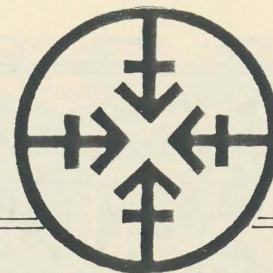


gender quest



THE QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF KINDRED SPIRITS

WINTER 2000

TO SET OUR LIGHT ON A HILL

by Louise Shea

The winter wind is sharp and unremitting along the Canadian border with New England. Trees and shrubs and brush bend and sway in the darkness, which echoes with a faint whistling sound. But the waxing quarter moon, low in the western sky over the forest, gleams and glistens like finely polished pewter. This is the time of what Starhawk calls "twilight vision".

Between Winter Solstice 1999 and Day One of the New Millennium, the moon came closer to Earth than ever before in our lifetime. It will not be that close again until 2065. The solstice moon was visibly larger on the horizon, and visibly brighter, and its light poured into the forest and over the meadows on the mountain where I live with astonishing radiance and sparkling clarity. Reflected off the snow cover, it was spectral, even in the small hours of the morning when I ventured outside with Lydia, my dog, into a softly glowing white silence that enfolded both of us.

In the ancient poetic colleges and covens of Wales and Ireland, where my ancestors worshipped in pre-Christian, pre-patriarchal times, the Lunar Goddess was felt to be most present when Her light was full, and it filled the local community's sacred grove of trees -- spirit light itself, the same light that bathed our tiny planet with extraordinary fullness at this time of transition from the 20th to the 21st century.



We, who are wiccans and daughters of the Lunar Goddess in a very special way, can perhaps see in this cosmic coincidence both a symbol of the fact that our time is nigh to take our place, rightfully, in human society, and a reminder that starlight vision works gently, quietly and compassionately. It also works forcefully and with deliberate intent to transform and undermine the unthinking attitudes, prejudices and obsolete conditioned responses of our violent and greedy, gender-dualistic, woman-hating, male-superior society.

To be a wiccan, or a witch, is to be one who influences the flow of daily events, one who can bend and shape events to her will, compassionately, but nonetheless forcefully and insistently. The late Senator Robert Kennedy, no stranger to personal agony and despair, and the American political system's last genuine radical, its last true friend of the despised and the disinherited elements in American society, was fond of declaring, in the words of George Bernard Shaw, "If not us, who? If not now, when?"

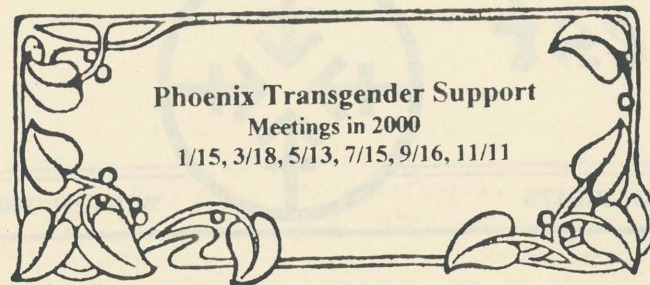
Those are, I submit, salutary words to keep in mind as opportunities unfold for us in this new century, to let people know who we are and to bend or shape events to the advantage of the truth about transgendered people. Our time has come. We have information resources at our fingertips unparalleled in human history, resources which can also create and sustain a large, indeed a global, cyber-community of activists, lobbyists, artists and thinkers.

Our torch has been passed since ancient shamanic times but, with the arrival of patriarchy, its light went underground except, perhaps, among the poets. "The truth is," wrote Samuel Taylor Coleridge, "that a great mind must be androgynous, having the characteristics of both sexes."

And, again, Virginia Woolf: "It is fatal to be a man or a woman pure and simple; one must be woman-manly or man-womanly... The whole of the mind must be wide open... There must be freedom and there must be peace."

John Winthrop, standing on the deck of the Mayflower in Cape Cod Bay in 1620, envisioned a community that would be "like a light set on a hill."

The bright light of our two-spirit torch has been passed to us from a long and distinguished and often hard-suffering line of ancestors. Now is the time to let it shine brightly again, in open daylight, and even to set it on a hill for all to see for all time to come.



Phoenix Transgender Support
Meetings in 2000
1/15, 3/18, 5/13, 7/15, 9/16, 11/11

TRAVELING MEDICINE SHOW TO PERFORM AT IFGE CONFERENCE IN WASHINGTON

A specially tailored script is in the works, and a dozen or so kindred spirits have signed on to perform a short but colorful piece of ritual theatre at the Luncheon on Friday, March 24. The theme for the day is "Religion and Politics". We will be sharing the stage with Riki Anne Wilchins and Dana Rivers. Imagine that.

ENVISIONING THE MEDICINE SHOW

Let us dream together... the bigger picture. The reason we had such a successful debut last Autumn at Southern Comfort was that each of us had been preparing in various ways for such a performance for a long time. The time had come. We were ready, and our audience was ready.

The first seven years of Kindred Spirits had been mostly about sharing our healing and empowerment. It was inevitable that we would next be looking for a special way to take our gifts out to the world. As transgendered shamans, nothing could be more natural and appropriate than for us to express ourselves through the art of ritual theatre.

Our medicine shows can take any any number of forms, convey all sorts of messages, feature unusual performers, and reach lots of different audiences. We are the dreamers of this dream to share our healing magic. Please come and bring your visions to the Medicine Show Launch this May.

Kindred Spirits Retreats & Guest House

Founded in 1993, and dedicated to the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical well-being of all transgendered people. We address these concerns through regional gatherings, guest facilities, a traveling medicine show, electronic and print media. Submissions to this newsletter are always welcome. Send simple text (no attachments) to: hollyfairy@juno.com, or hard copy to: Kindred Spirits, c/o 395 Lakey Gap Acres, Black Mountain, NC 28711-9558. Any issues to which you have contributed will be free of charge. A year's subscription to *gender quest* (4 issues) costs \$8. Make check or money order payable to: Kindred Spirits. For more information, you may phone: 828-669-3889 (9:00am - 9:00pm)

KINDRED SPIRITS EVENTS IN 2000

January-April
BODHITREE HOUSE LABOR DAYS - Black Mtn. NC
Kindred Spirits are welcome to come spend a weekend (or any time) with us to help with hands-on construction of the guesthouse. You will be housed and fed, and we will have a good time! Please call us when you think you can come.

April 30 (Sunday)
MAY DAY - Black Mountain, NC
Primarily for local people. a traditional celebration of Spring (a milder version of pagan Beltane), with costumes and face-painting, a May-pole dance, feasting and sweet fellowship.

May 27 - June 4 (Sat. - the next Sunday)
MEDICINE SHOW LAUNCH - Sweetwater, WV
A week-long intensive collaboration to create performance pieces that will tour. Primarily for the writers and conceptualizers, and business support people who will produce, promote and book the shows. Performers will be cast later.

June 23 - 25 (Friday - Sunday)
SOLSTICE CIRCLE - Black Mountain, NC
This will be the first circle ever hosted at our new space. It will focus on Sun-Heart sharing. It will also be a consecration of the BodhiTree House, and an affirmation of Kindred Spirits and our visions into the next millennium. Come share this powerful moment in our history.

August 17 - 20 (Thursday - Sunday)
8th ANNUAL CIRCLE - Hot Springs, NC
Our primary event, celebrating the growing traditions and visions of Kindred Spirits. Your opportunity to share in a rich, life-altering experience at the historic Sunnybank Inn, Max Patch Bald, mountain streams, hot tubs, etc. This is oriented toward our committed, visionary, fun-loving veterans, as well as welcoming newcomers.

October 28 - 29 (Sat. - Sun).
HALLOWEEN - Asheville, NC
While this may be called the "Crossdresser's National Holiday", we Kindred Spirits may prefer to take our magical presence out into this "safe space" in a good way of transformation for all, and in the pagan spirit of Samhain.

November 3 -5 (Friday - Sunday)
ZEN RETREAT - Black Mountain, NC
Silent, meditative space to sit, walk, work indoors and out, and be replenished in a natural space with nourishing food and evening discussion sessions. A most powerful tool to do your real inner work. This will be led by Zantui Rose.

There may also be ad hoc events that will be publicized on our web site: www.TranSpirits.org. You may schedule a vision quest at Dixon Mountain any time.

BODHITREE HOUSE PROGRESS REPORT

Construction has slowed considerably with the recent winter storms, but there is much to report since the last newsletter. The framing is all but finished, the roof is on, and nearly all the siding, doors and windows. The plumbing is roughed in, and three kindred spirits are coming soon to help wire up all the electric service. Once the ground thaws, footers will be dug to build the four deck frames. Then we will begin finishing the interior. There will be much to do until May.

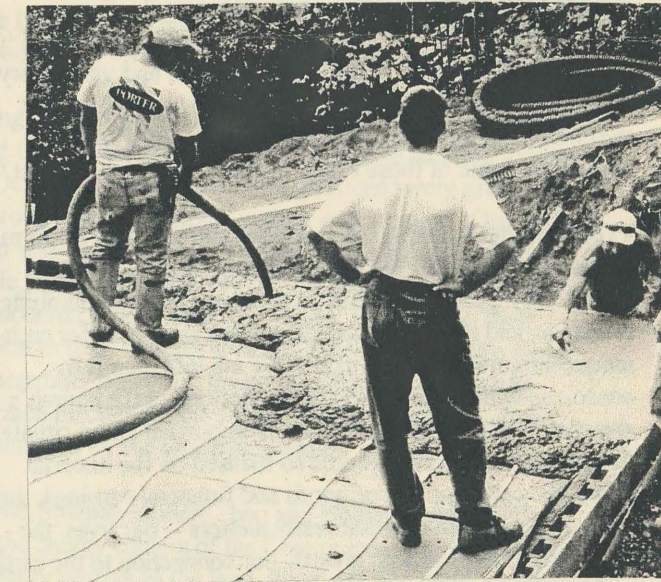
We are grateful to all who have come to help us work over the last five months, and to those who are planning to help us finish. And we want to thank all of you who have responded to our fund-raising appeal. But please don't give up yet. Your support is still needed to help us complete the project.



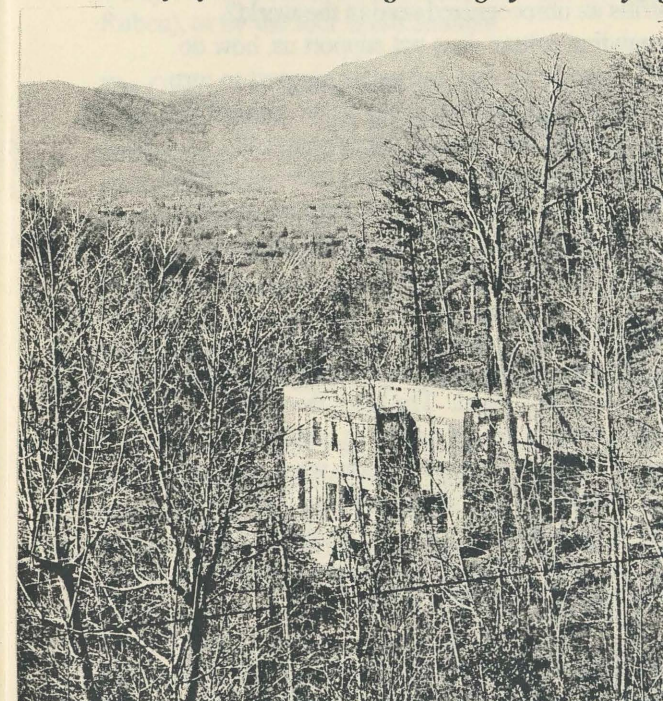
Progress up til Solstice



Jessy Lynn Smith & Angela Brightfeather laying pipe



Pouring the heated slab



A view of Craggy Dome



Emily Singleton & Annie Johnson, chainsaw mommas

SEE YOU IN THE CIRCLE

by Zantui Rose

The archives of our past experiences are full of voices from significant people who doubted our truth. What follows is a peek into my archives, where the inner dialogue of my self-doubt exists.

"What do you want to be when you grow up, little girl?" "I want to be a Ceremonialist." "What's that?" "A person who guides a sacred ceremonial event for another." "You mean like a wedding or a park dedication?" "Yes, or a transition from career to career, or a releasing of painful memories from a relationship that no longer serves, or a passage from one truth to another, or an integration of two step children in a blended family, or a celebration of the season's change, or an honoring of one's personal commitment to stop alcohol consumption, or, or, or."

"Okay, I get the idea. Sounds a bit unusual and unnecessary. I can understand for a wedding or a death, something that the church recognizes as needing a ritual. But I'm not so sure about some of those other 'events'. What's the point?"

"You see, that is exactly the problem and why this art form needs to be revived. We have forgotten the point. The present-day church's attempt at ritual has become numbing, mundane, and rote. The passion is gone, the intent for each unique situation does not exist. We are less than fully conscious while going through the motions of the church's rhetoric. We have forgotten what is important about rituals in our lives. We have become so focused on the material plane, the consumption of goods and financial earnings, that we are missing out on what really matters -- our lives, the progress of our Spiritual growth, our connection to the earth and its vibratory frequencies and our own journeys. Our lives are passing by with such little honoring of our paths. We go through portals of change and don't even know it, except to complain about the emotional responses brought by change. We dedicate ourselves to the existence of life on the surface and neglect to become aware of, to connect to, and to facilitate the journey that travels beneath the appearance of things.

"Ritual, creating ceremony, honors the deeper existence. It, in fact, works on a plane of existence that is far more powerful than what appears on the surface of the material world. Unfortunately, manifesting deep changes, working on the Soul's subtle consciousness is unusual work in our culture. Indigenous cultures, however, knew the value of the ceremony. Aborigines spent two hours a day gathering food. The rest of their waking time was spent in ritual, song and dance. The veil between the Dreamtime of the Ancestors and the walk on the earth was very thin for Aborigines, who walked with nearly complete consciousness in both worlds."

"Well, that is all well and good but this is the 21st century. Time marches on. We don't do that anymore. Trying to revive that notion seems fruitless."



"Certainly, not everyone is interested in walking on the inner plane. It does take a belief in what we call magic, but what is, in truth, nothing miraculous at all. All of us have the ability to interact with all of life's flows and energies, seen and unseen. Sometimes it takes a guide or facilitator to open the sacred path so the healing, celebrating, transforming, renewing, etc. can take place. I help open the space, the recipient of the ceremony brings the intent, and it happens!"

I have this dialogue over and over in my head, facing the voices that say I am foolish, living in some other awareness out there in the ozone. I went through childhood and into the first half of my adulthood with the people around me telling me I was not living in the 'real world'. Almost all of my major choices were ridiculed, scorned, or at least ignored.

Most recently I have crossed another bridge and stepped onto, once again, a foreign shore where my intention for contribution and service seems incongruent with the world at large. How do we hold and act upon the belief that we have something to offer the world that both fulfills us in the giving, and fulfills an unrecognized need in the world? When the surrounding culture does not support us, how do we go forward? How do we find and gather support to turn the dream, the vision, into fruition? How do we turn off the negative voices planted there by past, sometimes well intended, teachers and parents? How do we move upstream with a cargo that to us, at least, is precious beyond words? How do we rid ourselves of the demons that ego sends us, and finally come to believe in ourselves?

Oddly enough, my method to make these changes on a deeper plane is the very thing I am now struggling to put out into the world -- ceremony, ritual. The place that fear resides is the subconscious, and it makes its way to the conscious plane where we let it run the show when making choices. For me, ceremony extends an arm into fear's nest, yanks it loose and sends it on its way. The tools of ritual then replace the vacancy with powerful images, to create on every plane of existence a truth that works for me.

So, I'm off to light my candle and incense, to open my bag of ritual tools and to give birth to the Ceremonialist. See you in the circle.

JOURNEY TO THE CENTER OF THE SOUL

by Shelley Heatther Emerson

Words cannot describe my experience in Peru. All I can offer are a few thoughts/experiences about the Journey.

We were a group of 12 adventurous people, led by our Spirit-Guide, Victoria -- an extraordinary being. She has been my Body-Mind-Spirit Guide for three years and, obviously, I trust her judgement implicitly as do my fellow travelers. After a year's preparation, we were off to Peru during the first two weeks in October, 1999. We spent five days in Cusco (elevation 11,000 feet, population 2+ million), two days in Pisac (10,000 feet, population 30,000) and three days in Machu Picchu (population 10,000). The modern day village of Machu Picchu is at 8,000 feet, the Inca ruins are at 10,000 feet and the Mountain Peak itself is at about 11,000 feet. Cusco and Pisac are agricultural communities located in high grasslands, and Machu Picchu is now mostly a tourist town in a rainforest.

Some in our group suffered through altitude sickness the first couple of days. I experienced only a minor background headache. We ate mostly vegetable soup, fresh lake trout, some chicken, one pizza and lots of pre-packaged North American "power bars". We climbed ancient Incan steps to ceremonial grounds and rocks and ruins and caves in the awesome Andes Mountains. Because of the altitude, on some of these ascents we would climb about 20 steps, then have to rest for a minute or two before continuing on to the next 20 steps. It was an arduous, sometimes perilous adventure. We all helped each other along the paths, steps, ledges, etc. weighed down by our snacks, water and cameras. While it was usually warm at the beginning of our ascents, it was usually freezing at the top with strong, penetrating winds. We had at least one, but most often two ceremonies each day led by either of our two Peruvian Shaman guides (Theo and Ruben), or by the four Q'ero Shaman.

The Q'ero people were "rediscovered" by the outside world back in the 1980's. They are direct descendants of the Inca and live high up in the Andes at about 17-20,000 feet. They journeyed "down" to our level. Theo and Ruben discussed the history and the spiritualism of the Inca (especially their advanced knowledge and use of magnetic energy), and performed Shamanic rituals that included chanting, singing, imagery and sound (bead shakers, waterfalls and winds whipping through caves). The Q'ero performed what they call a "despacho" ceremony, in which we all participated.

They passed around a set of 3 plant leaves to each of us and had us blow our "inner breath" onto the leaves as we held them with our fingers. Then we would pass the leaves back to the Q'ero performing the ceremony. He would place the leaves on a llama-wool cloth in a circular arrangement. He would also place objects on the cloth collected from the four regions of Peru (rainforest, desert, seacoast, grasslands) outside the circle of leaves at the North, South, East and West points. Inside the circle of leaves, he placed bits of food and sweets (like bits of cookies, crackers, corn kernels,

etc.), polished stones, pieces of wood, etc. After all the articles were in place, he would wrap up the cloth into a pouch-like shape. He would then come up to each one of us, have us stand, and he would repeat a ritual of words as he touched several areas of our body with the pouch. He would then have us blow our "inner breath" onto the pouch. The pouch was saved (sometimes several at a time are saved) to be taken later to specific sites where a fire was started and the pouch was burned.

What does all this mean? This ritual is performed as a giving of our gifts (energetic as well as physical) to Father Sky, Mother Earth, the Wind and the Rain to represent our oneness and our interdependence with them. Burning the Despacho Pouch transforms our physical gifts into energy which is absorbed into Father Sky, dispersed by the Wind, and brought by the Rain down to Mother Earth which absorbs the energy and the nutrients to enrich its soil. Mother Earth (which they call Pachu Mama) will then provide for us a bounty of food to feed our bodies and our souls.

During the two weeks we were there, we participated in about five Despacho Ceremonies and were allowed to view one Despacho Pouch burning (a privilege rarely given any of the groups who participate in their ceremonies). Our entire group was impressed and amazed by the humility of these people, and the friendliness and the seriousness with which they undertook their shamanic work. That's right, their position in their villages is as full time Shaman. We all felt the incredibly powerful, loving energy constantly being generated throughout the Despacho Ceremonies by these Shaman, and by the group as a whole.

Our two Shaman guides, Theo and Ruben, mostly worked with the energy centers of the Chakra in combination with the energy centers of the land, the rivers, the wind and the fire. We spent an entire evening after dark in Machu Picchu and participated in three Shamanic ceremonies which opened our energy fields up to Mother Earth (Pachu Mama, via its stone vortexes) and Father Sky.

On the fourth day, I began to see and feel the energy of the mountains and rivers and sky getting "close" to me. Everything was very "close". I began seeing images of floods, mild and horrific, that happened centuries ago. By the time we got to Machu Picchu, I could feel the energy pouring out from everywhere. During the evening we spent at Machu Picchu in the dark, we participated in a Shamanic ceremony while sitting on a ledge with our backs against the famous ceremonial Pachu Mama vortex stone. During the ceremony, I began to see images of all of the members of our group living back about 2,500 years ago in Incan times as part of the inhabitants of Machu Picchu. I saw who we were and what we were doing -- we had all been there before! It sent shivers throughout my entire body. I finally understood what is meant by a "kundalini" experience. I would continue to see these images for the next two days.

That night, as I began my nightly journaling, a voice contacted me through my energy field and began dictating infor-

mation about each member of our group and their past life at Machu Picchu. I began writing furiously, trying to let it flow as it was being channeled, trying not to let my own personality interpret what I heard. I wrote until about 3 am, and did the same the next evening. I struggled with the meaning and purpose of all this and was in such a high-energy state that I began to suffer physically, developing an extreme headache throughout my entire brain and a very sore throat, combined with continuous coughing. Since I had not been told the purpose of all this, and even felt delusional at times, I was afraid to share what was going on with all but one member of the group.

During our daily "integration" session with Victoria (on the third day of my "channeling experience"), she opened her introduction to the session with words about "letting true feelings and experiences come forward in an honest, heart-centered manner" -- with which I usually have no problem at all. But, as she was speaking, I felt the fear of expressing my experience build. As she kept speaking, I felt as if she were reading my fear and trying to ease it. What would my fellow travelers think? Was I making this up? Did I just want attention? Was I truly delusional? What was the purpose of all this anyway? My internal struggle increased steadily as members of the group began to speak about their experiences during the last couple of days. I then spoke loudly, inwardly to Spirit: "What is this all about?" To my amazement, I got a reply which I immediately transcribed into my journal:

"You all were brought to this place to reunite. You were all principal characters in a rebellion against atrocities being committed by those in power during your time at Machu Picchu. You all died, except for one, as a result of your efforts before you could change social attitudes. You were all brought back to this place to connect again energetically. If you all can attain one mind and one heart, you will begin to change not only the present, but also the ever-present past. If your efforts are successful, over what you call 'time', the effect on people's attitude toward each other and, therefore, toward Pachu Mama, will occur exponentially. Many other groups are being brought back to the land of the Inca to perform the same task. This is in accordance with the overall plan to prevent present man from destroying himself (in his ignorance and arrogance) through the destruction of Pachu Mama. There is an exception in the group. There is one among you who was one of the leaders of those who slaughtered you. He is here to be given a chance at reconciliation and reparation. You will keep your hearts open to him to afford him every opportunity. He has lived many existences in tremendous pain through his denial. He will be given another chance here. It is for him to discover this."

Having received this information, I raised my hand, caught the attention of Victoria and was given the floor. Feeling extremely vulnerable and emotional, I began to speak about the events of the past few days and my sudden revelation. The group listened intently and had opened into their heart-centered space, allowing them to accept what I was saying. Several indicated they had been privy to parts of the images

and information that was being channeled through me. We were, at that moment, one mind and one heart and one spirit. We were all transformed at that moment. We were all connected, were all changed, forever.

I grew more ill and weak as the evening passed into night. At one point, I felt my head ready to explode, and my throat and lungs on fire. Three of the people in our group came to my aid by performing energetic healing on me, and provided me with antibiotics and headache medicine. I thought I was going to die. I started telling one of them, Beverly, to relate messages to some people for me, just in case. I felt I was speaking deliriously. My friends worked on me and worked on me until they finally got me calmed down and relaxed enough to go to sleep at around 3 am. I awoke at 8am, feeling much, much better, but still with quite a cough and a very hoarse voice. There is much, much more that happened on the trip, and much more that has happened since my return, but that will wait for another writing.

Was one of my goals for my journey to Peru to seek answers about my TG life? Of course. Did I find any answers or did I just gain more questions? Both. My TG life is part of my total spirit's experience and will be influenced by this experience. In Peru, my former existence died and my new life has begun. I am change, manifest. I am still in the process of recovering from the incredible energetic experience I had there. Many things have manifest in this physical existence since the trip, both spiritually and physically. I am totally re-evaluating my TS path from a spiritual point of view. I thought I had been doing that all along, but I now have an additional set of criteria from which I can gain insight on my spiritual and my TS journey.

TRANSGENDER LINEAGE

by Christina C.

Breathing in, breathing out. We do it all the time. Seems pretty simple actually. So simple that we forget about breathing. We take breathing for granted. But what would be the consequences of not. Of not breathing. Pretty drastic actually. Something so simple, but so important that our very life depends on whether or not there is a next breath... we forget about. We forget about a lot of things. Sometimes we forget about our life... and what it is like to be living this life. Just as it is. Just like breathing in and breathing out. We forget to notice what it is like to be alive.

With each breath we take in the sky, and then a little while later we put the sky back into the world by breathing out. Are we breathing the sky or is the sky breathing us? Hard to say actually. The sky has been around a long time. It has lent itself to the breathing of a lot of beings over the years, and some of those beings are our transgender kin. It is interesting to ponder what our kin may have left in the sky for us to breathe. Our kin have in fact left a lot of things for us to breathe in... to live... in their footsteps. With each breath, we assert that we are alive. And that is what our kin

do for us. They assert that to live, any life, including the challenges and the clarity of a transgender life, is to assert the miracle that we are alive. We are alive with the clarity of vision that lifts the fog of obsession from the notion of gender. Our kin leave that message in the sky for us to breathe. It is one of the responsibilities of our lives to perpetuate that message.

Every transgender being leaves the mark of what they do from moment to moment on the world. Every word, every act that we extend into the world causes a ripple across humanity that extends for all time. Today, you stand up and speak with clarity to someone who needs to know the Truth of what it is to live a transgender life. No hype, no sticky web of feelings, just the Truth. The signature of Truth is its irrefutable clarity, and so that person passes on that clarity to another, and so on and so on. Parent expresses to child, who expresses to friends, to parents, to relatives, to strangers, to historians, and on and on and on, across all generations, all cultures and all time. The Truth dissolves oppression and changes the world. What we do is vitally important, and taking responsibility for our actions is a serious commitment. What we do, lasts forever.

When we look out into the world, we can see the signature of all the transgender beings that have preceded us as well as those still alive. Their every act of clarity has lasted and impacts directly on our lives. We can find pride in our history, we have more choices, things are better than they once were, things are different because of the acts of Truth of our kin. This transgender signature upon the world is our lineage. A lineage not of ancestral blood but of ancestral mind... of ancestral being. The lineage survives and is perpetuated by living the only life we have any control at all over... our life... with clarity. In so doing, the lineage is ours for the living. Like breathing in and breathing out, you have to notice what is there. A pillar of strength and clarity. A guidebook on the clarity of transgender mind. Useful. To see it, to use it, you must notice it is there and has always been there. You have to pay attention.

Paying attention, we notice that not every breath is the same. Every moment of our lives is fresh, new and different. Feelings come and go, but the one feeling them is always there to notice... if we pay attention to what is actually going on. Our lineage leaves clarity in the sky for us to breathe, to notice that our lives arise fresh in every moment. To notice that life, our life, arises perfectly free. To awaken to the clarity that if we don't pay attention to our life as it is, we create a gap. It is within that gap that clarity and freedom are lost. Yet, clarity and freedom are always there to be recovered when we remember to pay attention. To see through the endless silly notions that float in society but which we all know are hollow. To stop "wanting" things to be different even when we haven't actually noticed how they are! Right now, in this moment, how are you, what is really going on? To breathe in and breathe out and actually notice what that's like. To notice how life is, to notice our lineage, just as it is. Perfectly free. To be enjoyed!

THE TYRANNY OF PASSING

by Holly Boswell

The range of human expression we have come to know as "transgender" has been accommodated and even honored throughout the vast majority of history. Why, then, are we being told by our so-called sophisticated, contemporary society to cloak ourselves in the guise of normalcy?

As Leslie Feinberg wrote, "It is *passing* that's historically new. Passing means hiding. Passing means invisibility. Transgendered people should be able to live and express their gender without criticism or threats of violence. But that is not the case today."

In actuality, the pressure of gender conformance is felt by all people, but the fear and denial surrounding transgender expression is nothing short of tyrannical. As any observer of a transgender support group meeting could attest, if the chosen topic is not somehow already related to our preoccupation with passing, it is the urgent but dreaded subtext -- the proverbial elephant in the middle of the room. And for every person present, there are ten more who will never leave their closets for fear of not passing.

But how many would choose to run this gauntlet if they believed they had the choice? If we didn't have to pass, would we still make all the effort? Would we do it just for fun? If passing was no longer required, how would we choose to express ourselves? I have taken this elephant for a ride at three large transgender gatherings. What follows are the composite answers to three questions I posed there: What are the advantages of passing? What are the disadvantages? And ideally, how would you want to express yourself?

The Advantages

These responses were expressed as four discernible concerns: acceptance, comfort, survival, and thriving.

Passing makes it easier for others to accept us. We get affirmed in our new identity. Others treat us as we prefer to be treated, and mirror us back the way we see ourselves. We get to belong, rather than being cast out as a misfit. We are allowed entry into previously forbidden worlds. Concurrently, we gain access to new worlds within ourselves which had lacked doorways. We become able to affirm our own expectations of how we believe we should be. We may achieve a greater sense of congruity between our inner and outer being. As we experience deep joy in this, we are less reminded of the unhappiness we felt in our former gender.

We increase our comfort levels and ease of living. Society rewards us for filling its prescribed roles, for successfully assimilating. Those family members and friends who still associate with us can breathe a sigh of relief. Neither do we risk making others embarrassed or uncomfortable out in public. We no longer have to keep explaining ourselves to the uninitiated, and seldom have to impose our gender issues on others.

No longer an obvious target, our security and chances of survival are enhanced. We no longer arouse fear in others, and are not perceived as a threat. We experience less hassles and less stress. In fact, we are taken just as seriously as anyone else, and can be perceived as a credible, worthwhile and effective human being. We can get a job, be self-supporting, and even have a decent career.

If we can pass, we can actually thrive. We are granted entitlement to equal opportunity for growth and happiness. We get to experience the joy of creating oneself intentionally from within, amending our birthright. We are privileged to work the magic of altering conventional reality. We are extraordinary beings who, by passing, get to enjoy ordinary functioning in the world. We have a lot more options in life than if we didn't pass – including the option to out ourselves whenever we want, and still not suffer as much.

The Disadvantages

Some were stumped at first, not ever imagining there could be any disadvantages to passing. But soon there was a torrent of grievance spilling forth: deceit and self-betrayal, petty preoccupations, disconnection, the perpetuation of injustice, and the overall cost.

Passing is a lie. However necessary or justifiable it may be, when we create a false presumption – even unintentionally – we are deceiving others. The very premise of our transgenering forces us into dishonesty at every turn. The culture lacks a context of shared experience, and even our language betrays us. There aren't enough words for us. Passing prevents us from showing who we fully are. And as we persist in passing, we must maintain elaborate webs of secrets and lies. We may come to feel that others are seeing less of our essence as we project ourselves through what Sandra Bem calls "the lenses of gender".

Even more perilous, is losing our sense of self. We undermine our original purpose of self-revelation when we deny our past, the whole of our truth, and risk losing ourselves in our new gender role. We may mistake our acceptance of the role with true self-acceptance. We thereby forfeit the uniqueness of our being, and cannot show all our true colors. We end up betraying ourselves to gender.

Indeed, there is something about our transgenering that can become an all-consuming obsession. In our passion to pass, we get caught up in every manner of petty preoccupation. We endure the bother and discomfort of every conceivable prosthetic, the extreme rigors of grooming and the torture of ill-fitting, surrealistic garments, all of which must be vigilantly maintained for indefinite periods of time. Passing also requires that we maintain appropriate carriage, affect and behavior, not to mention vocal range. We become shamelessly self-absorbed, all in the vain effort to look good and be liked and accepted.

We transgenered are intimately familiar with the state of disconnection. Though it begins with the alienation caused

by gender conflicts, one would expect it to subside after gender-shift. Unfortunately, many who pass report new forms of disconnection, sometimes even feeling disconnected from themselves. They may find themselves cut off from their personal history in their former gender. They have family and friends who can't recognize them so convincingly transformed, and don't know how to relate. Some friends are left behind, rather than invited to adjust. They become disconnected from former roles, such as partner, parent, or worker. There is a loss of commonality with those who once shared the former gender, and with former circles of people. Sometimes, there is a choice to not be seen in public with those who do not pass.

Recognizing that, when we pass, we inadvertently perpetuate the injustices of the gender system, strikes a deep and troubling chord among transgendered people. There is no happy ending when the slave becomes the master, nor is there any progress when one merely trades one gender closet for another. One simply inherits the other set of biases, and is subject to new and different forms of discrimination. Passing inevitably reinforces sex-role stereotyping, sexism, and gender duality.

In addition to the foregoing itemization of the price of passing, there is the obvious financial expense of wardrobe counseling, hormone therapy, electrolysis, various surgeries, and legal fees. There are a host of health risks – some known, some yet to be anticipated – associated with these bodily interventions. But there are also less tangible costs incurred by passing, like having the effectiveness of our political statements compromised. Others can't learn from us and benefit from the uniqueness of our gifts if we pretend to be ordinary and hide ourselves. And as a final word of caution, "passing" is a precarious set-up for "failing".

The Ideal

Whether we choose at this time to pass or not to pass, what we really want is the same as what everyone wants: acceptance, respect, love, and freedom.

We transgendered want acceptance, respect, and love from others for who we really are. We want to accept, respect, and love others from our truth, for who they really are. And we want to be capable and supported in accepting, respecting, and loving ourselves as we really are. We want to be equal with all beings in this regard.

We want to be free of fear and shame and persecution. Free from any gender designation or role expectations. Free to reintegrate all the parts of ourselves that have gotten separated. Free to explore and become fully ourselves in body, heart, mind, and spirit. Free to play any role at any time – for fun and fulfillment, and in service to others. And we want the freedom to remain fluid and to change at will. The only "passing" we really want is the freedom to *pass on through* to true selfhood. Isn't it possible that this is what everyone wants?