

Queer Spirituality

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In recent years there has been an increased interest in spirituality. Today people have a variety of ways to address spiritual matters, some of which include: therapy, self-help books, workshops, retreat centers, twelve-step groups, meditation, exercise, and rituals. As a result of these various practices specific spiritualities are being manifested by groups with common histories, cultures, experiences, and ethnicities. Some of these have been named "Feminist Spirituality," "Women's Spirituality," "Men's Spirituality," and "Native American Spirituality."

Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, and Transgender people have a unique history as spiritual people and our expressions of spirituality are being manifested in powerful and healing ways today. Those expressions are known as "Queer Spirituality."

The Power of Naming

Queer Spirituality. These two words have a multiplicity of meaning alone, much less when they are put together. Both words have had negative meanings attached to them in the course of history, but today they are being reclaimed as positive words. Oppressed peoples over the years have understood the power and importance of choosing their own words to name themselves rather than allowing the dominant culture to assign negative meaning to certain words that are used to demonize a group of people. Words are powerful tools used to describe experience and shape reality. African American people have reclaimed the word 'Black' for themselves and Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people have reclaimed the word 'Queer' for themselves.

We have reclaimed 'Queer' as an active word, a questioning word, a creative word and a challenging word. When we 'Queer' disciplines such as history, literature or religion we are actively looking for Queer people who have been hidden or lost by those disciplines. To Queer these disciplines is also to challenge their homophobic biases. Queer is also an indeterminate or generative word, pointing to the ways all identities are fluid and changing.

The word "spirituality" was first used in the 17th century as a negative word to describe elite, esoteric religious practices. It has also been a suspect word over the years to describe an "anything goes" faith, or an individualistic "navel gazing" faith that is not concerned with real world problems. While some of the suspicion about spirituality still remains today, there are more and more communities who are embracing spirituality as a vital component to every person's faith and the source for social justice.

Spirituality comes from the Latin root, *spirare*, which means *to breathe*. Our spirit is what animates or quickens us. It is what makes us alive. Spirituality, then, is the practice of staying consciously connected with what makes us alive: God, ourselves and others. While "spirituality" is a broad word covering many types of experiences, it is also a word rooted in particularity. Gender, race, sexual orientation and being a member of a particular community all impact and shape one's spirituality.

Our Queer Spiritual Ancestors

Throughout history and across different cultures Queer people have not only been spiritually inclined but respected and revered for their spiritual leadership. In her groundbreaking book, *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds*, Judy Grahn attempted to trace many of the words and behaviors that have been used to define and describe Queer people. There are several chapters in her book that mention the spiritual roles Queer people have played in tribal cultures as shamans, priests and priestesses, and go-betweens.

In his book, *Coming Out Spiritually*, Christian de la Huerta identifies ten spiritual roles that Queer people have assumed throughout the course of history: catalytic transformers, outsiders, consciousness scouts, sacred clowns, keepers of beauty, caregivers, mediators, shamans and priests, the Divine androgyne and gatekeepers. John Boswell has also emphasized the leading role Queer people have played in the Western monastic tradition in his book, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century*.

Walter L. Williams has studied American Indian cultures that venerate the *berdache*, androgynous, cross-dressing people who were considered neither men nor women and thought to be “two-spirited.” The *berdache* had important spiritual functions within the tribe such as healers, dreamers and visionaries, and mediators between the spirit world and the human world.

Because of prejudice and religious abuse Queer people today have rejected or lost our connection with our spiritual heritage. It is time for us to look inside, to do the work of self-discovery and reclaim our spiritual nature as teachers, healers, prophets, artists, visionaries, mediators, messengers, entertainers, priests and priestesses, and keepers of beauty.

Queer Spirituality Today

While many mainline denominations today continue to struggle with sexuality and spirituality, the reality is that more and more Queer people are embracing their spirituality and practicing it in communities of faith. Metropolitan Community Church has been a place where Queer people have been able to rediscover, articulate and live out their spirituality.

The contemporary liberation theologian, Gustavo Gutierrez identifies three stages in the development of a spiritual tradition: (1) a powerful experience that gives insight into the life of the Spirit; (2) reflection on that experience through writing, composition of prayers, liturgy, and art, as well as preaching and teaching; (3) the entrance of those reflections into the larger tradition to be studied, built upon and drawn from.

These three stages are clearly present in the development of a Queer spiritual tradition, especially within MCC. Many people who come to MCC churches for the first time have powerful experiences that give insight into the life of the Spirit. Often these experiences are described as ‘coming home,’ ‘Lazarus experiences,’ ‘wholeness or integration—not having to check sexuality at the door.’

The rich repository of reflections on those experiences can be found in books like *The Lord is My Shepherd and He Knows I'm Gay*; *Ten Spiritual Truths for Successful Living for Gays and Lesbians*; *Daring to Speak Love's Name: A Gay and Lesbian Prayer Book*; *Queering Christ*; *Queering God*; *Gay and Lesbian Theologies*; *Our Tribe: Queer Folks, God, Jesus and the Bible*.

Queer Spirituality has also entered the larger tradition (Gutierrez' third stage) as is evidenced by the increasing number of seminary courses, dissertations and theses that are being produced from the ongoing study of this tradition.

Queer Spiritual Disciplines – Learning to Drink from our Own Wells

A spiritual discipline is a practice that opens us to God. Some classic spiritual disciplines include: prayer, fasting, sacred reading, worship, and almsgiving. A Queer spiritual discipline is a practice that opens Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people to God, the Divine—especially in ourselves. These practices help us to drink from the wells of our own experience as people of faith. They also help us to rediscover our ancestry as spiritual people.

Inspired by the saying from Bernard of Clairvaux, “everyone has to drink from his [or her] own well,” Gutierrez claims spirituality is like living water that springs from the very depths of our own personal experience. History has shown that spirituality has flowed from Queer people in many cultures. What has been and is most important about that spirituality is personal experience. We must continue to value our experience of the Divine. Part of the valuing is also to name the experience, to give form and shape to it for ourselves and future generations.

Coming Out is a life long spiritual practice. Because we live in a heterosexist society, Queers will always be invited to claim their unique identity. It is a lifelong process because it involves the integration and transformation of our Queer identity into the whole of our lives. To speak of coming out as a lifelong process of integration and transformation is to invoke the classic spiritual model of “purgation, illumination, and union.” Coming out as a spiritual practice takes us through these three stages over and over again as we ‘purge’ ourselves of false images and expectations forced upon us by a heterosexist society; welcome the ‘illumination’ or insight that comes from living out of an identity that is more authentic to ourselves; and with every purging of a false life image and illumination from our true or authentic life image will come ‘union,’ connection, and abiding with the Divine that is at the deepest center of ourselves.

Letting Go is a spiritual discipline similar to the ‘purgation’ stage mentioned above. It is a practice that involves freeing ourselves from harmful religious beliefs and institutional expectations that keep us bound and not free. A Queer spirituality often involves the process and practice of letting go of ideas about God, the Bible, church, family, sexuality, and our own bodies that are not true to our experience. What is most important in this spiritual practice is honoring and recognizing that our experience is a source of revelation and can be trusted to point us to the Divine.

Justice Making is a third spiritual discipline which characterizes a Queer spirituality. It involves the hard work of understanding the interlocking nature of oppression. For example, the more we understand the ways homophobia grows out

of sexism and is hidden by issues of race, the more Queers will be able to practice the truth that “none are free, unless all are free.” Justice making is also a spiritual practice that calls us to deal with our own ‘isms’ in the Queer community. Reclaiming a Queer spirituality does not exempt us from doing the work of justice in our own backyard. Finally, justice making is about embracing our sexuality and our spirituality. Queer people living in a heterosexist society often fall into the trap of feeling like we have to choose between our sexuality and our spirituality. The two are integrally related as expressions of who we are as ‘body selves’ in the world.

Queer Lectio Divina is a spiritual discipline that involves reading sacred texts. Lectio Divina means sacred reading. Spiritual practices all over the world engage some form of sacred texts. These texts are windows and guides to the Divine. For Queers in the Judeo-Christian tradition the Bible has been a difficult text because of the way it has been misinterpreted regarding issues of homosexuality. However more and more Queer people of faith are reclaiming the Bible as a sacred text. Reading a text as a spiritual discipline means that instead of reading for information, one reads for formation. It is a meditative reading that allows the words and stories of scripture to open us to the Divine. Not only is the Bible a sacred text for Queers, but our coming out stories and our history can also be sacred texts.

Prayer is a classic spiritual discipline that takes many forms. The phrase “silence equals death” is often invoked in the Queer community. While there is much wisdom in that statement—the more we come out and speak out, the more we will live into our own truth and the more we will dispel harmful stereotypes—it is also true that keeping silence in intentional ways is a profound spiritual act. In an increasingly crowded and complex world, silence is becoming an endangered species. Being intentional about cultivating silence in our lives is a form of prayer and a profound spiritual discipline that opens us to the Divine within ourselves and others. When we keep silence we are able to listen deeply to ourselves and others. We are able to discern specific activities for justice making and letting go.

Worship is an important corporate spiritual discipline. It is a practice in which one can experience the Divine, as well as give expression to those experiences through music, art, preaching, teaching, and liturgy. Worship involves ritual and blessing and is a place where Queer rites of passage such as marriage, baptism, dedications, memorials and celebrations can be expressed.

A Queer spirituality exists today because we are learning to drink from our own wells!

For Further Study:

John Boswell, Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality: Gay People in Western Europe from the Beginning of the Christian Era to the Fourteenth Century. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980.

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Elizabeth Stuart, Daring to Speak Love's Name: A Gay and Lesbian Prayer Book. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1992.

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