

# Crisis of Conscience in the Gay 90's

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**T**HIS summer marks the 30th anniversary of the Stonewall rebellion. But judging by the pathetic Uncle Tom whimper coming from the gay movement, you wouldn't know that gay liberation once stood for revolutionary social change for society as a whole. Is it possible that virtually an entire group of people have abdicated their calling to be gay dreamers and visionaries and gotten into the back of a truck driven by the wrong kind of people?

This failure of vision, I believe, is rooted in a form of insidious self-hatred that shows two of the most powerful wings of the gay community—the mainstream gay political movement and the queer academy—actively sabotaging the notion of a gay-centered "myth of meaning." While my comments principally address the crisis faced by gay men, I hope that this paper could touch lesbians and the transgendered, too. This acting out of our own internalized homophobia is a symptomatic result of a thousand years of genocidal anti-gay and -lesbian suppression rooted in religious fundamentalism coupled with dogmatic heterosexism.

Despite this cultural tragedy, the most curious and inspired of gays can still turn to our gay and lesbian forebears to read about gayness as a powerfully electrifying multicultural trans-historical heritage that contains within it evolutionary, procreative power and potential, not just for gay people, but for everyone. This ancient wisdom tradition goes back in time through Edward Carpenter, Walt Whitman, Karl Ulrichs, Sappho, Plato, and to the first writers of the Epic of Gilgamesh; it can be found more recently in the works of the major founder of the modern gay movement, Harry Hay, and those of gay activist and psychologist Mitch Walker. Each of these authors could be said to appreciate and honor what we today would call the archetype of gay centeredness. This "myth of meaning" suggests "that there is an inborn pattern of meaning that focuses on homosexuality and its unfolding experience" (Walker, 1999) as a path toward self

realization and social transformation.

Appreciation for a homosexual lust and love that shapes gay self flourished in the early Stonewall era when, infused with a newfound sense of power and possibility inspired by the 1969 rebellion, queers, faggots, dykes, sissies, queens, faeries, and non-normal, fringe people all over the country came out in droves and unabashedly challenged as many forms of oppression and restriction as they could. However, this celebratory husbanding of a nascent gay spirit vision didn't last. Even by the late 70's, assimilation was coming to dominate gay politics. Then came a devastating epidemic and a vicious right wing backlash that piggybacked on the health crisis, convincing many, including many gay people, that gays either deserved damnation for their "life" style" or should at least become vastly more respectable.

On the extraverted, social level, these "events" marked an unfair assault to liberation from the outside world. But on the introverted level, a problem of a psychological nature was incubating all those years. Unexamined feelings of toxic shame and internalized homophobia from childhood could not be healed just by coming out or by the ecstasy of sexual liberation alone. Without a gay-centered psychological theory and practice for actively understanding and working through the emotional hell and sorrow of unfinished family business, we could not and cannot begin to learn how to know, own, and eventually integrate these resisted "bad" feelings into an emotional gay wholeness.

Bereft of the psychological tools that might help us fight successfully our own defenses against feeling, we are left without any deeper inspirational vision to guide our gay activism and love-making. This leaves us defenseless against deeper layers of internalized homophobia, and leaves many of us stuck, secretly hopeless, neurotic, even suicidal and homicidal. The gay personality suffers a violent split between a "good boy" presentation and a seething Mr. Hyde who's often hidden from the person's own view (though maybe not from others). This is how the pathological demon of internalized homophobia—residing undetected in a shadowy world

containing the heterosexist parental complexes as well as a crushed feeling child—thwarts gay-centered vision in virtually all contemporary gay people, in particular our leaders, both those in the mainstream gay political movement and those in the gay academy, ruled by social constructionism.

### Assimilation as Lemon Kool-Aid

In many important ways, gay life has improved dramatically since Stonewall. Gay activists fought to make sure that homosexuality would no longer be seen as pathology by the psychological establishment. Civil rights laws were passed protecting gays on the job and at home. After Stonewall, it was not quite so acceptable for the police to raid gay bars. Vast networks of social programs, community-based service organizations, and even gay political fundraising organs emerged. So did a bursting world of gay bars and bathhouses.

Even today, the accomplishments of the community's institutions have helped ensure that advancements in drug regimens and therapies are reaching the street. Optimism about AIDS rivals jubilation over the Dow as a herald of a new era of rising health standards and prosperity. But with the obvious enemies of AIDS and Reagan-Bush seemingly vanquished, and with Clinton cast in the role of a benign though ineffectual father, the problem of gay oppression can almost seem to be solved. While a gay youth crucified in the Montana snow exposes that fallacy, it doesn't do so deeply enough. We're not as politically secure as we'd like to believe.

So why is there a slumbering apathy among the gay masses, and how have our leaders and intellectuals promoted this?

My question exposes the exasperation I feel for the movement's betrayal of its basic liberationist principles. I came out in 19'79 and, despite my teenage, Jewish-styled, moody uptightness, I felt thoroughly enlivened by the sensual power of some in-visible but persistent gay spirit, whether in a lover's arms or organizing a gay

college talk. Over the years, I've seen how this contagious libidinal energy, designed to turn conventional thought and obligation on its head, has all but died. Of course, I wonder now how much my own internalized homophobia might have contributed to this perishing of the indigenous gay life force. The young people I meet today feel almost no hope about the future in their gayness as a platform for social change. Articles declaring a rise in unprotected sex show a community mentality split between sexual moralists and hedonists. And yet, hardly anyone looks at these pressing psychological needs with the courage to address the emotional issues that motivate self-destructive behavior patterns.

It seems clear that these sex/war players are acting out unresolved childhood issues and parental complexes of some kind. This conflict is reflected in the split between the radicals and the reactionaries in our movement, which may mirror the struggle between hurt boys and their failed fathers. On one side, there's Tony Valenzuela, who advocates barebacking for those HIV-infected individuals who feel so empowered. It's not that hard to imagine him caught in the clutches of some painful inner father complex, against whom he is compelled to rebel. Is it that unfair to wonder if there might be something deeply unresolved in his relationship with his father that causes him to flaunt his sexuality to such an extreme as to ignore the dangers of unprotected sex and then announce it repeatedly to everyone in the nation? On the other side is the "anti-sex" crowd, those like Michelangelo Signorile who campaign to shut the bathhouses down: their psychology also provokes speculation that maybe they are so desperate for acceptance from a cruelly controlling father that they must become "just like him." i.e., control other people's behavior through fear tactics or other methods.

What's missing in this conversation is an approach that would help us liberate the gay self from an internally demonized world by actively working with our own contradictory feelings (and the complexes they come from) in an ongoing, gay-centered manner, an approach that could nurture and inspire gay psychological and social life in ways that are more consistent with Stonewall's revolutionary

potential.

## Assimilation and Transgression

One way that our parental complexes inside the gay psyche act out their unresolved emotional issues is through pushing the gay individual into a "mainstream" lifestyle, toward anything that symbolically resembles the world of one's parents. When the Human Rights Campaign, the nation's gay political action committee, endorsed homophobic Republican Alfonse D'Amato for re-election to the U.S. Senate over the Democratic challenger Chuck Schumer last year, critics decried the decision as yet another example of gay people's power succumbing to hubris or to top-heavy national institutions. But that outcry didn't keep the political crisis from escalating: powerful gay community organizations such as the L.A. Gay and Lesbian Center and the national Gay and Lesbian Alliance Against Defamation broke with the gay community's most successful boycott ever, against Coors Beer and its ties to right-wing, anti-gay groups. Last year the Center took \$534,000 in corporate dollars from Coors, while GLAAD accepted \$100,000. The taking of Coors money is not so much rooted in greed as in a systemic willingness to grab at peace offerings from "bad parental surrogates" rather than sticking to our guns.

If assimilationism destroys gay essence rather crudely, social constructionism is more sophisticated in its manner of killing a gay-centered myth meaning, and it does so quite rationally. This school avers that the term "homosexual" was only invented in late-19th-century Europe, and arose out of "social forces and labeling practices unique to Western societies." Its exponents argue that what we call "gay" cannot legitimately be applied to the "classical Greek adult, married male who periodically enjoys penetrating a male adolescent," or to the "Native American adult male who from childhood has taken on many aspects of a woman." To the followers of French philosopher Michel Foucault, all identities are suspect, all are seen as techniques of subjugation and surveillance deployed by the social powers that be. Their more "utopian" vision gains a Freudian flare by

pushing for a "polymorphous perversity" that does away with labels and joins everyone together in a shared sexual fluidity. On the other hand, constructionists spend much of their time railing against the intuitive feelings that most gay people have about their "essential" sexual nature and desire.

Despite the dominance of this mode of thought in gay studies, a humble effort has been mounting in recent years to expose its faulty epistemology and its homophobic underpinnings. Constructionists argue that Greek homosexuality was never mutually enjoyable and always took place between an older man and a younger man, and that the men who frequented the 18th-century British molly houses weren't "gay" but instead transvestites (Halperin, 1990). And yet, even accepting these differences, why should we conclude that ancient and modern homosexualities have absolutely nothing in common? Philosopher Raja Halwani (1998) takes the same history and detects an essential queerness binding these groups together over time and place. Other scholars, such as historian Rictor Norton (1997), anthropologist Will Roscoe (1996), and culturalist Randy Conner (1997) conclude that homosexual roles and patterns derive from the cultivation of an inherent root cause. Norton lambastes the social constructionist obsession with 'acts' over states of mind, which confines being gay to a genital sexuality' writing simply: "Beneath a (fairly limited) variety of customs that differ from culture to culture lies the phenomenon of queer desire." Conner, who co-edited *Queer Myth, Symbol and Spirit*, charges social constructionism with destroying a powerful 'aspect of the resilience of lesbian, gay male, bisexual and transgendered experience [that] lies in the symbol-making process,' adding that: "for millennia, and in many cultures, humans have sought to symbolize a perceived association of eroticism, gender identity, and the realm of sacred or mythic experience." To be so literal-minded as to see gayness as merely a form of sexual behavior is to do violence to the gay spirit.

Of the four, Roscoe comes closest to analyzing the constructionist problem psychologically, arguing that 'the radical posturing of Queer theorists serves to mask an assimilationist yearning to efface one's

difference, to elude the debilitation of belonging to America's s most hated minority." To him, "this denial of identity seems to me a uniquely Gay form of self-hatred. I can think of no other contemporary minority whose intellectuals are so deeply invested in erasing their difference" (Roscoe, 1996). In other words, social construction serves the agenda of the individual's internalized homophobia more than it does the development of thought.

Social constructionists have done much to train us to observe the "local knowledge" of each historical culture, and not to make sweeping statements about people's inherent qualities, which erase them in an ethnocentric way. But in seeing all life and love as productions of language, culture, and power of "discourse, in postmodernism's favorite word—they exaggerate the value of sheer reason to measure existence, and mistake cultural constructs of "homophobia" for those of authentic queer desire.

### The Next Stage of Gay Liberation

The word "soul" has been co-opted by Christianity. In its original meaning, however, the soul is one way of understanding what happens to us when we get sexually turned on: it is the connection to our heart's romantic yearning for wholeness that helps us deepen events into experiences. Such an understanding honors that "there are deep currents of meaning, often crosscurrents, running through the human soul which can at best be glimpsed through a glass darkly" (Lear, 1998), an attitude so sorely needed if gays are to break with the deadly, materialistic hold of social construction on gay thought today.

With all its homophobic and sexist limitations, the Jungian process of self-realization offers the only scientific theory and practice of which I'm aware for helping individuals to enter into and know the "spirit world", or 'underworld" of the unconscious, so as to reunite continually with one's missing wholeness. Freud did not believe that the unconscious had a collective or magical level. He saw it stopping with the "id," a dynamic garbage heap composed of drives, wish

fulfillments, and repressed memories. But Jungian psychology went further, into a world where the basic forms of life exist as magical points of connection to powerful and eternal truths, called archetypes, not always easily grasped by linear thinking. Containing the basic thought forms of life and death, these pre-formed dispositions to feeling, thought, behavior, and meaning manifest themselves in symbols, images, and emotions of potent influence such as images of a great love, a great parent or a transcendent value.

For this reason, Jungian thought makes practical inroads by providing tools to explore what's missing in contemporary gay life: the eternal, the transpersonal, the symbolic, the alchemical and the mythological. When harnessed to a gay-centered perspective, Jungian psychology helps explain the worshipful attitude many men have towards each other. Thus refusing to reduce sexual intensity to "nothing but" an animal urge that either gets discharged or repressed. Gay-centered depth psychology posits an original homosexual intelligence, called "Homoprogenitor" by psychologist Mitch Walker, born in every gay boy. A growing boy wishes to get erotically close to his father for dad represents the first personification of this homo-deity. The incest taboo frustrates that desire. Libido is returned back; home into the boy's unconscious, where a gay soul buddy, an archetypal twin brother, is constellated. We look for him all our lives long, by projecting him out romantically onto the stud of our dreams.

While erotic projection of the soul figure is a wonderful act that leads to sex and love in the outer world, projection represents only the first half of a psychological process. If done without "recollection," without an effort to return the soul home to the psyche where it originates in the first place, the emotional reserves will be emptied out, resulting in a "loss of soul." Within this worldview, human behavior is understandable because it always has an "inside" meaning, a meaning that is suffered and experienced by the person. This attitude can help compensate for a gay movement that is principally extraverted in focus (as evidenced by the obsession with getting gays into the military and getting them legally married).

To be sure, a gay-centered depth approach has no choice but to point out how Jungian psychology has been crippled by its own homophobia, a vicious heterosexual bias that rejects gay archetypes and gay individuation and speaks not a whit to the specific romantic issues gripping gay people. Jungians and other experts in religion, spirituality, and anthropology have tried to separate "shamanism" (and other forms of sorcery and healing) from "gayness." A gay-centered approach attempts to redeem archetypal psychology for gays and to reveal the gay roots that run through the fields of alchemy, psychology, and philosophy, roots that Jung and his students have systematically ignored.

This holistic understanding of same-sex love has been destroyed by a pernicious anti-gay bias rooted in patriarchal control and psychological collectivization. Our time is still only proto-individual; most people are still thinking as the group would think, thus lacking an individual answer to the question of their being. The subordination of the individual to the collective results in a shame-based personality shaped by the rigors of discipline, shame and punishment. The ego thus constructed is split off from the unconscious, the source of its life, based on stifling internal control, shaped by cruelly repressive defenses. These defenses continuously annihilate the unconscious as a way of managing volcanic rage, hurt, and shame—keeping those feelings totally away from conscious awareness and expression. This violent process of personality development amounts to a psychological fascism that arose as humanity's initial answer to dealing with animal instincts. But this outdated structure no longer needs to be the only option. Increasingly, gay people can see for themselves that by being rigidly defensive psychologically they are not only being homophobic; they are living as their enemies wish them to live as zombies pursuing a path of self-destruction and despair.

The promise of Stonewall is a promise not just for the good of gay people, but also for the soul of the world. The answers provided by the two most powerful wings of the gay movement today—gay political mainstreaming and social constructionism—can no longer

be treated with any enduring seriousness. They do not offer a helpful contribution towards our indigenous long-term survival, for they discount the very notion of a gay centered "myth of meaning." From my own personal experience, I have learned that only by facing my repressed toxic shame during a prolonged series of night-sea journeys could I begin to sense a glimmer of redemptive reality a new ground of being forming under my wobbly feet.

There is a next stage of gay liberation beyond Stonewall, and it is about becoming psychologically aware struggling to liberate the gay self in one's own way. The psychological impasse pessimistically endured by the mainstream gay movement is being challenged by a grander and more hopeful vision put forward by people whose voices have not yet been heard as loudly as those of Tony Valenzuela and Michelangelo Signorile, the view that there is something inherently indispensable to humanity in the existence of a gay soul. This vision is nothing new. Edward Carpenter, the 19th-century English socialist, believed passionately that "The similar sufferings of the Uranian class of men are destined in their turn to lead to another wide-reaching social organization and forward movement in the direction of art and human compassion" (quoted in Thompson, 1987). We might not be able to expect this vision from our leaders, as they continue to chase the carrot of acceptance and assimilation. But perhaps we can hope for it from the new breed of activist who sees that gay liberation can mean something truly revolutionary, not only for gay people but for society as a whole.

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