meaning throws us a big existential question: will gay people and gay liberation slouch backwards to sterile nostalgia, or instead strive bravely toward an ennobled gay future that involves tackling more efficaciously what is still terribly destructive in ourselves so we can ascend to a regenerated, better enlightened gay life most relevant to humanity’s pressing climacteric challenge?

Note: The Institute for Contemporary Uranian Psychoanalysis will soon publish a new book exploring these historical matters in greater depth: *Lavender Self-Awakening: The Revolutionary Moral Struggle For Gay-Centered Inner Work, Basic Archival Materials 1978-2010*, edited by Mitch Walker.