

were less caring, compassionate and responsible than other people I know? More neurotic? People are people.

In the end I don't know whether I'm glad or not to be gay, or bisexual. Being in a minority will always have its problems, especially a minority that tends to get little acceptance from either side. I don't choose to identify myself primarily by my sexuality, but then I don't choose to identify myself by any of my other labels

either (female, white, middle class, Jewish, university educated. . .). I am myself as a person, and I'm trying to be that person as fully as I can. Somewhere along the line I will make choices which will probably cause society to categorise me in a particular way, but I hope those choices will be personal ones, not limited by adherence to a movement or set of beliefs. I can only be glad to be the person I am, with all its struggles, insights and confusions.

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## *Hall of Mirrors*

*David Evans*

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A sharp swing left off a quiet country road took me between worn stone pillars into the avenue of tall lime trees that lead to The Hall and there in the sudden shade I involuntarily braked and brought the car to a standstill. 'What' I thought 'am I doing here? Do I really want to face all those men, strangers all?' Such thoughts and feelings ricocheted around inside me as I drew near to meeting the gay men who were to be my close companions for the next week — 60 or so of them — ten times as many as I'd met knowingly in the whole of my life till then.

Let me start from the beginning. I'm a late developer for it was not until recently that I accepted that I was gay. In the few years that have elapsed since then I've begun to explore cautiously what my new found self is all about, and that has included a love relationship that ended

without ending. Thus the summer of 1993 found me raw, very vulnerable, apprehensive and not a little fearful at the gates of The Hall.

I'm a determined soul, however, so I put the car into gear and drove on.

The Hall is a late Victorian pile set in spacious grounds which include the end of a large lake. The estate is home to a mixed community who live in the top floor 'servant quarters' or in homes round about that range from stable block or caravan to thatched wigwam. They were our hosts and we used the 'master' rooms on the first two floors for communal living that centred very much round the ever blazing log fire in the great hall. Most of the heating in the house comes from wood-burning stoves and one morning in the week was set aside to help the residents clear dead trees in nearby pine

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forests for use at The Hall. Walking back, sun on heather, resin scent in the air, clear views of the distant sea, was one of the highlights of the holiday for me.

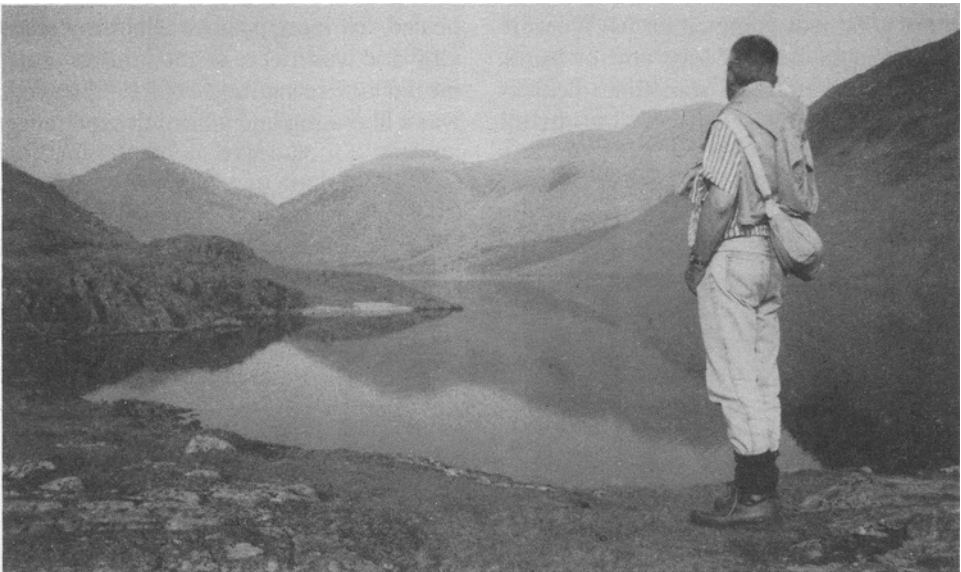
No formal programme had been planned in advance — only empty time slots that anyone could fill with workshops. So we learned the gentle art of massage, we made relationship maps for ourselves and made face masks, decorating and presenting them to the rest of the group as thespians or as parts of ourselves we were discarding. We went for long walks in the hills and we danced. We danced folk dances to the music of the resident band; we danced in one morning's dew, a slow North American Indian 'dance of life' and we danced modern free style into the early hours of the following day until we had no more energy. We danced in bare feet on the grass as the sun set, circle dances to haunting Jewish melodies and as the moon rose high we continued round a centrepiece of flowers

and lighted candles, dancing into oneness with creation and into each others' hearts.

We sang. We sang in the cellars where the acoustics made everyone a star and sang action songs at the end-of-week concert to which the residents and folk from the pub down the road were invited.

A Jew led us through the ritual meal that marks the beginning of the Sabbath, with its breaking of bread, and a Christian priest celebrated Holy Communion with participants sitting round an ordinary table — and we discussed White Light Spirituality.

There was maypole dancing that left us helpless with laughter and games with a parachute. There was a regatta on the lake when the landing area was abundantly decorated with pink triangle bunting made the day before. The boats were two rubber inflatables operating under rules that would have found pride of place in 'Alice in Wonderland'. And there



was a tea party so that everyone could dress up!

If all the activity didn't appeal there was always sunbathing and swimming sans everything or just talking, something that was very evident at every meal (which was always vegetarian).

One evening, the main room was lit only by a myriad candles flaming among flowers in the centre of the floor and we sat in silence remembering friends who had died of AIDS. Everyone had the chance to write names on chits of paper and place them among the candles and talk for a moment of the person they were remembering. In those flickering lights each person was held by the group, as maybe he quietly cried, and it was an occasion made all the more poignant by knowing that some of those among us with HIV could well not be present next year.

And there was space — space to be alone, space to meet regularly with just a few others, the same few each day, to share what was going on for us. We were privileged to hear of joys and of hurts, deep hurts generated sometimes deliberately but more often by blind

non-understanding, often by parents. And the sharing was deep too.

So what was the point of the week? What did we get out of it? I guess each man would give a different response — I can only speak for me. Perhaps for me it was the first time since I was very small that I felt able to be really me. Knowing that network of 60 gay men of all ages, some of whom I hardly spoke to, was creating and holding an environment so safe, so supportive, so trustworthy, it enabled the shy inner me to come out — to laugh in the games, to cry in another's arms and to accept, without fear, frequent hugs of friendship. In the grounds of The Hall lives a potter. On my table at home now stands a bowl made by her in the shape of an open flower. At its centre, seated on a rock, is the relaxed figure of a naked man. It represents me, totally vulnerable, held by those with whom I shared that gay men's week.

As I drove away from the The Hall at the end I felt stronger, more whole, more healed, felt more positive about my sexuality and was aware of good things about me I'd not recognised before. The week was a liberating and affirming experience.

