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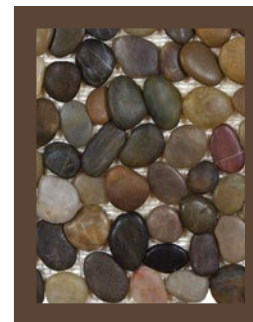
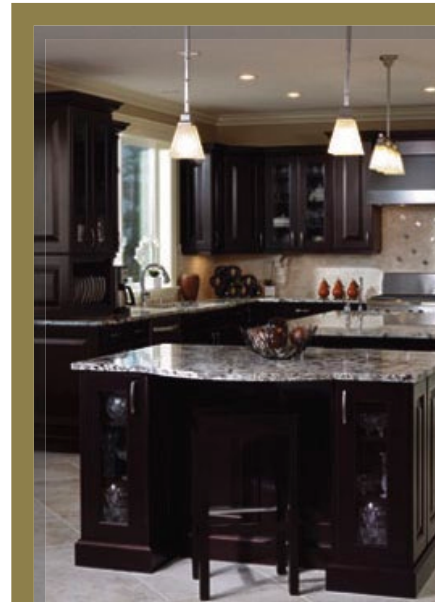
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WINNERS

From the Publisher

Publisher



Welcome to autumnplay 2012! It is our third issue in our quest to explore civilization as we count down to the prophesied Maya Apocalypse, and in this edition we will be diving into the contentious world of religion and spirituality!

It can be hard to give a decisive opinion on the value of organized religion. On one hand there are countless religious charitable causes, and the many religious factions that strive to spread tolerance and acceptance of all peoples. But on the other hand, there is martyrdom for the sake of war and a religious ban on contraceptives facilitating the spread of HIV and AIDS. Religious conflict has a long, plentiful history that continues right into our present. There is the war on terror, which is still embroiled in anti-Muslim sentiment, and let's not forget the aggressive, anti-gay philosophy of the religious southern United States. Those are only a few *western* examples. What place does religion hold in our modern world and what is its relationship to spirituality?

I was born into a Catholic family and I mean a *Catholic* family. We went to church every Sunday faithfully, I was a choir boy and I even served at the altar. Religion was a big part of my early life and I grew up very devout. There was actually one summer in my youth where I prayed before a shrine for two straight days. Yeah.

Even when I got older, I retained a love for the notion of religious belief and, though I am no longer a practicing Catholic, I find the idea of a benevolent higher power to be comforting. Belief, for me, is first and foremost a personal journey, and on that journey I have learned to take the good aspects of organized religion and leave the bad. I can still look at the red letters (the words of Christ in the bible) and see enlightened philosophy, man's search for morality, and the revelations of an adept spiritualist. However, that doesn't necessarily mean I subscribe to ideas of a divine

messiah, a personified devil, or a tally system of sin, guilt and penance.

In fact, the way we think of "sin" can be seen as a relatively new one. Like many ancient religions, the gods of the Ancient Maya were not permanently characterized as either good or evil. In fact, their entire concept of good and evil was vastly different from our modern one; what was good at one time may not be good at another. This moral ambiguity is important to note when considering the gory human sacrifices that the Maya's ritually made to their massive array of gods.

The cyclical nature of time played an important role in Maya religion, which explains the important religious aspect of the Maya calendar. The life cycle of maize was especially significant, as the Maya's main crop, and the God of Maize was a central religious figure. As I've mentioned before, the night sky was seen by the Maya as a window into the workings of the gods, as well as the intersection of all possible worlds. It is strange to think how little the shape of the heavens has changed since the ancient world—we can still look up and see many of the same constellations that the Maya did. Hopefully, future generations will look back and say the same thing about us.

Have you been playing the cover puzzle game? Do not miss a chance to win \$500 in cash. To find our more info see ad in this issue or visit our website www.pinkplaymags.com

Thank you to everyone who has followed us on our journey this year—we are almost there! In a few short months we will be reading the final issue and celebrating the dawn of a brighter tomorrow for us all. Until then, sit back, relax and enjoy reading *autumnplay! 2012 Part 3: Healing the Spirit*, I know I did.

Antoine Elhashem

autumnplay!

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2012 Pt. 3: Healing the Spirit

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While working on our latest issue,

"2012 Part 3: Healing the Spirit," my sister Shelley, our wonderful columnist for "From the Heart," told me she was coming for a visit. She wanted to attend Ignite 2012: An Evening with Grandfather Fire. She'd spoken many times about David Wiley, a *Tsauririkame* (Elder Shaman), and his ability to channel the great spirit Grandfather Fire, so when I went last year I was fascinated, but admit to arriving with an urbanite's skepticism. The experience then, is hard to describe, but I was left with such a revered sense of awe that I gladly agreed to join her around the fire again this year.

Shelley, has long been an explorer of theology and I was reminded of this while working with her on her feature article: "God(s) A User's Guide" (page 12). She mentions that we never grew up in a very religious family, and I very clearly remember the first chat about God, churches and religion I had with my Mom. I was in Scouts at the time, maybe 10, or 11, and every once in a while we ended up in a church—Catholic, I believe. I remember wondering during a service, "Who is this strange man on the stage? Why does he keep telling me I'm a sinner and unless I change my ways I am going to Hell?" I remember wondering if Hell was similar to Mordor, from *Lord of the Rings*.

When I got home, I asked these very questions. There was a pause with baited breath and I knew I had asked Mom one of the Big Questions, and she was taking a moment to decide how best to answer. She sat me down at the kitchen table and told me about how she, my aunt, uncle and grandparents, used to attend church regularly,

until one Easter when they were made fun of for not having new Easter outfits on. Grandma had been making them, but had run out of time to finish them. Incensed at the teasing, both girls decided they were never going back. Seems a silly thing, but I could totally relate to my feelings of being judged by this man on his stage telling me I was bad, when he didn't even know me.

"Religion and God mean a lot of different things to a lot of different people," I remember her telling me, "and you are going to meet a lot of people that believe differently than you do. I think if you hold on to one valuable lesson the Bible teaches everyone, 'Do unto others as you would have them do unto you,' then you'll do just fine."

"Do I have to go back and listen to that man telling me I'm a bad person?" I asked.

"Not if you don't want to," she said and smiled at me.

I'd like to think that I've grown up to be a very tolerant, loving and forgiving person, and I think it's fair to expect the same back. Watching the froth south of the border as the religious right whip themselves into a frenzy around marriage equality and the upcoming U.S. election, has reminded me how much power hate and fear can have. And I have to admit—it scares me.

Our queer community is all too familiar with the sting of organized religions accusing us of being an abomination in the face of whomever they call God. I always shake my head and wonder where the love and forgiveness have gone. It starts with us. Not always an easy task, especially with what we're so often faced with, but healing our spirit leads us to helping others heal theirs.

Jeff Harrison

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God(s)





I've come to the Canadian Museum of Civilization in Ottawa to see the exhibit "God(s) a User's Guide."

A User's Guide

by Shelley A. Harrison



I was enticed by the evocative black and white posters around town—equal sized portraits of members of four major world religions: a Muslim woman in a black hijab, a middle aged prim Christian woman wearing a cross, a Jewish man with the traditional black hat, and an Asian Monk, head shaved. As I walk up the approach hall to the exhibit, a surprising and subversive statement is made. The same four photos are posted, but they shift back and forth from one image to another as you walk past: The Muslim lady becomes the Christian, and the Hasidic Jew becomes the Monk.

I enter the room. There are fluffy white fake clouds suspended overhead. Heaven? The displays are divided by ephemeral white panels hung from the ceiling, and there is simple, pure white furniture and seating. The floor consists of black tiles in the shape of puzzle pieces, precisely fit together. There are several alcoves created by the white divides, each holding artifacts, photos and videos, which illustrate a theme. The atmosphere created is mysterious and compelling. It evokes the same feeling of sacredness one might feel when walking into a church.

A variety of ethnicities are wandering through. An elderly Hindu woman in her sari accompanies her daughter in modern dress. I pass a Muslim couple. A Middle Eastern teenager poses for a photograph. There are whispered languages being spoken I do not recognize. I am impressed by the diversity, more than I have ever been present with in one room.

"Globalization has led to the co-existence of different religions in the same city. This is especially true in Western cities; they have become a melting pot of the world's religions."

I'm fascinated by the quotes in the exhibit, powerful universal themes projected onto the black floor in glowing white, or informational paragraphs beside photos and artifacts. They cut straight to the heart of the archetypal themes of our religious impetus, binding the diversity.

Growing up in South Mountain, Ontario, down a dirt road, was a white bread experience. At Nationview Public School, I don't remember any black, brown, red or yellow kids. In kindergarten, we started each morning singing "Oh Canada!" and reciting the Lord's Prayer, both were poured out over the intercom. I had no clue what the Lord's Prayer was about or whom it was addressing. It was just something to memorize and repeat. My family did not go to church, and I still know very little about the stories in the *Bible*. For me, connection and peace was outdoors roaming freely through nature, playing in my tree house with my brother, and getting to know plants on our property. I liked my kindergarten art teacher very much. Kay played the guitar and taught us songs. She must have been First Nations. She taught us "Hani Couni, Hah, Who, Hani." Later, in my 30's sitting in a sweat lodge, someone sang this song. I began to sing along. I still knew the words.

Light

"Light is central to all religions. Synonymous with life, truth, wisdom, and divine presence, it is often opposed to darkness, obscurity and nothingness."

Every morning and evening, I sit in front of a candle at my altar to quiet myself for prayer. The flame flickers as I begin my two way conversation with Divine, speaking and listening. Fire is the element of the heart energy which connects all things, the spark that animates relationship with all things, and with Divine. The divine aspect of fire, called *Tatewari* (Grandfather/Grandmother Fire) by the Huichol Indians of Mexico, helps to carry my prayers, and awaken my heart voice over the chatter of my mind. I learned this from the man I consider my spiritual teacher and elder, Eliot Cowan, an initiated shaman in the Huichol tradition, known as a *Marakamé*.



Divinities, God, Gods, Spirits and Ancestors

"All religions have divinities—forces that are superior to humans, and that determine the course of their existence and give it meaning,"

Different religions have different overarching beliefs. Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and Sikhism are monotheistic religions: they recognize one God. Hinduism, Shintoism, Daoism, and the traditional Chinese religions acknowledge the existence of several gods, they are polytheistic, and their gods form a pantheon. Animistic religions believe in a world inhabited by spirits, and that these supernatural, invisible entities are the souls of the elements of nature and our ancestors. Syncretic religions combine aspects of two or more belief systems.

When I wasn't in the tree house with my brother, I would wander through the fields on my own. I didn't know it then, but I was feeling the aliveness in nature, and building unspoken relationships with trees, plants, bodies of water and places special to me. As a teenager, the first spiritual book I remember reading was *Here and Hereafter* by Ruth Montgomery. It was about past lives. I found it fascinating. I still have a copy in my cupboard, marking the beginning of my journey.

When I discovered the healing modality of Reiki at 19, and followed it with a 4-year training at the Barbara Brennan School of Healing, graduating when I was 28, the world of the invisible became real as I began to experience and penetrate the veil of form. I learned to feel, perceive and work with the human aura and for a long time, consciousness and energy were my experience of the Divine. I had become another member of the "New Age" awakening that characterized the '80s.

Body

"All religions invite believers to affirm their religious allegiance through the body."

No religion ignores the body. Some treat it with contempt, while others revere it as a temple. Often the very personal, such as sexuality and diet are controlled by strict rules. Some of the ways we play out our religious beliefs on our skin are how we nourish the body, how we purify it and how we dress or mark it up with tattoos or symbols.

After Ruth Montgomery's books, came Mary Summer Rain's series about her relationship with a blind Indian grandmother, No Eyes, who became her mentor. I longed to be guided in the same way. After I graduated from the Barbara Brennan School and began my practice, my yearning manifested.

It is utterly dark in the sweat lodge. That way we can see the spirit lights moving. Kenny Awasis, a Plains Cree Elder from Saskatchewan prays and sings songs in his language, and beats his drum as others rattle. He speaks to the White Horse spirit, the spirit who works through the healing lodge. More than just purifying ourselves through our sweat and our prayers, Kenny's body takes on the illnesses that are brought here. His spirit guides help him to pass them through his body, but sometimes this takes time. Often at the end of lodge we have to carry him

out because he is so cramped up in pain.

I sit with my back to the pit in the centre where the hot rocks, or "Grandfathers," emit heat and steam from the cedar water poured over them. Kenny had told us to turn our backs to the fire for a "final sweeping."

As he sings, I feel feathers brush my back. He has an eagle wing in his medicine bundle.

Afterward, I turned to another, more experienced participant, and told her excitedly about the feathers brushing me, saying, "Then I felt Kenny wipe my spine down with the wing..."

"How long do you think his arm is Shelley? He can't hold his arm over the hot stones like that, he would get burned," she said in reply. My jaw dropped as I realized no human hand had been holding the Eagle wing. This kind of thing happens all the time in the lodge.

Passages

"Most religions include rites of passage that punctuate the lives of believers from birth until death. The four main rites of passage are: Entry into the Community/Entry into Adulthood/Entry into the State of Marriage/Entry into the Beyond."

I sit near the fire at the yearly reunion of the Sacred Fire Community. Nearby I observe a group of young adults convening. They are very animated, yet grounded, self-possessed. I know that everyone in the group has been through the Young Men's or Young Women's initiation to adulthood rituals offered through our Lifeways programs. Having known many of them before they went through this ceremony, I can see there is something very different about them now. I am impressed and excited, not just for them, but for how the community and the world will benefit from their authenticity. It's a huge blessing that we have been given back appropriate rituals to serve young people from the West who no longer have an intact tradition.

Places

"Every religion exists within a space, in places where the divinity manifests itself and where believers gather to worship."

Occasionally, one religion drives out another and takes its place, but a sacred site may also be used by several religions at the same time. Certain sacred places attract believers, sometimes from very far away. That is the phenomenon of the pilgrimage.

In the mysterious hills of North Wales, I have unexpectedly stopped in to Pennant Mellangell. I sit quietly in the church pew, feeling into this place. It is a small church set in front of a stunning wall of high cliffs. It is well known that the church sits on an older Celtic sacred site.

The story related to the place is of St. Mellangell, an abbess who retreated to this place for solitude and was so pious that when a hare hid under her skirts fleeing from a pack of hunting hounds followed by the prince of the land on horseback, the hounds cowered, and the hare was saved. Give me a break, I think! This is clearly the Christianized version of a much older story of the Goddess of the land here, and smacks of sexual overtones and fertility rites to me! The energy here is profoundly of the Goddess, so feminine. I somehow know there must be



a sacred well, and find myself out behind the church trying to locate it, unsuccessfully. When I arrive at my next destination, the camp director tells me there is a sacred well up in the mountains behind, as well as the cave where the lady was said to dwell.

Intercessors

"In every religion, there are intercessors or other spiritual guides. They act as intermediaries, building bridges between this world and the world of the divinities, and between this world and the next."

My friend Niall Campbell is a *Sangoma* from Botswana, Africa. The *Sangoma* is the shaman, or spirit medium, for ancestral spirits to communicate with the community. When he dances to drum songs that specifically call the possessing ancestral spirits that work through him, he disappears into a deep trance. He wears a beautiful and intricate beaded outfit that clothes the ancestor, the design received during dreams, and sewed with his own hands during his initiation period called *Twasa*. He describes mediumship in this succinct way: "Some ancestral traditions are Shamanic—that means the shaman goes to the spirit world to bring back guidance for the community. Others are Mediumistic, which means that spirits come to the shaman to communicate through him the guidance for the community."

When I visited him in Cape Town, South Africa, we drove into the townships to the home of one of his *Sangoma* students. Over 12 *Sangomas* in trance, danced and drummed in succession as I watched, clapped and joined in. I didn't feel afraid. The intense field created by the ceremony and the spirits was glorious. My heart had never been so happy!

Cycles

"All religions set the rhythm of people's lives and, similarly, organize the community time."

The air is cold and brisk, stars emerge overhead. I'm outside at my fire pit with my friend Lisa. Tonight we celebrate Samhain, or the Celtic New Year. It is close to its modern equivalent, Hallowe'en. This year, its exact astrological alignment will fall on the full moon October 29th, Sun in Scorpio, Moon in the polar opposite sign, Taurus. Inside, the feast awaits, an extra plate set aside for our ancestors. They say the veil between the worlds is thin tonight and one can communicate more easily with the dead. We burn fragrant wormwood in the fire, a tribute to the crone Goddess Ceridwen. In the Welsh tradition, the faces of the triple Goddess—maiden, mother, crone—are reflected in the goddesses Bloedeuwedd, Rhiannon, and Ceridwen. Witches at Hallowe'en recall this alignment. In the death of the year, begins the new cycle, plants descend their energy into the roots, and, linking our personal process to the energy of the earth, descend into the underworld for deep introspection.

Voices

"Another truly universal human experience—music—accompanies religious activities throughout the world. It expresses the whole range of religious feelings better than words do."

The harmonium hums, tablas pop, and the soulful voice of a female vocalist of the Bhakti Connection leads us in a call and

response chant. I'm sitting in a yoga studio, practicing yoga. Ah, but not the form most of us Westerners are used to. There will be no physical stretching, just the stretching of vocal cords and the expansion of spirit. Bhakti is the yogic path of devotion. Chants are sung to the various gods and goddesses to open the devotee's heart. It is said to be the fastest path to awakening, and the best suited to emotionally driven practitioners. All I know is I feel totally high and blissed out after an evening of this practice.

Worship

"Religions are expressed through systems of worship that organize communication with the gods."

The roses on the altar are beautiful. Laid out below them are portraits of different saints, god forms, gurus, and personal photos of family members to be blessed. I am attending my first Oneness Blessing weekend intensive. Although I have practiced yoga for years, I have never been interested in the gurus and saints in India... until I received my first *deeksha*, or Oneness Blessing. It is a phenomenon that transmits an awakening energy directly from the hands of the initiate, to the receiver. This phenomenon is gifted by an awakened Hindu couple, Amma and Bhagavan who have built the Oneness University in South India. They are considered avatars, or incarnations of the Divine, and were born in the enlightened state.

After we receive the *deeksha*, although we may have blissful visions of the form of divine we worship—Christ, Shiva, the Goddess, the Light, Buddha—it is meant to move us to the true sense that All is One, that behind the many, lies the One. This is how an awakened person experiences reality. Someone lays their hands on my head. As a powerful energy blows through my crown chakra, I begin to giggle uncontrollably, and then wail with grief. So many layers of illusion have to fall away before we can experience unity.

Beyond

"All religions assume the existence of a world beyond our own, one that is invisible, strange yet familiar, but they do not all conceive of it the same way."

This journey through the museum exhibit has recalled my own winding exploration of contact with spirit. I realize just how blessed I've been to have so many genuine experiences of the ways in which we humans experience the divine. *I'm glad I came.*

Shelley A. Harrison is an Energy Healer in Ottawa. She graduated from the Barbara Brennan School of Healing 4-year professional training and has been working in private practice for over 10 years. She visits Toronto regularly to see clients and visit her brother, Jeff, the editor of this magazine. You can write Shelley at fromtheheart@pinkplaymags.com or visit her at www.doveheart.ca



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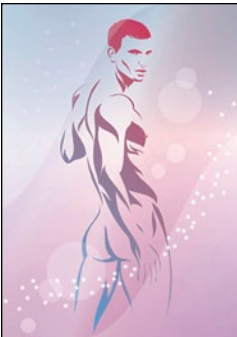
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Ending the Holy War

by Scott Dagostino



When I look back on my years attending Sacred Heart of Jesus Elementary School in Hamilton, Ontario, I still count myself lucky that my grade seven teacher was quite terrible. As the educator responsible for preparing my class for our first Holy Communion, he was stuck explaining the Catholic mystery of “transubstantiation” to a roomful of doubting 13-year-olds.

He explained how the priest transforms the bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ, who suffered and died on mankind’s behalf, and about a dozen hands popped up all through the room.

“It’s symbolic, right?” asked one boy, “The bread and wine represents the sacrifice?”

“No, no,” the teacher insisted, “They BECOME the body and blood.” More hands shot up.

“But it’s still bread, yes?” asked a girl at the back, “It’s not, like....human flesh or anything.”

“Well, yes,” the teacher sputtered, “It is the BODY of Christ!” Some hands went up, others down, in a roomful of increasingly

nervous children.

“But it would be like...two-thousand-year old skin,” said another boy, “That’s creepy!”

The flustered teacher insisted we all put our hands down and yelled, “The priest transforms the bread and wine into the actual body and blood of Christ! If you don’t believe that, you cannot be a Catholic!”

And that’s the story of how I became an atheist at the age of 13. I was a logical kid and the teacher had drawn a line in the sand I simply couldn’t cross. Yes, I consider myself very lucky. Years later, when it became clear that I just wasn’t ever going to date girls, I didn’t feel any religious guilt or pressure about it, not like the gay men I’d met in years to come who joked about escaping their families and who wore T-shirts that read RECOVERING CATHOLIC. For so many queer people, religion has always been something you must escape from in order to be free.

“Run away!” laughs Kamal Al-Solaylee, journalist and theatre critic, “It was an option I’ve recommended to many other people:



Kamal Al-Solaylee (Photo by Peter Bregg)

“There comes a point you have to cut ties with something that doesn’t respect who you are.”

run for your life!” Born in Yemen, raised in Beirut and Cairo, he says leaving his family in the Middle East to go to university in England saved him.

Though Islam and Christianity are often pitched as opposites, his path away from his faith was no different than mine or others. “If being in that religion means denying who you are or accepting the denigration and hate that you hear, it’s just not worth it,” Al-Solaylee says, “There comes a point you have to cut ties with something that doesn’t respect who you are.”

In 2012, however—a year supposedly pivotal to human transformation or renewal, according to another ancient faith—we’ve seen a tipping point in the musty “gays vs. God” story. Simply put: we’re starting to win.

In a recent Pew Research Center survey, 68% of young Americans said they never doubt God’s existence. A faithful majority, yes, but a sharp drop from 2007, when 83% of these American “millennials” said they never doubted God’s existence. In that same study, 63% of young adults under 30 said that “homosexuality should be accepted by society.”

Meanwhile, despite this being the year of Mitt Romney, the Mormon Church has suffered severe fallout from its financial backing of California’s Proposition 8 to ban gay marriage a few years back. Over 3,000 ex-Mormons were interviewed about leaving the church and 48% of them cited “Church’s stance on homosexuals / Prop 8” as a major factor in their decision.

The backlash is real, but also represents an opportunity, as

79-year-old former Mormon church researcher Ray Briscoe told Reuters. Just as this once-racist church “had to grow up enough to accept” black priests, Briscoe believes the church will similarly come around on queer people too, saying, “it will get there, in my judgment.”

But if religious institutions are slowly dwindling in power, like with the rows of empty pews in Ireland, some are going out kicking and screaming. This year, the gap between the faithful and the fabulous has seemed wider than ever with fighting over marriage rights, school bullying and weirdly, chicken sandwiches. But within that gap, the transformation of religion into something new and more meaningful, by a growing diversity of people working within it, is finally taking root. Can religion be rescued?

Maybe, says Al-Solaylee, but not for him. He had to make a clean break: “It was a double rejection,” he says. “It’s very difficult to separate Islam from Arabic culture. They’re so interconnected. I had to reject not just the religion but the culture that goes with it... the Arabic language, the Arabic customs.” It was challenging, he says, but ultimately freeing. “There are so many taboos in Arabic culture,” he says, “In its strictest form, you’re not supposed to listen to music because it’s the work of the devil.”

There might actually be something to that because, in his new memoir *Intolerable*, Al-Solaylee writes of seeing the Olivia Newton-John movie *Xanadu* as a youth and being struck gay. He was lucky, he says, in that he grew up with “a moderate version of Islam,” but this changed in the ‘80s. “Islam and Christianity aren’t as far apart

as we like to think," he says. "The hard line of both rose about the same time." It's interesting to note that the fundamentalist Islamic revolution that began in Iran in 1979 occurred just as Jerry Falwell was founding his "Moral Majority" in the US, a fundamentalist Christian strain that would become a major (if not now defining) part of the Republican party. But even so, says Al-Solaylee, "the West offered human rights and the separation of church and state but the magnet that was pulling me was gay liberation."

Happily living as an out gay man in Toronto, Al-Solaylee got out but, he says, "no matter how often you run away from the Middle East, it has a way of tracking you down." No one can ever truly escape the religion of their family when the ties are still there.

That's what queer people must always contend with, insists out Anglican priest Daniel Brereton: "Regardless of where you stand personally, the reality is that religion isn't going away anytime soon as a force within our culture and within every culture. To completely disengage with that is to disengage with a whole lot of other people in your community, to not understand what motivates them and to lose the ability to speak with them in that language. It's like losing your high-school French," he says, "because you never use it, but then find yourself wanting to speak

French. It's not that people need to *be* religious, but to completely say you have no interest in understanding where religious people are coming from, you're really disenfranchising yourself."

"When your experience with religion has been 100% negative and you're oppressed by it, it's understandable to want a community without it," Brereton acknowledges, "but religion is much more nuanced than being a crutch or a weapon. The discourse around religion gets too simplistic, too black-and-white. It doesn't recognize how nuanced an individual's faith can be and also how multi-faceted a community's engagement with their faith can be. Even fundamentalists will vary in how they approach their faith. I know people who consider themselves evangelical fundamentalists, but they're the most socially liberal evangelicals I've ever met."

The story of Al-Solaylee's family, says Brereton, "is the struggle to bridge different cultures. Your religion is either something that helps you navigate and relate to the wider secular world, or it becomes an alternative culture. Take any religious group and you'll see the liberal moderates in one camp and the fundamentalists in the other. And the more disenfranchised you feel within the dominant secular culture, the more attractive that alternative fundamentalist culture becomes."



"The discourse around religion gets too simplistic, too black-and-white. It doesn't recognize how nuanced an individual's faith can be..."



Rev. Daniel Brereton (Photo by James Anok)

“Religion becomes identified with adopting particular stances on social issues and there’s no longer room within the religion for a diversity of opinion and discussion.”



Chris Stedman (Photo by Alex Dakoulas)

Queer people have always understood that, having spent decades turning political oppression into cultural splendor, but weirdly, it's the religious majority now forming the Pride parades. Witness the bizarre spectacle of thousands of people lining up around the block for fast food this summer when U.S. fried chicken chain Chick-Fil-A became a right-wing cause célèbre. The founder had donated \$5 million dollars to anti-gay hate groups and when gay activists and their Democrat allies declared a boycott, Christians across America rallied in support. It was nauseating to witness millions still ignoring the ongoing crisis with queer youth suicide in favour of supporting a \$3-billion-a-year fast-food outlet.

Supporters, however, insisted that Christians weren't necessarily turning out in droves as some “fuck you, gays” gesture, as we assumed, but as a show of support for their “tribe,” what evangelist Billy Graham called a “strong stand for the Christian faith.”

“It's not an act. They actually feel oppressed,” says an amazed Rev. Brereton, marvelling at how those blocking human rights for gay people cry persecution. “It's an old trick, to take your enemy's language and use it against them. As a progressive religious person, I find it really frustrating. Religion becomes identified with adopting particular stances on social issues and there's no longer room within the religion for

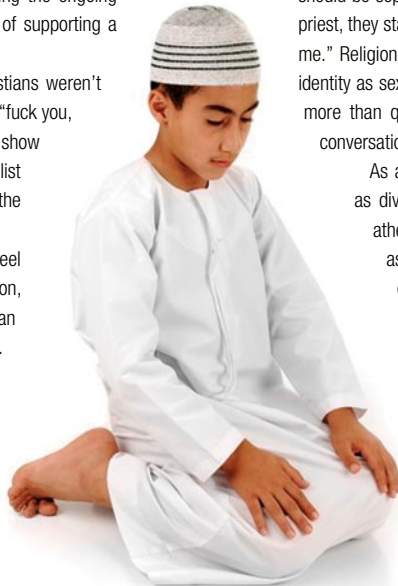
a diversity of opinion and discussion. And you'll notice that the things Jesus taught don't even come into it!”

But although the battle lines are clear, Brereton says, it's vital for both camps to keep trying for respectful discussion. Religious conservatives, he says, “want to put sexuality in a box and treat it as a separate thing to be dealt with, rather than a fundamental part of who I am that weaves through everything, but atheists and non-religious people tend to see religion in the same way.

They treat religion as a series of ridiculous practices that should be separated out. When gay men find out I'm a priest, they start making all kinds of assumptions about me.” Religion, he says, is equally intrinsic to people's identity as sexuality. The religious can't be “cured” any more than queer people can. “They have to be in conversation with each other.”

As a Christian, Brereton says, he often feels as divorced from this “tribe” as much as any atheist, but activist Chris Stedman sees this as an opportunity. His upcoming book is called *Faithiest: How an Atheist Found Common Ground with the Religious* and it's a manifesto for cooperation from someone who's been on both sides.

A former Christian evangelical, Stedman came out as gay and subsequently left the faith. What's new, however, is that he now works as an atheist interfaith activist, trying to build bridges between



Christianity and Islam and heal some of the vicious bigotry that sparked the horrific massacre of Sikhs in a temple this summer, in Oak Creek, Wisconsin.

"None of us were surprised," Stedman says. "We'd been dreading this. The number of hate groups targeting Muslims has exploded." As an activist, Stedman says he's used the gay communities' approach and success as a model. "We demystified ourselves to straight people and I've seen this approach be the most effective," he says, "I go to Muslim communities, express solidarity and offer to help. I don't lead with being an atheist or being queer but, more often than not, they become curious and want to return the favour." And that, he insists, is how dialogue begins.

Brereton agrees that this represents a way forward for every group. "There will always be tribes," he says, "but if people within them can find a way to represent the tribe while still engaging with those in other tribes, we can find a way to create a bigger community."

When he started doing interfaith work, Stedman says, "LGBT issues were off the table and every day, I'm like, 'Why am I even doing this?' but I believe in the long-term approach." He's been working with Eboo Patel, one of two Muslims on President Obama's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, and proudly points to a speech Patel gave in which he mentioned the support of Stedman as a gay atheist. "I could hear the audience's discomfort," Stedman says, "but this is the

most visible, prominent Muslim leader in the US—that's huge. I've seen the dividends in building these kinds of relationships as we work to move our culture away from polarization."

Brereton agrees, but finds it difficult within a homophobic institution as he struggles to be out and represent the Anglican church. "It's not that I'm not out, but I have to be selective in where and when and how I bring it up...It puts a huge block between me and the people. I can't fully accept them because they won't fully accept me."

He admires writer Irshad Manji as someone who's "found a way of engaging her identity as a Muslim in a way that creates a space for her to be a lesbian and an academic and the person that she is. He'd like the same. "If I left the church tomorrow," Brereton says, "I'd still be a Christian and there are days when I don't know if I can continue to wear a collar and be active in my ministry on behalf of an institution I'm so angry at much of the time. It's an everyday struggle, but the reason I ultimately decide to stay is that I have found something within that faith that I find good and life-giving and I don't want to abandon it to those who would make it into something else. Just my presence forces that conversation to continue."

Kamal Al-Solaylee gets just as frustrated with Islam in Canada. "The Muslim community that lives in the West should've accommodated the gay and lesbian members of their community a long time ago. The Canadian Muslim Congress is more progressive and very welcoming, but it's not a place of worship, it's an office," he laughs. "The rest of the community thinks of them as heretics, unfortunately." He admires the diversity in the Christian churches, ranging from the viciously homophobic Catholic Church to the gay-positive Metropolitan Community Church, and praises the Unitarian church on St. Clair for its rainbow flag. "A mosque with a rainbow flag? We're still generations away from that moment."

But it's inevitable, Brereton says. "At one point, Christians maintained strict gender roles and were okay with slavery. At every point in Christian history, there's been something we've shifted away from and I know, in the grand scheme of things, we will get beyond sexuality. I see Jesus trying to break through those barriers we create and saying, 'We are all one tribe.'"

Scott Dagostino is a Toronto writer and editor who's been told by religious people that if there is no God, the universe would be nothing but random chaos and coincidence. Being a jazz fan, he thinks that sounds rather wondrous.



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The Shambhala Path

Waking up.
Right here, right now

by Karen Fulcher



*“When you first sit down,
You’re feeling pain, you may be
in trouble, you’ve got a broken
heart, or someone’s died.”*

- Jacqueline Larson (above)

This world has a lot of pain and we feel it, sometimes acutely.

When I first came to visit the Shambhala Centre (at 670 Bloor Street West #300; toronto.shambhala.org), I had returned from living in Japan for a number of years and was feeling lonely and disconnected. Learning meditation seemed like it made sense: a way to help me cope with how I wanted to shape my new life. I soon found out that the Shambhala path made more sense to me living in this big, bad city than anything I had ever explored before. Since then, I had “fallen off the cushion,” but I decided to venture back, talk to people about the Shambhala tradition and revisit nurturing my spirit.

Jacqueline Larson, a volunteer with the Shambhala Meditation Centre of Toronto, agreed to spend some time chatting with me on a hot summer afternoon. I was curious if more beginners were coming through the Meditation Centre’s doors lately and she confirmed. “The last few weeks, we’ve had over 20-30 new people come for beginners instructions,” Larson told me. “We’ve had to ask the regulars to switch rooms.” There is one shrine room for instruction and the main shrine room is for open sittings.

If you are to trust the news and social media you might feel that Toronto is becoming faster and less connected. In fact, you might be experiencing that as you navigate around the potholed busy streets. Is the upsurge in newcomers to meditation because people are seeking a way to escape?

Larson told me that the Centre doesn’t take surveys, but if they did, she’d bet that there are some common themes to why people are driven to seek meditation. “[One of the teachers here] told me that if you were to ask people about why they’ve come here, it’s usually because they’re in some kind of trouble. That’s the initial motivation: some kind of heartbreak, relationship meltdown...physical pain. And most people feel that their world is too speedy and that they want to do something to slow things down.”

She added, "It often takes something dramatic to cut through. In my case, it was a dramatic relationship breakdown. I had done psychotherapy, exercise and I had reached a point where none of that was helping enough."

When people come through the doors of a Buddhist meditation centre, I suspect they are seeking spiritual healing but not a religion. I posed the question about what was different about religion and spirituality to Margaret May, the Director of the Centre. I caught May on the phone just prior to her leaving for a Shambhala retreat on the east coast.

May sighed and responded, "I don't know about those labels. Maybe some people are getting at the idea that one is all form and dogma and the other is a little more open. Without saying it's one thing or the other, if spirituality is deepening one's connection to one's nature and discovering what that is... You know, it's both ordinary and totally magical."

But what is different about Shambhala and other Buddhist paths? "On a simple level," May explained, "Shambhala is related to all the same Buddhist teachings: suffering, impermanence, cause and effect, the path to relating to one's suffering. [You practice] so that you are no longer caught up in a world of 'this is suffering and this is happiness, and I don't want that and I only want this.'"

"We can connect with the enlightened energy of our minds and our being," she continued. "We can wake up to our true nature and make a difference... today. And we have to. There is an urgency in the world because there is so much suffering."

"Shambhala is a way of expressing the way society would be if we were all connected to our basic goodness. Shambhala is about waking up right now, being authentic, being genuinely brave," May says.

That is one thing I remembered about Shambhala. When you sit, you imagine that you are a warrior. Yes, a warrior. The Shambhala path of meditation is not wishy-washy or weak... it is you, on the cushion as a king or queen, the ruler of your world. As Larson quoted Chögyam Trungpa (Shambhala's founder): "Ruling as the monarch with a broken heart."

That's right. Meditation is a brave path. One of the hardest things you can do, but with the greatest results. "When you first sit down," Larson explained, "You're feeling pain, you may be in trouble, you've got a broken heart, or someone's died. There's loss, there's grief and you sit down and there's quiet and breathing. It's pretty powerful. Your feelings can be pretty daunting. But it's learning how to sit with those powerful feelings with gentleness."

"If you have this idea that you are going to meditate and everything is going to be peace, love and Woodstock... well anger [or hurt or pain or jealousy] is not a part of that equation. But meditation gives us that little space to just

notice it and feel it without acting on it," she says.

I asked May about what other misconceptions beginners might have. She responded, "They may have high expectations that this is going to solve all their problems. Or not understanding what meditation actually is—you know, 'I'm not thought-free.' Or they may set the intention and don't deliver on or don't accomplish and be judgmental about [their failure]. And then [they] get embarrassed and don't talk about it anymore."

But both May and Larson used the analogy of joining a gym. You've got to keep coming back to see how much better you'll feel. That's why practicing with others in a community makes sense. You get support, you may make some friends, you are also less likely to get up and leave the meditation room when you get jumpy, agitated, or speedy, if others are sitting beside you.

Plus, the beauty of the Shambhala Centre's shrine room is seductive. May described the room and why it is set up the way it is. "It is very bright and colourful. The colour is from the Tibetan culture—a celebration of the magic of the world. We're human beings and our minds are engaged with thought, but our experience of the world is all through our senses. All our five senses are how we experience the magic of the world. That's why in our meditation practice we meditate with our eyes open, which is a bit of a surprise for some people."

"We do this because, we can't shut down our ears, we can't shut down our taste or our smell, so why would we shut out our eyes?" May asks. "Now we have to work with that because many of us are so visually oriented. The shrine room is also connection to sacredness—I mean that in a very broad way. The shrine room is a focal point of energy."

The Meditation Centre offers classes and intensives to help people grow in their practice. You don't have to be perfect or pure or even strive for those things to begin a meditation practice. It is odd that meditation is simply sitting and doing nothing but we find it so hard! "It's about sitting down in the midst of your life as it is," Larson explained.

She retold the story from Sakyong Mipham's (current teacher of Shambhala) book, *Turning the Mind into an Ally*, in which he likens meditation practice to taming a wild horse. "When you first show up (sit on the cushion) the horse (your mind) is just racing around in the field and won't even come near you, but over time, if you keep on showing up every day, eventually the horse will let you come closer and closer. When you develop enough trust, you can even ride the horse. But it's a long, slow, gentle process. You can't just climb on a wild horse and expect to ride. That's meditation practice: showing up regularly and just being patient and gentle with the wildness until it starts to be tamer."

Larson told me the act of gentleness with yourself is



what is so attractive about Shambhala. “Sakyong Mipham says it’s a way of making friends with yourself. In order for it to be sustainable, you have to be really gentle with yourself. I find that really hard—and really radical.”

She mentions another, perhaps most well known teacher of Shambhala, Pema Chödrön. “My partner really notices it when I’m not doing my meditation. Changing the world is about changing ourselves. In one of Pema’s teachings, she was saying that when we talk about transforming our world, what she’s talking about is the dinner table. It’s how we are reacting to ‘our’ people. It’s about what’s going on in our domestic [or work] situation,” Larson elaborates.

“Pema Chödrön is really pointing the way for many people. Like them, I read her books and they helped me feel generally better, but I still didn’t meditate,” she continues. “I didn’t really understand that she was talking about meditation. I think a lot of people who read Pema’s books think they’re self-help. I think they do tremendous good at that level because they’re about that basic gentleness, about how to work with pain, how to work with confusion and how to work with our broken hearts. But, when you actually start meditating? Then you read Pema Chödrön? It’s ohhh, that’s what she meant!”

Okay, so you’ve begun to meditate and you’re doing your best, but how do you practice having a brave and open heart where we meet real aggression? May advises that we start with our own aggression. She told me, “The practice of meditation: sitting on the cushion is just that—practice. It is becoming familiar with our own minds and our own habits and seeing the patterns as they pass and grab us and strangle us. Just sitting with that, and then with practice you start to see if I don’t feed the story, it actually dissolves. I can start off feeling angry and frustrated and if I just sit there and not think about how right I am and everyone else is so wrong then maybe it doesn’t feel so tight, strong and energetic the next time.”

And if we fail? We choose to jump the queue because, hey, that jerk pushed ahead of us through the door—he deserves it! “Maybe there will be times when someone’s

being aggressive,” May says, “but we don’t need to respond with aggression because we’re not afraid of the other person’s aggression. Now, I’m not talking about having a gun pulled on you—that would probably be an advanced practice,” she says with a chuckle. “But the rudeness, pushing, shoving, and the hurry—if we cannot push and shove so much ourselves, or at least recognize when we are pushing and shoving and just hold back. When it happens, we can give it a little more space and say, ‘Oh wow that person is really wrapped up. I can give a little more space to that. I don’t need to respond to that.’”

And, after poor behaviour we feel guilt! May explained, “We often find real fault with ourselves. By becoming familiar with our judgment, we can recognize our own habits of aggression and fear and we start to soften... And we actually can see sadness in other people.”

Shambhala starts right where we are with all our follies and imperfections. The founder of Shambhala, Chögyam Trungpa, was a bit of a controversial person in the late ‘60s and early ‘70s. He brought the Shambhala teachings to the Western lifestyle by participating in it. He challenged his students to be where they were as Westerners and brought a secular perspective to teachings that previously were esoteric.

And as Larson quoted from the first page of Pema Chödrön’s *Start Where You Are: A Guide to Compassionate Living*: “We already have everything we need. There is no need for self-improvement. All these trips that we lay on ourselves—the heavy-duty fearing that we’re bad and hoping that we’re good, the identities that we so dearly cling to, the rage, the jealousy and the addictions of all kinds—never touch our basic wealth. They are like clouds that temporarily block the sun. But all the time our warmth and brilliance are right here. This is who we really are. We are one blink of an eye away from being fully awake.”

As we were leaving the centre, Larson told me a story about her son. He sat down on a step and refused to move after she had told him he couldn’t have something he wanted. When asked why he wouldn’t move he simply said, “I want time to feel disappointed.” From the mouths of babes, we all can learn.

The Shambhala Centre has meditation instruction three times a week and has sessions on the weekend once a month. See you there!

Karen Fulcher is a freelance writer, wonderer and still working on that horse training!





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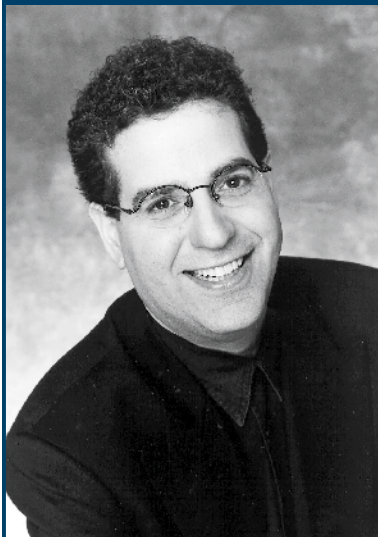
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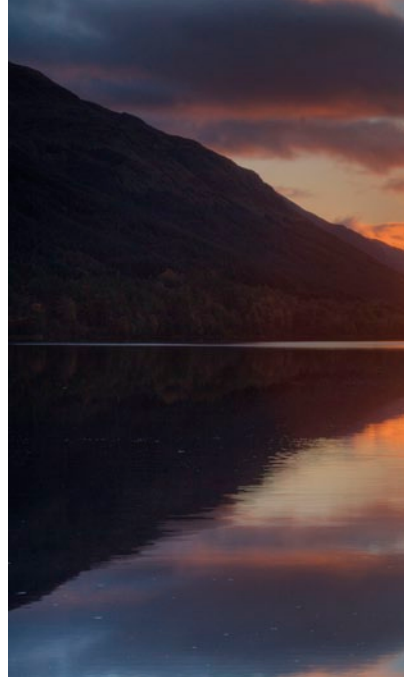


Global Spirituality

by Bryen Dunn

The word spirituality has become synonymous with a belief in variety of thoughts, transcendental well being, inner strength, and religion. Spiritual practices and experiences may include meditation of the mind, body development, or prayer rituals that often include a connection with nature, awareness of one's inner self, or worshipping of an existential existence of some kind. Although often associated directly with religion, spirituality is now a term commonly used by many secular, atheist and agnostic individuals who seek refuge with inner peace and happiness. Religion implies a particular faith tradition that includes acceptance of a metaphysical or supernatural reality, whereas spirituality is not necessarily bound to any particular religious tradition. Many seek spirituality through new age practices, alternative medicines and treatments and self help programs to aid in bringing about a state of higher awareness, perfection of one's own being and wisdom, or a connection with a higher strength, whatever that may be.

Continuing our year-long series on health and well-being, join me as I look at some spiritual retreats around the continent, beginning here in Canada.



The Dharma Centre (www.dharmacentre.org) in Huntsville, Ontario was founded by the late Namgyal Rinpoche, and has a 45 year history of prayer, meditation, study and ceremony. It's a rustic centre located on 400 acres of pristine land in central Ontario, within driving distance from most major cities such as Toronto and Ottawa.

They offer a range of diverse programs in all forms of Buddhism, as well as Shamanism, Mindfulness and more. They respect and support universal spiritual and religious teachings and have cabins available for people who wish to do solo retreats, or groups who want to rent the entire centre to hold their own. The centre can accommodate roughly forty guests in either single or double rooms or cabins with camping also a possibility. Onsite facilities include a full kitchen where guests can prepare their own meals, or have them provided in the case of groups. There's also an extensive library of books pertaining to spirituality, science, philosophy, psychology and the arts.

The natural surroundings include a number of walking trails on and around the property and canoeing or kayaking can be done on an adjacent lake. A number of monuments and sacred spots are located around the property, including a Buddha rupa, a Burmese pagoda, a Tibetan stupa and a mother goddess walkway. For those with limited funds, there are opportunities for people to volunteer in exchange for accommodation.

South of the border, **SpiritQuest** (www.retreatsinsedona.com) differentiates itself from other lodges by not utilizing a centralized retreat facility. What makes SpiritQuest unique is the fact that their retreats are customized to the needs of each individual client rather than set within a group setting. This allows clients to arrive whenever they want and stay as long as they want and they can stay anywhere they like within a ten mile radius of the main office, allowing them to choose their own level of comfort and budget.

The staff consists of a core team of 20 practitioners, each with their own specialties. There are meditation teachers, sound healers, hypnotherapists, psychotherapists, ceremonialists, and many other modalities. Most have over 10 years experience in the field of personal transformation, and some have over 20, allowing for a more customized program. Representative Ed Preston reiterates, "In a private retreat the sessions are one-on-one and the attention is all on the client, so people usually feel freer to open up and get the work done. We're also fortunate to be in a place where nature does half the work for us." SpiritQuest is about becoming more authentically yourself, having the courage to follow your heart and connecting with source.

Kalani (www.kalani.com) was founded by Richard Koob and his partner Earnest Morgan, two professional dancers who fell in love with Hawaii nearly 40 years ago. They came to this piece of untamed jungle in the wildest corner of Hawaii and over the years transformed it into the largest retreat centre in the state. The centre is largely managed by gay and lesbian staff, yet caters to a diverse audience with a strong emphasis on yoga, performing arts, wellness/massage and Hawaiian culture. Support also comes by way of volunteers who donate their time for up to three months assisting with a variety of tasks.

The majority of their programming is open to all, but there are several men's weeks throughout the year with women's programming soon to be introduced. Drew Delaware, a Torontonian has been living and doing some consulting at Kalani for the last year and shared, "Lesbian and gay visitors love coming any time of the year and the gay community here is the most accepting and loving that I've ever experienced. It's truly paradise—a gay Shangri-la."

Upcoming workshops and retreats include: Nude Yoga; Singing with Courage; A Call for Heroes: Initiation into Power and Purpose; Strengthening Your Heart; and Cultivating Inner Strength and Radiance.



Page 31: SpiritQuest Retreats, Sedona, AZ;
Page 32: Kalani, Pahoehoe, HI, Photo by Jess Scranton;
Page 32/33 and page 33: Dhanakosa, Balquhiddy,
Lochearnhead, Scotland



On the other side of the Atlantic, **Hamilton Hall** (www.hamiltonhall.info) is located in Bournemouth, Dorset County, England, and is the only clothing optional retreat in Europe that is exclusively for gay and bisexual men. Programming is primarily focused around sexual, self and spiritual development for the mind, body and soul. Owned and operated by John Bellamy, a former sex trade worker, psychologist and care worker, who saved his earnings over the years and opened the property in March 2000.

Hamilton Hall has since appeared in the UK television program *Three in a Bed* and garnered reviews globally, including mention on CNN, SKY, and FOX. The Victorian House is filled with wonderful mood lighting, warm rich colour schemes and a bright and contemporary feel with traditional comforts. It is ideally located approximately a 15 minute walk to the centre of town, and a ten minute walk to the sea.

Hamilton Hall is a spiritual urban oasis, supporting, metaphysical, spiritual, alternative, holistic, new age and complimentary lifestyle. Bellamy believes strongly in the gay spiritual soul and has tried to live his life according to a spiritual code that links us all. "Life can be hard, and it's easy to find yourself in need of guidance. There have, and will continue to be, moments when we feel lost, alone, or even abandoned by those we trusted. Yet for me personally, my spiritual faith has always kept me going", he cites.

Dhanakosa (www.dhanakosa.com) provides a variety of retreats open to anyone, regardless of sexual orientation, and they also offer an exclusive gay men's retreat in the spring each year which has been running successfully for the past decade. Next year the dates are March 22nd to 29th and are lead by Mangala, an ordained Buddhist in the Triratna Buddhist Order.

Buddhism teaches that all beings regardless of race, gender, or sexual orientation, have the same spiritual potential to develop greater awareness, kindness, compassion and understanding. Individuals explore the Buddhist path of ethics, meditation and wisdom, by way of talks, discussion groups, meditation and other practices. Dhanakosa is located in the Southern Highlands of Scotland, in the beautiful Balquhiddy glen, on the shores of Loch Voil, and has been offering retreats there since 1992. The centre operates on the basis of donations received from friends and visitors, with reservations taken for a booking fee of £75. Anything above and beyond is based on each individual's discretion.

My Own Dolce Vita (www.gaydolcevita.com) is spearheaded by John Ballew, a psychotherapist living in Atlanta who has been leading retreats for gay men in Italy for over a decade. He says "It's a different way of experiencing Italy. We're about slowing down, enjoying life and exploring with a group of like-minded gay men. The pace is designed to help men recharge their batteries—but just as important—to inspire them to bring the good life home with them after their time away."

Produced in cooperation with Il Chiostro, the retreat balances seeing Tuscany, light self-exploration and time to relax around the 18th century villa's pool overlooking a picturesque valley. A private chef is onsite who is integral to the component of sharing an evening of good food, good wine, and good conversation. The handsomely restored villa located in the rural countryside just outside of Cortona is the perfect spot to relax and get away from it all. Each day there is time for some light meditation, getting to know other guests and sharing what makes for a great

Counter-clockwise starting from the right: Siena, Italy; Villa at Dolce Vita, Italy; Photo from "Out in the Woods", Greenwich, New York, Photo credit: Dave Dietz; Photo from "Out in the Woods", Greenwich, New York, Photo credit: Dave Dietz



life. There's also a visit to Montalcino, Assisi and other beautiful places in the area. Ballew knows how many of us are stressed by the demands of work and daily life, and his program helps men to experience Italy as travellers rather than tourists. His next retreat happens in June, 2013.

For me personally, the ideal retreat would involve music of some sort, as I find this very therapeutic, especially when experienced in the right environs. **The Quebec International Festival of Sacred Music** (www.imsq.ca/eng/default.asp) offers this opportunity without any religious or linguistic barriers or restrictions. The Festival spotlights international musicians inspired by spirituality, who through their music

express soothing and stirring powers. Sometimes meditative, sometimes exalted, sacred music is the reflection of the human spirit and its passions.

Easton Mountain is a community retreat centre and sanctuary created by gay men, offering workshops, programs and events to celebrate, heal, transform, and integrate body, mind and spirit. They hold an annual queer music festival each summer called Out in the Woods (www.eastonmountain.co), set in the bucolic foothills of the Green Mountains in Greenwich, New York. It's a celebration of queer talent and creativity that raises awareness and support for their LGBTQ Youth Summer Camp.

Whatever direction you choose, going on a retreat of some sort is becoming more the norm rather than the exception. It's simply about taking time away from your ordinary life and everyday situations, and reflecting back upon yourself. Choose your journey, pack your necessary belongings, and leave your baggage behind!

Bryen Dunn is a freelance journalist based in Toronto with a focus on tourism, lifestyle, entertainment and community issues. He has written several travel articles and has an extensive portfolio of celebrity interviews with musicians, actors and other public personalities. He's willing to take on any assignments of interest, attend parties with free booze, listen to rants, and travel the world in search of the great unknown. He's eager to discover the new, remember the past, and look into the future.





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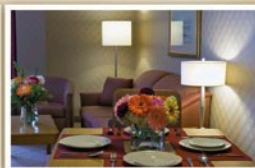
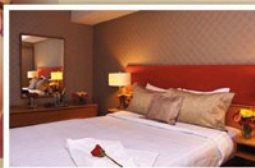
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Our Opinions and we



T.T. Bloomquist: “Ashen” is the word to best describe my mother’s face when, at the age of 16, I refused to attend church and held fast to that decision. I had reasoned myself into alignment with agnosticism. Poor Mom: her children had grown up attending the United Church, and my rejection of such a tie-dyed brand of Christianity made her despair for my soul.

It was the label, *God*, that drove me away from religion—that, and being told to believe stories which were patently unrealistic. Miracles were just silly. I did continue to entertain the possibility of a metaphysical reality, and I never gave up on the notion of a cosmic *Goodness*. I still had spiritual concerns during those years after my break from church-going.

As I’ve aged, though, I have come to appreciate biblical stories as beautiful literature and a window into ancient attitudes, but most importantly as a guide to the spirit. I grew up with the Christ story, so that is the one I follow today (yes, I’ve returned to church-going). The story has no more or less merit than the Moses story or the Mohammed story. They all point to the beyond. Spirituality by itself seems directionless to me. Religion, *with its narrative quality*, helps spirituality to coalesce and travel.

Melissa Benner: Spirituality is the newest form of cosmic Goodness, minus the dominant narrative of God—whose words are set in stone. However, the idea that there is only one true God, this is where I balk. Hundreds of years

of war and persecution and murder have stemmed from this statement.

It’s interesting that the narratives of Christianity are what drew you back to church, because the words are what drove me away. In my own urge to move beyond, I certainly looked to my United Church roots. However, what confused me now and in childhood were words like “sinner” and “heaven and hell.” Those words, and the black and white path they suggest, sit heavy in my gut.

Although I have many friends, including feminists and queers, who have navigated their way in Christianity, I cannot. Instead, I find direction in a spirituality gleaned from many sources. I draw on humanism and ecology for inspiration, and practice meditation as a way to understand suffering and build compassion. There are storytellers and meaning-makers in all three of these areas. This suggests that spirituality can be thoughtfully grafted beyond “One God” ...and that it’s inclusive—often not the case in religion.

TTB: The greatest weakness in religion is the fallibility of those who preside over it. You mention “sin” and how problematic the weight of that word is for you. I’ll suggest it is religion’s gate-keepers who have given “sin” so much weight, not religion itself. Unfortunately, self-righteous demagogues have imposed on that word the *connotation* of intractable evil, usually associated with “the other.” The irony is so bitter that I can’t even crack a smile over it.

I bring up the poetics of words because that is how I

on... e have one! Religion V S. Spirituality

by Melissa Benner and T.T. Bloomquist



approach religion. Religions grew from words, from texts. Contemplating the meaning and usage of the word “love” was one of the catalysts for my renewed spiritual journey. In the Christian faith, God is Love, so having Love as one’s true God seems pretty sensible to me. I wish, though, that others could put jealous, cruel Yahweh to bed.

A spirituality informed by many sources is an excellent way to approach the unseen. However, the metaphysical universe is too vast and mysterious to be reduced to one interpretation, so we need a template to sharpen the edges, to bring it into focus.

There will always be the urge to reject religion because of the small-minded, hard-hearted loudmouths who exist in every group, but those people are a challenge, not a blockade. When I decided to journey to the roots of Christianity, I first had to overcome my prejudices towards Catholics. Eventually, I joined them.

Unmooring one’s spiritual journey just to avoid association with those who claim to—but don’t—practice the tenets of religion, weakens the goal of the spirit: to leave this world a better place than one found it. More productive is to do Good Works within a community. There is strength, even spiritual strength, in numbers.

MB: In many ways we are speaking the same language: love, storytelling, and good works are indeed the underpinnings of a meaningful life.

However, I think it’s impossible to disconnect “true”

religion from how humans have shaped it over the centuries. It’s not just demagogues and gate-keepers that uphold religious intolerance: its everyday people. Many of our cultural and educational systems are founded on conservative religious values.

Consider the recent Catholic Church stance on Gay-Straight Alliances. It was not just the radical fringe claiming homosexuality as “intrinsically disordered.” Many people were against GSAs, from Ontario bishops to your average churchgoer. And although Catholic teachers went to bat for their queer students, good sense prevailed only when the rule of law stepped in.

So, how do progressive Catholics negotiate these contradictions? My guess is by adapting biblical teachings to fit personal values. But this is already an act of interpretation. So why not take that extra leap and weave your spirituality for yourself? Draw from the many rich stories out there without limiting it to one lineage?

Spirituality denotes connectedness with a larger reality, development of an inner life, and a sense of wonder in the world. This is also at the root of most world religions. But spirituality has the added advantage of bypassing intolerance and the many sins in the confessional.

Melissa Benner is a writer, educator and community organizer, living in Toronto.

T.T. Bloomquist acquired his melancholic optimism in the snows of Manitoba. He lives in Toronto where he writes, among other things.

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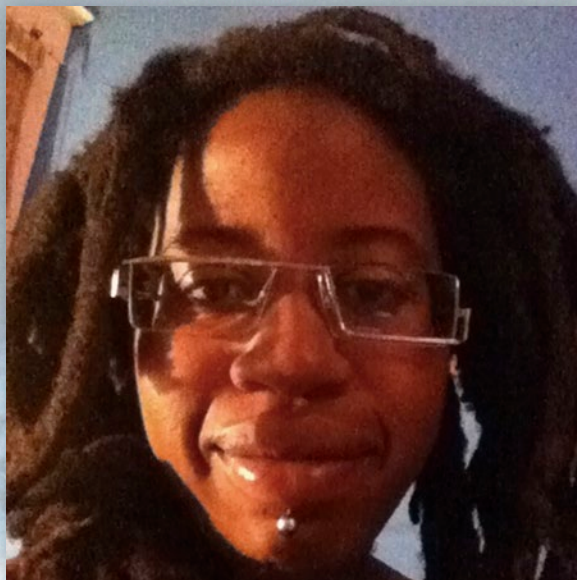


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HOT ARTIST: KALMPLEX

by Cee Sando

When most artists claim they are multidisciplinary they are usually referring to involvement in a couple artistic mediums such as: painting and sculpture, or playing an instrument as well as doing vocals. I have yet to meet any single artist as multifaceted as Toronto's own Kalmplex. Kalmplex's Facebook bio reads like that of any other fun, hot, young thing: "I like warm climates dark chocolate music plantain mangoes positive black power movements fresh kicks live performances." However, this incredible multi-dimensional artist is much, much more *complex*!

Kalmplex is a photographer, theatrical and spoken word artist, videographer, dj, painter, street artist and organic vegan chef. Born and raised in Toronto with Jamaican and Ghanaian roots, Kalmplex is a truly eclectic artist who draws inspiration from just about everything and everyone they* encounter. "The talents that I have, like cooking, come out of the necessity to enjoy what I'm eating and being healthy, whereas my artistic endeavours are more about me having a critical eye and wanting to showcase the colours and images I see in my head," Kalmplex explains. **[Editor's note: Kalmplex does not gender identify, using instead the plural "they" as their chosen pronoun.]*

Kalmplex has performed at venues such as the Gladstone Hotel, Tota, and Lula Lounge and has been featured numerous times in the *Globe and Mail*, *Toronto Star* and Snap! Toronto Photography. On any given Friday night Kalmplex can be found front and centre at the biggest concerts in the city snapping photos of musical mega-stars and local up-and-comers alike; spinning hip hop, dance and drum & bass on vinyl (yes, remember records?) at a nightclub or house party; editing footage for their documentary on life in Jamaica; even hosting an intimate dinner for a select group at a downtown Toronto supper club.

As a filmmaker, Kalmplex is currently working on an independent documentary focusing on the lives of locals met on a recent trip to Jamaica. The film covers conversations with individuals ranging from strangers randomly met on the street, to a health food shop owner and Kalmplex's own family living in St. Mary. Through organic conversation and observation of daily life, the film covers topics like vegan eating, self love, Rastafari, black women and mother earth, homosexuals and migrant workers. This film was preceded by Kalmplex's debut documentary *Confessions of the Coloured Caucus*—an edited conversation between friends discussing what it is like to be a queer person of color in Toronto. The film debuted at the Toronto Trigger Festival 2011.

Kalmplex recently participated in the The Nindinawemaaganidok "All My Relations Mural Project" as one of the graffiti artists in the Eagle/Condor crew. The project is an attempt at educating and bridging the gap between Indigenous people of North America and those who now live on the soil. As many citizens of Toronto are unaware of the cultural history and geography of this city, the hope is that this art project will bring attention to that



lost history.

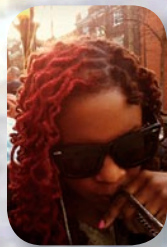
Though it may seem unlikely at first glance, one thing that is not surprising to those closest to the artist is a current focus on culinary endeavours. Most recently Kalmplex has been dedicating their time to creating

organic Jamaican feasts for the private dinners they serve at the Depanneur Supper Club. For a fee, diners are treated to a BYOB fixed menu of intricate dishes perfectly paired with delicious desserts. Non-vegans need not be apprehensive, as the delicious assortment of flavours included with each meal would satisfy even the most picky meat-eater or cheese-lover! Kalmplex grows the majority of the ingredients themselves. When this is not possible, they use locally sourced items.

"As a chef specializing in vegan *ital* cooking (*ital* is cooking without salt) I find it is important to use natural and fresh ingredients," says Kalmplex about their mandate behind their cooking. "The food that we put in our bodies fuels us and it's important to keep our body running smoothly. I incorporate local and traditional African/Caribbean ingredients into my cooking. Blending what is accessible to me along with the cultural foods in an African diet to sustain my health."

Keep in the loop of what this incredible artist is up to on twitter @kalmplex and tumblr kalmplex.tumblr.com

Currently calling Toronto home, Cee Sandro (@xox_cee) rarely sits still. Jet-setting throughout the Caribbean, France, Dubai, India, Mexico, the USA and Canada, Cee documents her experiences through words, photos and her fashion choices. Obsessed with style and pop culture, Cee has a bohemian heart and readily admits her love for the classic rock-and-roll lifestyle.



If you want to catch a glimpse of this incredibly diverse artist at work in Toronto, there are many opportunities to cover a range of tastes and interests. Here is where you can find Kalmplex next:

The mural discussed is located at Allen Gardens on the Gerrard and Sherbourne Street side of the park. You can find out more about it at: www.facebook.com/pages/The-NindinawemaaganidokAll-My-Relations-Mural-Project/309167695843315

For those not lucky enough to snag a seat at one of Depanneur's exclusive dinners, Kalmplex sells their famous vegan patties at two downtown Toronto farmers markets: Dufferin Grove Organic Farmers Market on Thursday 3-7pm (dufferinpark.ca/market/wiki/wiki.php); Sorauren Mondays 3pm -7pm at the Fish Shack booth (westendfood.coop/farmers-market)

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HYPER-CULTURE

by Jaime Woo

Earlier this summer, a friend and I went for a stroll along Queen Street West after meeting for dinner. We found our way to Chapters, where we browsed through magazines and journals. I got distracted leafing through a leather-bound journal when I heard the sounds of ocean waves softly crashing against the shore.

We followed the sounds into the baby section of the store, where we discovered a plush monkey as its source. Apparently the animal was used to help babies sleep better, with the option of four sounds: a mother's heartbeat, rainfall, whale cries, and the ocean waves that had acted as our siren song.

Nearby was also a plush lamb, but it was at regular price, while the monkey was on sale. When I asked a passing salesperson, he noted the "Cloud b" lamb was a more popular item and never went on sale. A sleeping machine at \$20 was a steal, but double that was too steep, even in the face of something as adorable as a lamb.

The salesperson tried to be helpful by asking if it were a boy or a girl—which, upon reflection, is a silly question: how are monkeys and lambs gender-coded? I took him by surprise by announcing that it was for me. I thought it was playful and worth a try for my insomnia, without having to commit to one of those awfully serious-looking sleep machines I always see in Brookstone shops.

As I biked my rainfall-playing plush monkey home, I started to think about how technology and restfulness come together.

The previous year at the Game Developer Conference, I had attended the Experimental Gameplay Session, where developers share abstract, unconventional ideas for games. One game that stood out in my mind was *Mantra*, a game developed by Argentinean developer Agustín Pérez Fernández that investigated meditation. Certainly, people get accused of getting into trances while immersed in a great game, but could a digital game



actually help with meditation?

In Mantra, the player must focus on a rotating bar and move a joystick in a corresponding motion. As the player gets better at matching the action on screen, the game throws obstacles on-screen as a distraction. The idea is that focused, meditative players will be able to filter out distractions to successfully match the motion.

I'm not sure we'll likely see a commercial version of the game anytime soon, but it does bring up the idea of how we can accomplish computer-mediated meditation. After all, we can't all have access to spiritual coaches, but a virtual version may be as helpful. I turned to the Apple App Store to see what might help in an attempt for a more mindful life.

I downloaded Simply Being, a guided meditation app, developed by Richard and Mary Maddux, who are behind the Meditation Oasis podcast. Having never heard the podcast before, I was curious (and a little skeptical) about Simply Being. I sat on my couch and closed my eyes. The narration was helpful without being intrusive or indulgent, and the brief reprieve from having to analyze, label, or evaluate life was a welcome one, especially being a writer. I took long, deep breaths, and before I knew it the first five minute session was done.

Earlier in the day, I had downloaded Pranayama, a free app to help with my breathing. The app is relatively simple, providing visual guidance on how to pace yogic breathing, through the nose focusing on the back on the throat. What felt simple in the



beginning increased in difficulty as I hit the third minute of sustained, rhythmic breathing. By the end of the first session, a total of seven minutes, I felt heady, with a minor dip in tension. I could see how daily practice would introduce more calmness into my life; in addition, proponents of yogic breathing have suggested benefits such as helping with posture, boosting our immune system, and raising metabolism.

Finally, I downloaded the free Relax Melodies app, which supplied 44 sounds to help aid concentration or provide relaxation. The noises ranged from expected ones like waterfalls and bird chirping to the more niche sounds of a vacuum cleaner, a medieval fair, and a cat purring—which could incidentally also double as “cat farting.” What’s fun about this app is the ability to play with our soundscapes and experiment with how we behave immersed in different sonic environments. The app even allows a layering of sounds, so if you ever wondered what vacuuming at a medieval fair held near a waterfall sounded like, you’re in luck!

I could see myself using the Relax Melodies as an alternative to music while I’m deep in writing. I already know I need repetitive sounds to write best—I tend to play one song over and over again until a piece is done—and it’s nice to have sounds without vocals. I could also see use for the app while in transit and needing a way to block out outside noise, perhaps while doing breathing exercises.

The one place I won’t be using the app, however, is in bed. For that, I’m still stuck on my plush monkey.



At a time when things are so disposable or prone to become obsolete, how do we balance experiencing what’s new while being respectful of the planet? Maybe the solution is ensuring we discover the full value of the things we love.



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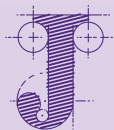
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~ Part three of four ~

WORLD OF THE FIFTH SUN

a short story by Jeff Harrison ~ Illustration by Wade Shaw

Zack flicked his eyes open in alarm. The blazing sun in the cloudless cerulean sky above him seared his eyes, making him squint. A hot, steamy breeze wafted across his bare chest, making sweat immediately jump out on his skin, dampening the hair on his pecs, under his arms and across his brow. Shading his eyes with his right hand, he sat up. His head swam woozily and his vision blurred. He pressed his eyes shut trying to regain his equilibrium.

When he opened them again, he could see that he was in a grassy clearing. Tall verdant trees seemed to rush up and crowd him, making him feel like his perch near the cliff was precarious.

"Where the hell am I?!"

He'd just been... What? What had he been doing? Drinking tea. It had been served to him by...that woman with skin the colour of chocolate. His mind was such a haze, like the humidity shimmering in the air around him.

A sibilant hiss behind him snapped his foggy mind to attention. Something was coming towards him in the grass and it was moving quickly. Zack crabbed backwards away from the unseen threat until his fingers grasped air, clumps of dirt and bits of grass falling off behind him into space. He glanced over his shoulder to see a pounding waterfall hundreds of feet below him. There was nowhere for him to go. Even as panic threatened to consume him, a small rational piece of his mind was nagging him that this place was familiar.

Unfortunately there was no time to consider this sense of déjà vu. A large arrow shaped head rose on a long sinuous neck to regard him, forked tongue flicking

in and out, scenting him. It was a giant snake, emerald scales, with obsidian blotches running the length of a massive body that disappeared into the grass. Lemon-yellow eyes set high on the narrow head regarded him, unblinking.

"We have no time for me to be gentle," the serpent hissed, "but know I mean you no harm."

Zack found it impossible to believe the creature as the muscled tail coiled around him firmly—although he had to admit not uncomfortably—and lifted him into the air. Then the creature snapped off into the jungle like a bolt of lightning. Glancing one final time behind him, his mind clicked with recognition. The clearing was the same one he'd seen his mysterious hostess spray-painting in the alley opposite the coffee shop. Another unsettling thought drifted through his mind as he and his captor...guide—whatever—spirited him away. Where was the jaguar?

As soon as they arrived at an enormous black stone ziggurat, the giant anaconda released him. The structure scintillated in the afternoon sun, even as it seemed to devour all the light around it, sucking the sunlight from the sky until it the day became blackest night, the pinprick light of a billion stars now the only illumination. Sharp, edges of volcanic glass seemed to tear at the air around it appearing more like a hole in its surroundings, than anything man-made.

"Where am I, exactly?" Zack asked. "And what the hell did you put in my tea," he exclaimed making a sudden leap of logic. "You're that crazy graffiti artist!"

"Yes. And no. My name is Aisha. I am the daughter of our Mother Earth. You are the Guardian and her future well-being is in your hands."

"Oh for fuck's sake! I'm not going to get a straight

answer out of you, am I? You're as loony as that crazy red-haired guy that appeared in my bathroom mirror warning me about the end of the world!"

His final words rushed out of his chest in a painful *whoosh* as the serpent snatched him up in her tail again and brought him within millimeters of her incessantly flicking forked tongue.

"Joaquim appeared to you? When?!"

"What happened to the part where you said you meant me no harm," he wheezed from crushed lungs.

"My apologies," she said and released him to fall on his ass in the jungle grass. "I *knew* she was cheating!"

"That's what Joaquim said, but he never said who the hell was cheating," Zack grumbled, as he stood, rubbing his bruised rear. Loincloths offered no padding whatsoever.

"*I'm cheating,*" snarled a deep feminine voice.

And *here's the jaguar*, Zack thought, watching the magnificent tawny and mottled black creature stalk sinuously out of the jungle to circle him and the ophidian.

"Your corrupting influence over the Guardian ends here!" the snake spat and launched herself like a javelin at the giant cat, who met her in the air mid leap. The two creatures slammed into the ground with enough impact to knock Zack off his feet again. This time he landed on the razor edged steps on the inky monolith. He gasped sharply as the volcanic glass drew blood, then yelped in fear as black tentacles of darkness wrapped his body more tightly than the snake had and dragged him up to perch precariously upon the zenith of its flat plateau. He could feel the inky appendages sucking hungrily at the wounds caused by his ascent, even as the two animals below drew blood and gave no quarter. Where his blood fell to the cold stone, it hissed and flames sprung up, quickly becoming a raging inferno with him trapped at its centre.

"This must to stop!" Joaquim's voice boomed across the night sky, shaking the stars from their fixed perch,

Zack caught a flash of movement to Aisha's right even as the spotted blur launched itself for a killing blow.

sending them falling like spilled glitter, until nothing remained but his colossal form, carved from stone, looming over the two warring animals. "While you two fight for your prize, the world burns itself up, consuming Zack until there is nothing left. Is that what you would have? To fight until no one is the victor? To fight

until there is nothing left to fight over anymore? We all die—gods as well as humans—if that happens. Is that the ending you want, Aisha?"

The giant green anaconda released the jaguar from the crushing grip of her muscular coils, shimmered and was suddenly the cocoa-skinned woman who had given him the crazy tea. Zack knew for certain he was having one hell of a trip.

"I am sorry. I should know better." She let out a frustrated sigh and looked up at the hulking face, the mouth of which was large enough to swallow the ziggurat in one bite with Zack as the cherry on top. "But what is happening to the earth infuriates me so! You know I can feel it being violated every second, day and night—what would you do if your mother was being raped, desecrated, abused? I will tolerate it no longer!"

Zack caught a flash of movement to Aisha's right even as the spotted blur launched itself for a killing blow. Instead of scintillating green scales between its sharp teeth it got a mouthful of stone and a broken nose, as Joaquim's massive hand blocked the attack.

"And you!" He thundered at the cat, "You have been cheating since the game began. If it were in my power to terminate your claim in this battle, I would see it done."

The jaguar shimmered as the snake had and in its place was—

"Isabel?!" Zack was stunned.

Bringing her well-manicured hand up to her face, Isabel massaged her cracked and bleeding nose for a moment and when she took her hand away, the damage was gone.

"But you cannot interfere, Joaquim, so I suggest you go back to the sidelines and do what you do best—watch. You yourself break the rules by interfering now. As always your hypocrisy is pure hubris."

"Not so, Isabel. As the trickster, I may not be able to change the rules, but I am free to play within the rules created by others. As such, I merely use your own rules against you. Perfectly allowable."

"And yet you exercise them on behalf of Aisha, who is clearly losing. You cannot pick sides to sway the outcome and you clearly have. If anyone should forfeit, it should be you. Let me claim my victory!"

"It is not your victory to claim," Aisha hissed.

"Then let's settle this sister," Isabel growled, growing long knife-like claws from her hands.

"Gladly!" Aisha's balled fists transformed into rock, sharp crystal points erupting to create deadly spiked maces.

As the two women tore into each other with renewed hatred, Joaquim's gargantuan face turned to regard Zack, who struggled futilely at his tarry bonds. "You must wake up, Zack."

"Why me?"

"There's not really time to go into all the details, but you are what's known as an Avatar—a divine spirit reincarnated into a mortal body to restore a karmic injustice."

Zack felt the all too real heat of the spreading fire lick at his skin—this dream was getting way out of control. "To hell with them! Let them tear each other to pieces! I have more pressing matters of survival to be concerned about! Why should I care?"

"Because, just as Aisha is the daughter of Mother Earth, Isabel is the fiery heart of humanity—but both are horribly out of balance. If they destroy each other, you will have no world to go back to. It's up to you to restore the balance."

"I am just an ordinary guy who was given some doped up tea after a stressful few months. I have no clue about guardians, balance or cosmic world wars and

**Zack felt the all too real
heat of the spreading
fire lick at his skin—
this dream was getting
way out of control.**

as soon as I can shake off this bad dream, I'm outta here!"

With a snap Zack broke free of the tentacles strangling the life out of him and lunged free—sitting up on the cool tiled floor of Aisha's kitchen.

"Screw you and your damned mystical war!" he bellowed into his surprised hostess' face.

Scrambling to his feet he clambered back out the window he'd come in through and fled down the fire escape, knocking potted plants off their railing perches to smash like little dirt-filled clay bombs in the alley below.

"Zack, wait. Please!" Aisha called after him. "You're my mother's only hope! Earth's only hope!"

"Find yourself another freak to fight your war for you 'cuz I'm not buying into any of this hokey horseshit!" he yelled back up at Aisha's silhouette peeking over the balcony after him. "I'm outta here!"

He bolted out of the alley, dead set on storming over to Isabel's and demanding to know what her part was in all this fucked up mumbo jumbo.

As the speeding taxi slammed into him, sending him spiraling into the air, Zack had enough time to reflect on the absurdity of demanding anything from Isabel, before his skull came crashing down into the hard black pavement. A frantic siren wailed in the distance, as the asphalt greedily sucked up Zack's blood. Aisha emerged from the alley in time to see the EMTs tear Zack's shirt open and yell: "CLEAR!"

The ionized snap of electricity jolted her heart from where she stood. Looking up she spied Isabel standing in the spotlight of a street lamp opposite her.

This isn't over! Aisha's thought crackled across the space between them like summer lightning.

Isn't it? Isabel thought smugly back. *We shall see how resilient our little soldier is.* She turned her back on her rival and drifted away, leaving Aisha to stand helplessly amidst yet another natural disaster she could do nothing to prevent.

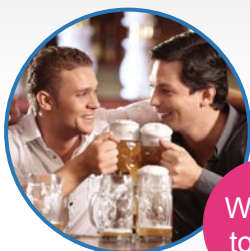
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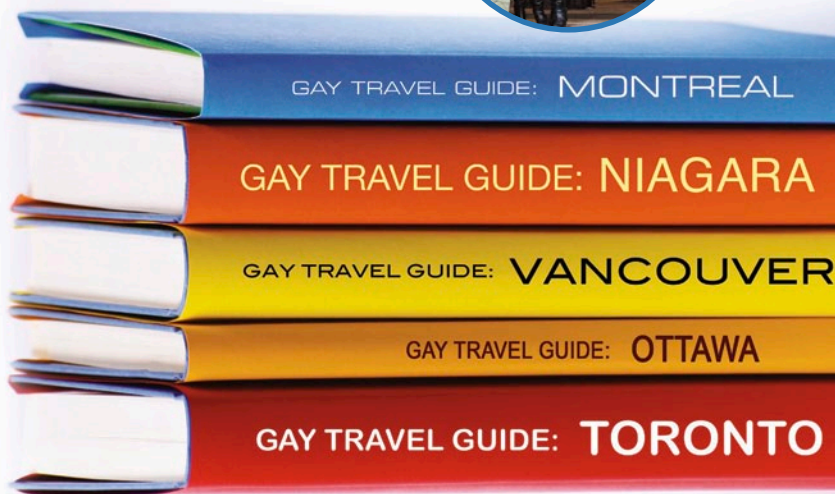
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Community Cornerstones



by Kelly Wilk



"We take off our clothing and our skin and we all have beating hearts." This bold statement by Karen Hillier struck me deeply when we spoke. In one sentence she striped away our earthly confines seeming to make us different, and left bare the spiritual adage that we are truly all the same.

Our most basic elements are the things that unite us and when we realize this is why we are equals and have the right to happiness, community and freedom of expression, the opportunity for growth is unleashed, even in the most unlikely of places.

Growth starts with something as simple as a watering hole—a group of peers seeking companionship in the quiet backyards of an even quieter suburban town. Growth is built with the smallest intention, growing that watering hole into something like Oshawa's vibrant community based nightclub Club 717 (www.club717.ca).

Hillier, voted in as President of The Board of Directors March 2012, shared her tremendous vision with me: "I can be the change I want to see," she said. It was quite to the point given that it was tattooed on her arm. Simple, yet strikingly powerful when taken to heart.

Instantly I got the feeling that Club 717 was much more than a great bar for the queer community to gather in the GTA. In her estimation it's an instrument for social action. Hillier views its upcoming 25th Anniversary as a cause for celebration and an opportunity to ask: "What is possible? Where do we want to go in the next 25 years?"

A strong collection of founding members made this organization grow with the beautiful objective to: "Maintain community in a safe place. I am a change maverick," Hillier readily admits, clear on her directives. "It's like the Hawthorn effect—the act of observing something change, changes you." Club 717 supports PFLAG, holds regular fundraising dances in support of the AIDS Committee of Durham Region and works with the CIC (Community Involving Community) and its partners like the local police department and school board.

Hillier also volunteered at their Christmas toy drive to collect Canadian Tire money and hold a turkey dinner. Participating in events like this is what she really thrives on, saying proudly, "Leading the charge in putting the unity in community." However, I firmly believe the most fundamental difference they are making is with their younger members.

It all began with a private monthly youth dance at the Club where funds went to youth initiatives. Alcohol was not served and the LGBTQ students of Oshawa had a safe place create community. This led to the all-ages nights where kids and adults mingled to strengthen this directive.

How many times have you heard the story among gay and lesbian friends, of high school activities that ostracized them from social functions? Club 717 responded to that shared experience by creating an event where students from across Oshawa could celebrate. Parents were invited to see the youth talent contest, which drew many kids and frankly stunned Hillier and the audience with their performances. "They were making more in tips than the adults did," she exclaimed. "One young man apparently went home with \$60. It is so wonderful to see Club 717 not only encouraging queer youth to shine, but creating a place for them to do so."



Hillier reminded me of the story of the starfish. A little boy and his father are walking down the beach and the boy every so often stoops to pick up a beached starfish and tosses it back into the ocean. His father watches silently and then says to his son, "There are so many of them, what you're doing is kind, but you can't save them all."

"I know." He looks up at his father, perfectly sanguine in his reasoning, the way only a child can be, and says holding a starfish up, "But to this one, I made a difference."

When I think about all the queer kids in small towns and of course Toronto, whether they want to be starfish or just puddle quietly in the sea, they are in danger of being invisible, of falling through the cracks. It makes me glad to see positive reinforcement. Not only is Club 717 preaching a like adage of Dan Savage's amazing "It Gets Better" campaign (www.itgetsbetter.org), reaching out to kids over multimedia, but they are actually creating ways for it to be better for local youth, right away!

"We want to feed people in more than one way," Hillier says, and I can just hear the longing, the love in her voice as she looks to the future of a community she is utterly invested in. It honours me to witness her commitment. With a strong board behind her and a generous community, I cannot wait to see the foundations Club 717 will lay for the future and what kind of revolution those foundations will inspire.

Kelly is a freelance writer, Reiki Master and Reflexologist working and living in Toronto (www.feetmatter.ca). She has also contributed to LoveinToronto.com reviewing Queer Community events, businesses and Pride-Flagged restaurants (www.loveintoronto.com/tag/Kelly-Wilk/).



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COMING MID OCTOBER



autumn in the city

by Jesse Trautmann

Autumn is my favourite season.

I love the leaves turning colour and the comfortable weather: it's not too hot and it's not too chilly. Over the last few years I've noticed that the seasons have shifted and that September and October are like an extended summer for Torontonians. There is nothing better than still being able to sit outside on a patio in mid-October wearing your favourite jeans and t-shirt. You can still sport your flip-flops, but you may need a scarf. There's something in the air as the leaves die and fall, leaving the trees bare, but it doesn't seem as macabre as described. It's more spirited and fluid. It feels like change. And change can be a very healing and powerful thing.

FOOD

Since this issue's theme is all about healing the spirit I thought I'd check out some of Toronto's eateries that are great to comfort the soul this fall.

Pizzeria Libretto

221 Ossington Avenue or 550 Danforth Avenue
416-532-8000

pizzerialibretto.com

\$20

If you're in the mood for some upscale comfort food, definitely try Pizzeria Libretto. They offer a variety of gourmet pizzas that are baked in less than 90 seconds in their 900 degree wood burning oven, hand built by a 3rd generation pizza oven maker in Naples. There's the simple Margherita, which has tomato, basil and mozzarella, or try the Cremini Mushroom, with buffalo mozzarella, gorgonzola, roasted garlic, rosemary, thyme, and pecorino.

Tip: Don't pass on the wine! If you're going to do Italian, do it right! I had the Ripasso Superiore, which paired with my Ontario Prosciutto pizza.



Southern Accent

595 Markham Street
416-536-3211
southernaccent.com
\$20 – 40

If you're looking for a simply delicious lemon beure Bourbon Street Chicken dish complete with garlic mashed potato and cream spinach and shallots, or a Canal Street Creole Jambalaya including smoked ham, andouille sausage and tomato bayou sauce, this place serves it up soul-food style.

Tip: *Almost everyday of the week Southern Accent has on staff Psychics to give you guidance on love, health, gifts that you hold, people, places, situations and past lives. Check the website to book with these ladies and get your future in check.*

SPIRITUAL HEALING

Spiritwind Internal Arts

64 Oxford Street 2nd floor
Kensington Market
416-939-9583
www.spiritwindinternalarts.org

If you're stressed out and feel like you have the weight of the world on your shoulders Spiritwind offers Shiatsu, which relieves many conditions such as headaches, neck and shoulder tension, back pain and pressure. Or how about Tui Na (Chinese massage) or Acupuncture? These ancient healing methods are gaining newfound recognition with new legislation passing in Ontario.

Tip: *Check out Spiritwind's website to learn much more about the services they offer. It's really interesting stuff covering everything from their Toronto based healers to the history of Natural Medicine.*

Downward Dog Yoga Centres

735 Queen Street West, 2nd floor
416-703-8805

Varies: anywhere from \$17 to \$150 depending on duration; see website for details.

www.downwarddog.com

It doesn't matter if you sign up for an Ujjayi Pulse class that combines vinyasa yoga with a steady rhythmic flow, or a Level 1 class focusing on fundamental actions like sun salutations and strengthening standing poses. This is a great way to unwind and get back to a relaxed state after a hard day of work.

Tip: *Downward Dog offers Yoga Basics designed to introduce new students by offering smaller class sizes allowing for more individual attention and detailed instructions.*

EVENTS

Dragonette

October 18
Sound Academy
11 Polson Street
\$20

www.ticketweb.ca

Most probably know Dragonette from the hit single "Big in Japan" with Martin Solveig, but even if it was a tad over played, it was still infectious and worthy of respect from this Canadian band. After the solid success of singles from their 2012 album *Bodyparts*, Dragonette should rock out Sound Academy.

Tip: *Mark your calendars because their upcoming third studio album, *Bodyparts*, is due out on September 25.*

Reinventing Radio: An Evening with Ira Glass

October 27
Massey Hall
178 Victoria Street
8pm

\$37.50 - \$57.50

Ira Glass, the award-winning creator of the public radio show *This American Life*, talks about his program: what makes a compelling story, where they find the amazing material for their show and how he and his staff try to push broadcast journalism beyond the usual fare. Glass will mix stories from the show, live onstage, combining his narration with pre-taped quotes and music, to recreate the sound of the show as the audience watches.

Tip: *An imaginative, cultural date, whether with friends, or someone new.*

Gamercamp

November 3 to 4
Isabel Bader Theatre
\$39 daily, \$69 for the weekend
www.gamercamp.ca

Celebrating the best of art and creativity in games, join nerds and geeks, both local and from lands afar, at the 4th annual Gamercamp. There will be panel discussions, workshops and game playing—lots and lots of games!

Tip: *After stuffing your head with talks, be sure to chill out in the Snakes and Lattes café. Play something new or discover a childhood favourite.*

ARTS & ENTERTAINMENT

Die Fledermaus

October 4 to November 3
Evenings 7:30pm; Matinees, Sunday 2pm,
Saturday 4:30pm
Four Seasons Centre, 145 Queen Street West
\$80 - \$334
416-363-8231
www.coc.ca

Before imprisonment, Gabriel von Eisenstein attends Prince Orlofsky's ball, where he is ensnared in plots of revenge, mistaken identity and spouses pushing the boundaries of each other's fidelity.

TIP: *Dress up, go for champagne cocktails and don't forget your opera glasses, for a truly glamorous experience!*

Halloween

October 24 to 31
Church Street
FREE

Not unlike Pride festivities, Halloween is a big deal where Church Street gets closed off for the weekend to celebrate this week full of parties and mayhem. The real night to be walking



the streets is Saturday when it's just as much fun outside as it is in the bars! Trust me when I tell you, the best masqueraders make appearances as the city flocks to show off everything from movie-spoof costumes to just plain outrageous guess-what-I-am outfits!

Tip: *Be mindful of your costume choice or else you could end up learning the hard way like I did. One year I went out as a naked Susan Meyer from the iconic episode of Desperate Housewives where she got locked out of the house naked and had to scurry across the lawn with a little shrub to cover up! It was chilly that night and I felt it!*

Cavalcade of Lights

November 17
Nathan Phillips Square
100 Queen Street West
FREE

Every year Nathan Phillips Square lights up with thousands of energy efficient LED lights in colours of red, white and silver. This event has been a Toronto tradition for 45 years. This special evening also includes live musical performances and a fireworks finale.

Tip: *If the weather is right be sure to bring your skates and take a spin under a canopy of glittering stars suspended from the Freedom Arches over the Square's outdoor ice rink.*

Jesse Trautmann is a Ryerson Journalism grad and a freelance writer in Toronto. Jesse dishes on queer dating mayhem and shenanigans in his column, "Date Night FAIL" for mygaytoronto.com and he also pens the hilarious blog, "I Shaved My Ass for This?" at www.ishavedassforthis.blogspot.com

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From the Heart

Healing the Spirit

by Shelley A. Harrison

As I was teaching a yoga class this morning, I was captured by the elegance and effectiveness of yoga asanas (postures). Body, mind, and spirit. I reminded the students that while they were toning and stimulating their bodies, as they breathed deeply, their mind was being calmed and cleared, which simultaneously opened access to a state of presence, in which the spirit steps to the foreground, as body aches, and busy minds fade to the background. One step closer to wholeness and harmony, each day we practice, each time we step into the discipline, and hopefully pleasure of the routine. The result? A feeling of energy, radiance, wellness, and an ability to interact with others from a better place, a higher ground.

We are blessed with so many spiritual traditions and practices that can help us bring our spirit and light to the foreground. But does our spirit really need to heal? We use terms such as “broken spirit,” and sometimes, in the case of depression, our light can feel pretty dimmed. Yet I prefer to think that the way to truly heal the spirit, is to simply connect with our own light within the universal life force. Let me share with you one perspective about where our light within resides, and how we can return to our connection with the One Light and life that animates all form (some call this Source, or God, or Great Spirit).

In our last issue, *Nourishing the Body*, I spoke about our connection with the earth through the root chakra at the base of the spine in our auric field. All light and energy is spirit, but as we move up the spine through the seven main energy vortices, the frequency of consciousness raises. Therefore, once we pass through the doorway of the heart, we move beyond the personal, to the transpersonal, characterized as more “spiritual.” So in order to connect with spirit, let’s look at practices that enhance the quality of light and expression in the throat, third eye, and crown chakras, at the neck, brow, and top of head respectively.

The gateway in the throat has to do with speaking and listening—the voice and the ears. We need to speak and hear truth, to express our needs, and be able to receive the nourishment of having them responded to. This is also the doorway to Divine Will. This means, that there is always a higher purpose, and a higher choice that can be made which will bring us into alignment with the greater plan and evolutionary consciousness.

Confession is an act that unburdens us of our lower choices. We admit where we have faltered or chosen harm over harmony, and clear the slate for better decisions. We associate the word ‘confession’ with the Roman Catholic religion, but many of us now do this work in therapy, or with trusted friends. More of us could stand to look at where we hurt others through our selfish or fearful choices, rather than always focusing on who has wounded us.

Prayer is the voicing of our needs to our higher power. We beseech the divine for intervention on our behalf, and offer our gratitude for all we have been given. We can also pray for help and guidance to make higher choices when we are confronted with our fear and lower consciousness. If you feel skeptical about the effectiveness of prayer, or two-way conversation (you need to listen too!) with “whatever/whomever is out there,” let me reassure you that as an energy healer, I see the energy of grace descend in response to prayers. It is very beautiful.

The third eye, or 6th chakra, is the seat of clear vision, dreams, prophecy, insight, and bliss. If you think of the highest spiritual experience you have ever had, it will activate this centre. Try it now, and let yourself bathe in the bliss of Divine Love and spiritual ecstasy. It is an emotional experience of higher love.

Meditation clears and opens this centre. As we calm the thinking mind, which obscures clarity with mental labeling, fantasies, projections, and pre-occupation with past and future, insight and clairvoyance develop. Drug highs can blast this center open, but they also damage and weaken it, which is why you get a low afterwards, and erode your ability to maintain a high vibrational state. Alas, a spiritual practice of some kind and regular doses of real ecstatic connection, are the way to heaven on earth.

The crown chakra connects us to Divine Mind, or the greater universal patterns of our life. We glean a sense of meaning from life events, and see them within the panoramic picture of our learning and growth. When you are uplifted to the white light which pours in through the crown, a sense of communion, devotion, and serenity descend. Meditation can also lift us to this level, but devotion to our divine, whatever face or name we know it by, is the most powerful way to heal our spirit. Here we lift into unity consciousness, where we experience ourselves as an expression of the great Oneness which resides in everything. Enlightenment is the experience of all separation dissolving, and the truth of Oneness shattering our ego.

Don’t forget, true health means working on becoming our best through all seven chakras, and levels of mastery that they embody. The surrender, bliss, and serenity vesseled through chakras five, six, and seven are an essential part of our wholeness, whether we think spirituality is trite or delicious. So get your God on, and seek out a practice that feeds you, and makes you feel radiant.

Shelley A. Harrison is an Energy Healer in Ottawa. She graduated from the Barbara Brennan School of Healing 4-year professional training and has been working in private practice for over 10 years. She visits Toronto regularly to see clients and visit her brother, Jeff, the editor of this magazine. You can write Shelley at fromtheheart@pinkplaymags.com or visit her at www.doveheart.ca



Autumn Horoscopes

by Micki Lee



Aries (Mar 21 – Apr 19)

September: They may still need your shoulder to lean on.

October: Instant romance could be yours if you get out with friends.

November: You need to share some of the dilemma.

Taurus (Apr 20 – May 20)

September: Take the time to educate yourself on the fundamentals.

October: Sleep on it, and listen to your dreams.

November: Your subconscious can open new doors of discovery.

Gemini (May 21 – Jun 20)

September: Be careful not to let playful teasing turn into anything more than that.

October: You can't live your life for others. You must challenge yourself.

November: You can make new friends if you get involved in group activity.

Cancer (Jun 21 – Jul 22)

September: Be direct about your opinions, but be careful of the impression that you leave behind.

October: If something in your life isn't working, take action.

November: This is not the time to lend or borrow money or possessions.

Leo (Jul 23 – Aug 22)

September: Someone close to you may disappoint you or hurt your feelings.

October: You may need to make a choice. Don't feel guilty.

November: You may not be able to solve all your problems, but you can start by making changes.

Virgo (Aug 23 – Sep 22)

September: Enjoy the attention; be confident in who you are and where you are going.

October: Changes in your home will be beneficial to all involved.

November: Your professionalism will shine.

Libra (Sep 23 – Oct 22)

September: Watch what you say to co-workers, because you may inadvertently offend someone.

October: The Golden Rule has never looked more attractive.

November: It's not easy to put anything over on you, but someone may try to do just that.

Scorpio (Oct 23 – Nov 21)

September: You may decide to have less to do with the person who tried to put something over on you.

October: You'll need to relax yourself with comforting activities.

November: Now that you know what's possible, do what's necessary.

Sagittarius (Nov 22 – Dec 21)

September: It will be difficult to maintain your balance throughout this emotional time.

October: Physical, as well as mental, hobbies can put you back on the right track.

November: A problem may erupt that you have to deal with.

Capricorn (Dec 22 – Jan 19)

September: Apply your honest approach to your personal life and you'll be able to relax at home.

October: Don't allow your tension to cause you to make a wrong move or a false start.

November: It's a pain but don't over react.

Aquarius (Jan 20 – Feb 18)

September: In your professional life, you may feel a little overworked and undervalued.

October: Someone you've known a long time may contact you from a far distance.

November: Social gatherings will have a way of putting you back on track with those around you.

Pisces (Feb 19 – Mar 20)

September: Hunt for bargains for the house.

October: You'll be able to accomplish tedious tasks you've been putting off.

November: You and your mate should spend some quality time together.

Micki Lee is a business woman from Oshawa who uses the stars as a guide for her daily life.

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Looking Back

An excerpt from
Heard Around the Fire: Teachings of Grandfather Fire

What is the most important thing for us to do or remember, as fear and anger escalate in this world? (Fire in Barnet, Vermont, July 9/05)

You need to investigate the root of the fear. That is the first step. Until you begin to understand the root of the fear, the reasons for all the confusion will remain unclear. Modern society has tremendous reliance on the mind. It's like a religion: what you accomplished, how much you make, how you look, what sort of education you have, layer after layer. Who is right?

A long time ago, when there were many indigenous or first peoples, no one ever fought about a person's spiritual view. It was part of the people, part of their own special connection from the beginning of time. Yes there were times when they fought over hunting grounds or crops or women in the village or stuff like that. But, your spiritual view of the world, your spiritual connection, your *birthright* was something that no one was really interested in controlling. That was between you and the Gods, between you and Divine. They would get more concerned over practical things, like if there was going to be a raiding party or something like that.

As "civilization" progressed, ideology began to creep in. At one point in history, one group would come in and tell the conquered people that their spiritual view, their Gods and their connections were wrong. "We are right. You are bad. Spiritually, you are ignorant because you don't have the same view we have. Not only are we going to take over your territory but we will see that you follow the state religion or you're going to have to get out!"

Unfortunately, when you have large invading cultures, they don't care about indigenous first people's spiritual views. So you have a lot of people that have "original connection" that are under the sword, or under economic duress, and there is a conflict in their soul. This has been propagated in many ways. You had the Romans who

were good at moving across territory, but they weren't that interested in messing with other people's spiritual views unless they were promoting insurrection. So, they chopped down some Celts, persecuted some Jews. When they moved in this new state religion, Catholicism, you needed to adopt this new view. They got a good launch in what is now Europe. *Then*, it rolled into the New World. There is a background in this—it's a fight over who is right.

The truth of the matter is, if you really look in the face of God, Divine, Oneness, however you want to express it, it is all the same. In certain spiritual paths they have many different expressions for the divine aspect of spiritual manifestation. Some people would like to boil that down to one or two or three aspects, but that is just intolerance.

When people feel a longing deep inside of themselves to develop the relationship with life as a living manifestation, something inside has spoken to them, something inside of them says, "This is what it feels like! Something sings in me about this!"

Then a group comes in that says you have to look at it this way or they threaten your safety—economically, or some other way. There is a tremendous fear and whenever fear is present it creates a major Heart block. It stops things *cold!* Under the heading of survival there is a voice that says, "You better do this or else!" Whatever "else" you had in mind, you'd better put it away.

Unfortunately, you need to bring a lot of courage to bear. I mean unfortunately, because it would be good if that were not necessary—there might be an injustice there. Finding places where you can *be*, where you can *express* yourself and sort through that fear or injustice—exploring this in an open and safe environment is very important. (Grandfather Fire, page 32-34, *Heard Around the Fire: Teachings of Grandfather Fire*, compilation by Jeff Baker, Sacred Fire Press, www.sacredfirefoundation.org)

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