

# Queer Spirit

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I was not brought up in a strict Catholic household; I had a liberal non-religious education, unusual at the time in Ireland. But during adolescence, as my hormones erupted, volcanically, I found myself cruising and having lots of sex; I also found myself, one particular Lent, drawn to going to Mass daily, finding comfort in ritual, and the peaceful atmosphere I found there. It was a space to reflect, to work things out, move towards an adult relationship with my spirituality, with my self, to tentatively say 'hello' to God. But when I heard the priest pontificate on the 'grave moral disorder' of homosexuality, I instantly knew that I could not stay. Apart from funerals, I have not been back to a Mass since. The first cut is the deepest.

In my forties now, I know that strongly sexual phases often go hand-in-hand with a spiritual awakening; but, alas, there was not that sort of wisdom available to me when I needed it back then. In a way, I believe I threw the baby out with the bathwater, when I abandoned religion, and I've been hankering after it ever since. Fiercely political and anti-clerical for many years, I began to gingerly work my way back towards a relationship with the numinous, the sacred, but it had to be on my own terms. Initially, this came about through my work as an actor in Tom McIntyre's plays at the Abbey Theatre; later, a friend handed me a book by Liz Greene on psychological astrology, and an interest in Jungian psychology bloomed, which resonated with me as if I had already known it. But, in my late twenties, I encountered a similar shock of alienation and rejection to that which I experienced as a teenager at Mass: I was told that I

would not have been accepted as a candidate for training as a Jungian analyst, for the same profoundly unjust reason: my sexual orientation.

As a Kinsey 6, with a persistent inner knowledge that my being gay was an essential, unmovable, and vital part of my identity, I floundered around, depressed, unable to reconcile the split in me between spirit and flesh. Whatever familiar Irish Catholic shame I felt about my sex life was now compounded by something far more modern and insidious and toxic: apparently, I was psychologically flawed. I moved to London when I turned thirty, and despite what I learned about myself through the complex and beautiful language of astrology, I was finding it difficult to come to a sense of self-acceptance. I yearned for a relationship to prop up my shaky sense of gay identity, which, of course, does not generally bring about success in love. My astrological map may have shown me which way to go, but I had no idea how to travel there.

It was a joke that began my real healing journey. I was at the Psychosynthesis and Education Trust in London Bridge in 1996. I was jittery and suspicious, full of rage and fear, having dragged myself there to do the Essentials, the week-long introductory self-development course. On the last day, much relieved and a little hoarse, (I had done a lot of shouting), while posing for the

celebratory group photograph, one of the trainers, Judith Firman, made a point of standing at the back beside me and a couple of lesbians, and quipped, *sotto voce*, 'I'm with the queers'. With one deliciously timed joke, she came out; we all laughed, I was hooked, and healed, and welcomed. I knew that if ever I was going to find my place in the world, trembling as I was on the tectonic fault lines between sex and faith and psychopathology, I felt that such a joke, delivered so lightly by Judith, could only have been the fruit of some deep inner work. Therefore, I knew instinctively that something similar could happen to me. It was the beginning of a journey that was to take me eight years. One tutor in particular, Angie Fee, who taught sexuality and psychopathology at the Trust right through my training, provided me with a space to think things through that was fertile and open and fearless, modelling a way of working that I hold dear to this day.

But I had to go through the darkness first to get out the other side. 'The soul is in the symptom' is axiomatic of psychosynthesis - a holistic principle that can turn notions of allopathic psychopathology on its head, very similar to the Jungian alchemical search for the riches of individuation in the shadow. For if it is pursued, honestly, without prejudice, the end result may not be something that fits in with normative ideas of psychological maturity; it may for some, like

me, result in the greater acceptance of behaviour which is transgressive, perhaps anarchic, and outside the pale. This, to me, is a comforting notion - for if psychotherapy was about turning unhappy rebels into complacent conservatives I would have nothing to do with it. Society can only be changed if anger at its faults can be channelled productively; an army of angry rebels has, arguably, never been more necessary.

The flexible and dynamic model of understanding the psyche, in psychosynthesis, is that of subpersonalities - identifying the cast of characters in our personalities, through guided imagery or dreamwork or gestalt chairwork, exploring which ones tend to dominate, attempting to understand the underlying needs and qualities of each, and working towards co-ordination and, ultimately, synthesis. As an actor, this makes intuitive sense to me. I know I have in me, among others, a strong rebel, a fierce critic, a very sexual cruiser, and, perhaps oddly, a nun - indeed subpersonalities often come in polarised pairs, symbolising a split that may need attention. When working in this way, with a soft touch and a kind guide, we can come to some empathic understanding of what each part of us is seeking, especially that which seems to make our lives a misery. Over time, these figures grow and change; I now understand and appreciate the creative,

imaginative aspects to my cruiser, indeed recognise his (my) quest as being a pagan, spiritual one; as much as I now recognise my inner nun, far from being a figure of starchy disapproval, to be a jolly mixture of Julie Andrews and a Sister of Perpetual Indulgence.

I've come to realise that, as in most things, the judgments we make about our behaviour matter enormously, and if they are severely critical, as they usually are about sex in our culture, they serve to compound and exacerbate shame and distress, instead of alleviate them. The more polarised we are inside, as a general rule, the more tortured we are, the less accepting we are of ourselves. And when we fight against self-acceptance, we alienate ourselves from others, increase a sense of isolation, get depressed, and make the likelihood of forming meaningful relationships diminish. It's a vicious circle.

With some struggles, this process is very difficult. If someone is drinking excessively, and their behaviour while drunk has damaged relationships, caused them to lose their jobs or their home, then the part of them that wants to drink, that drags them to the off-licence in the morning as if on auto-pilot, is hard to deal with neutrally. Self-destruction on that scale can't be condoned, and must be stopped in order to get support and allow some

healing, some thinking, to be done. This is why abstinence programmes such as Alcoholics Anonymous can work so well to save lives - zero-tolerance of suicidal behaviour is required, and the part that wants to drink cannot be allowed to.

But the problem with the AA model is that it works by re-enforcing shame around the desire to drink, classes it as a manifestation of disease, and any attempts to try to look at the 'drinker' as a subpersonality, in a non-judgmental and empathic way, are deemed to be evidence of denial - a heresy. Once sober, the problem drinker can spend the rest of their life carrying around a profound level of shame, that is only alleviated by a surrender to a spiritual programme that is remarkably similar to the Christian discourse, in which sinners seek absolution through confession to a third party. It's a life sentence of focussing one's life on one's sin/shame/disease, one in which relapses are proof that one has failed, and also, unconsciously, evidence that one belongs. For many people, it works - especially those who are comfortable with the Christian paradigm, and for whom drinking has become so compulsive it cannot be dealt with in any other way. But, often, (and I know this from having worked as an alcohol counsellor for three years) the deeper meaning behind the desire to drink, the purpose it serves to escape from a hurt or

to allow the expression of otherwise buried feelings, is not explored, because one cannot allow that drinking could serve any good purpose. And we need to recognise that good purpose in order to try and figure out healthier ways of achieving it.

When it comes to sex, it is deceptively easy to apply the 12-step model of addiction to those who have a lot of it, and are unhappy. For a couple of years, early on in my training at the Trust, I believed I was a sex addict, and sought help for my problem through 12-step groups, believing I had found redemption, a spiritual path in recovery. But it served to reinforce my shame around matters sexual (which took *some* doing) and, for a while, I believed that sex was the problem, that there was something badly wrong with me for wanting it so much. My cruiser subpersonality was in the dock, guilty as charged, guilty as sin. Lock him away and throw away the key. I experienced a severe period of clinical depression around that time, hopefully never to be revisited. Something was badly wrong.

For many heterosexual men with partners, struggling with their use of prostitutes or pornography, for example, a sex addiction programme with a zero-tolerance stance on sex outside marriage often serves to help them to remain faithful to the women in their lives, and so keep families together, and

reinforces traditional social mores. If an entire family agrees that a father and husband's philandering is shameful, and it accords with general cultural and religious values, then it is hard - or perhaps simply folly - for a married man to consider his sexual adventuring in any other light. But I, as a gay man, without a partner or family, and with a healthy lack of interest in upholding traditional mores, had no such reinforcement. As my sexual life continued, floridly, abundantly, relentlessly, and my depression deepened, compounded by a sense of failure, of sickness, I began to wonder if it was the shame that was the problem, not the sex.

As with so many aspects of our society, homosexuality is a phenomenon that is causing us to re-examine many established norms. From property and tax law to the institution of marriage, from established religion to health education, from the military to psychotherapy, the ascendance of the Stonewall generation is testing and changing our values, challenging our understanding of human nature. And so it is with ideas around addiction.

The link between addiction and spirituality is well established in our culture. 12-step groups offer a ritualised spiritual fellowship that encourages a relationship to God, an acceptance of the principle of surrender in the face of the inevitable, and a forensic

examination and confession of character defects (read: *sins*) as a way of encouraging a sense of well-being. But for many gay men, we have ritualised a different route to the spiritual, to the transpersonal, and that is through sex.

In his understanding of our dream life, our unconscious, Carl Jung referred to a *temenos* as 'a piece of land, often a grove, set apart and dedicated to the god.' For many men, cruising areas, which are as a rule invisible to the uninitiated, act as a space where age-old rituals of sex are enacted by men in search of an experience that is not connected to the love of a particular person, but for the experience of sex in all its variety, imagination, sensory pleasure, adventure, intensity and repetition, according to intuitive rules of engagement, evoking (or invoking) experiences of the numinous, the transcendent, in every encounter. In other, especially Oriental cultures and religions, the phallus is revered as a manifestation of the divine, like Shiva's *lingam* - in the west, where it is shamed, it is left to the queers communing in the parks to honour it. For, of course, it is not that we worship the six-inch piece of flesh, *per se*, it is that it carries a projection, a charge, a sense of power, or some may say an *illusion* of power. Entering a cruising area - and in this day and age it's not only a literal grove, but a corner of cyberspace or a basement of

a bar - has a *frisson* that is hard to explain to those who haven't experienced it. It's a crossing over the threshold to the unconscious realm, very dreamlike, very exciting, sometimes numbing, full of infinite possibility and fantasy, a yearning to connect to some collective sense of fraternal (paternal?) communion, a magick of sorts.

In classical mythology, the god that ruled over such sacred/profane spaces was Dionysus, the god of transgression and release, of drunkenness and ecstasy. He had his role to play, his rightful place in the pantheon. But the paradox of Dionysus is that in order for there to be some transpersonal charge to the transgression, a sense of breaking the rules, there has to be something to transgress in the first place. Which is why those of us with parental figures still reigning supreme in our inner landscape, severe, condemnatory inner critics, who serve to dole out shame on our animal, instinctive sexual drives, are often those for whom the desire to indulge in Dionysian rites is overwhelming, compulsive. The priest's shadow, his counterpart, without whom he is incomplete in archetypal terms, is the rampantly out-of-control pervert; the attempt to transcend the fleshly devilish realm and live in the spirit world invokes the disowned transgressor even more

strongly, often to destructive effect.

The sex scandals that have beset the Catholic church, since I left it, have revealed how outmoded and flawed the fundamentalist Judeo-Christian moral code is with regard to sex; it simply does not work to blindly repress sexual energy, to cover it up, to pretend it's not there. Although there are many men who have consciously and successfully chosen to sublimate or transcend their sexuality into something more focussed, through religious vocation, all too many have chosen priesthood in a Canute-like attempt to stem the tide of their sexuality, and adopt a hypocritical role in public policy on matters sexual that perpetuates fear and ignorance, and encourages furtiveness and shame. One infamous example of this split occurred in a gay sex club in Dublin in the early nineties - a priest died of a heart attack there, and there happened to be two other priests present to give him the last rites. I offer this as a sad example of how, in my experience, the harsher the injunction to avoid sex, and in particular queer sex, the more it is likely to result in guilt-ridden 'acting out' against the strictures, in the same way as US Christian-funded abstinence programmes for young people have such a poor record in preventing teenage pregnancies.

This is not something that is just of significance in places like the

US, or Ireland, or in the developing world where aid workers are prevented by Catholic/Christian funders from teaching sexual health sensibly, resulting in people dying of AIDS. This Christian shame cycle - prohibition leading to transgression leading to low self-esteem and compulsive behaviour, fuelling an even more tyrannical prohibition - has found its way via the 12-step movement into addiction treatment models, and also to psychosynthesis, through writers such as John Firman and Anne Gila, in *The Primal Wound*. Happily, psychosynthesis is a broad church, and draws not only on early psychoanalytic principles but also on spiritual traditions from the East as well as the West, and there is room for many other perspectives than theirs.

A truly healthy psychotherapeutic approach encourages each person to be fully who they are, with less inner conflict, more energy to tackle life's real challenges, less susceptibility to criticism and rejection, and a greater sense of inner conviction that one is turning out exactly as one is supposed to. Queer people in psychotherapy often challenge traditional notions of relationships, gender, and sexual expression, and in order to fully respect the mystery and wonder of human evolution we need to listen to each queer story with an ear for what is new, what is trying to emerge and break free from

convention. The moment we attempt to impose, directly or indirectly, consciously or unconsciously, a model of relating or sexuality that is based on the monogamous heterosexual model, we have lost faith with our queer clients, we run the risk of driving them further into depression or self-alienation. Kenneth Lewes writes eloquently on this, challenging the bias in current psychoanalytic thinking towards the relational. Queer people look to us as therapists to honour their journey so far, not to dismiss it. The truly challenging notion, that real change can only begin with complete acceptance, implies that each queer person has to begin their healing journey by a detailed examination of their own lives and ascertain which aspects are natural forms of self-expression, and which are the result of pernicious cultural attitudes towards sex, gender difference, creativity, and the very notion of individuality itself. The happy 'ending' of a happy monogamous relationship is something that so many well-meaning people wish for me, and for other gay men like me - if only we'd 'settle down' with a nice man and stop this endless searching, this adventuring, this restlessness. This play. Being a single sexual man is not supposed to be satisfying or nourishing or the mark of healthy psychological development. I must, therefore, have not had the right therapy to see the error of my ways, am in complete

denial over my sex addiction, not overcome my resistance to intimacy, stubbornly remained attached to the faulty container of the sexualised, perverse sexual encounter, and obviously been unable to tolerate ambivalence in relationships and the lack of control.

Or is that just what being a man is like?

To look at the role of sex in the lives of many men, and our engagement with cruising, in a non-shaming, gentle, transpersonal light, is essential in order to work towards a lasting, workable, inner peace. By making the desire to commune conscious, by seeing sex as a creative form of self-expression, we can begin to enjoy ourselves in our transgression, and even begin to

bring that puckish, transgressive queer spirit to bear in our public lives. It changes from being an experience that is driven and cold and shame-filled, often quite risky, to one that is less compulsive, more enjoyable, and friendlier. More responsible. And actually quite liberating. But it's not easy. Making peace, whether intrapsychically or across tribal/nationalistic schisms, is a painful, often intractable business. Many mystical traditions speak of the *essentially* disturbing experience of contact with the transpersonal, an eruption of the sacred. We should not accept that because we find ourselves so disturbed that we are diseased, sinful, and defective. We are as God, or Shiva, or Darwin, or Freud, made us. Not quite monks of Dionysus. But differently blessed.

### Further Reading

Lewes, Kenneth *Homosexuality, Homophobia, and Gay-Friendly Psychoanalysis*. In D. Moss (ed.). *Hating in the 1<sup>st</sup> Person Plural* Other Press, 2003, New York

Lingiardi, Vittorio *Men in Love: Male Homosexualities from Ganymede to Batman*, Open Court, 2002, Peru: Illinois

Moore, D. *Diary of a Man* Hot Press, 2005, Dublin

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