

# Affirming Queer Spirituality in a Sometimes Hostile World:

Addressed to my transgender friends and anyone else who recognizes some queerness in themselves.

A lecture by Virginia Ramey Mollenkott

I want us to spend some time pondering the rather unique spiritual gifts we queer people<sup>1</sup> have to offer to our various faith-communities (and secular friends and colleagues, for that matter), recognizing that our gifts are sometimes spurned and rejected by churches and political groups who are profoundly ignorant of who we are. I am going to begin by discussing how to respond to homophobic, transphobic and heterosexist attacks without allowing ourselves to become hostile in return. Internalized hostility is our great enemy as a queer sub-culture, because once our anger is aroused we have a tendency to attack other people and organizations within our own sub-group. In this way we diminish our effectiveness as we seek justice within society as a whole. There is nothing the political and religious ultra conservatives relish more than the idea of queer people and queer organizations bashing one another – so it is vital that we learn how to handle hostility without taking it into ourselves.

Jesus was a Jewish teacher who encountered huge hostility when he offered God's unconditional love to a society that was not accustomed to his unusual approach to “the law and the prophets.” So when he sent his disciples out two-by-two to share his message, he told them what to do when they met with hostility. He said, “whosoever shall not receive you, nor hear you, when you depart thence, shake off the dust under your feet for a testimony against them. Verily I say unto you. It shall be more tolerable for Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment, than for that city” (Mark 6:11; cf. Matthew 10:14 and Luke 9:5).

What might it mean in our society today to shake off the dust from our feet as we leave a hostile environment or confront a hostile attack? First of all, it means that we must learn to leave judgment to God because we do not know all the factors that might be causing our opponents to act or speak in a hostile fashion. (By the way, notice that Jesus uses Sodom as an example of lack of hospitality, as an example of nastiness and lack of graciousness, NOT as an example of homosexuality. His usage here is typical of the way Jesus always spoke of Sodom. Sodom was never judged for “sodomy,” unless by sodomy we mean being cruel to helpless strangers who have asked us to give them food and shelter). I can illustrate the importance of leaving judgment to God from a recent example in my own life. About two years ago a woman sent me the final chapter of a doctoral dissertation she had written about my work. It was nasty in tone and very inaccurate, claiming I teach that God is a woman and other nonsense. My first impulse was to tell her “where to go,” but instead I began to correspond with her and found out that the very right-wing seminary for which she had written the dissertation had required her to be negative toward me in order for her to get her degree. She subsequently took some courses at a secular university and did some traveling, and kept revising her dissertation so that it would represent my ideas more accurately. When it was finally published by the University Press of America, it was very close to accurate – better for her as a scholar, better for me as a subject, better for her readers as well. I am glad that I left judging her to God and instead approached her as a fellow human being who

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<sup>1</sup> I use “queer” as a way of reclaiming a word about diversity that was previously used as a slur. Just as the Society of Friends reclaimed the slur “Quaker,” we who do not or cannot conform to society's false gender roles and rules are reclaiming the word “queer.”

is doing the best she can under circumstances that at first I had no way of knowing.

Secondly, by telling his disciples to clean the dust of the hostile city off their feet before they left, he was telling them to locate the problem accurately and leave it in the location where it occurred rather than taking it with them as they proceeded through life.

There are people in our country today who believe we queer people should be executed. When I was speaking at an ultra-conservative seminary, I was told in public that as a lesbian I should be executed. It would have been easy to take that in to myself as if somehow I must deserve such hatred. Instead, I located the problem in the student who made the statement and in the seminary that taught so much hatred (at least half of the students had applauded the idea of my being killed for being who I am). Their interpretation of the Bible as requiring death to homosexuals is their problem; they are responsible for choosing the most dreadfully cruel interpretation of the Bible available to them. As a citizen of the USA, of course, I will vote against hate-mongering and use my influence to teach a more loving biblical interpretation; but the hatred itself is not located in me, and I am careful to shake off its deadly dust after I have been confronted by it.

Another meaning for “shaking off the dust” would be to keep oneself informed about positive scholarship concerning homosexuality, so that the dust of homophobia will look to us as dirty and ignorant as it truly is. For instance, a heterosexually married scholar named Theodore Jennings has written three books that I strongly recommend if you are afraid that perhaps the Bible really does teach the sinfulness of same-sex love: *Jacob's Wound* describes the gay-friendly stories in the Hebrew Scriptures (or the Old Testament); *The Man Jesus Loved* describes the queer-friendly stories in the Christian Scriptures (or the New Testament); and *Plato or Paul?* shows that the origins of Christian homophobia are in Plato's *Laws*, not in the Bible at all. (In fact it took hundreds of years for Christianity to absorb and begin to echo the hatred that arose out of Plato's Greek paganism, and there is no reason why today's Christians should continue to express such hatred as if it were essential to the Christian belief-system). So reading Jennings and other scholars – and for transgender people this would include my book *Omnigender* – would be a way of cleaning the dust of ignorance off our shoes.

A final way of “dust clearing” would be to test all advice people make about our queerness by the result that advice would bring about if their suggestion were to be followed. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus issued a warning about “false prophets” and said that we should test peoples' authenticity by their fruits or results: “by their fruits ye shall know them” (7:15-20). One time some years ago I was the first person ever to describe a positive biblical approach to homosexuality at an extremely conservative Christian college in the Midwest. While I was speaking, my “gaydar” went off frequently – there were plenty of queer faculty and students in my audience, but they were afraid of standing with me because of the probability of being fired or expelled.

So it was not until hours later, as I sat alone in the campus guest room, that I heard a timid knock on my door. It was a young gay Christian student, who wanted to know how he could tell whether what I had said in my presentation came from God or from the Devil. I suggested that we should apply the test Jesus had suggested: “by their fruits you shall know them,” or in other words, “test the results before you believe what someone's telling you.” He agreed, so I asked him, “If you believe that my queer-positive message came from the Devil, what will be the result?” He never even hesitated before he

answered: “I will commit suicide.” Then I asked him, “If you believe that my queer positive message came from God, what will be the result?” Again, no hesitation: “I’ll become a gay Christian evangelist.” Finally, I asked, “And which result would the Devil prefer?” The young man broke into a big smile, relaxed, and announced that he was going to become an evangelist. The last I heard of him several years later, he was a happy and fulfilled gay Christian evangelist in New York City.

So I suggest to you that you test what you hear by the results. If you hear suggestions that you should kill yourself or others, or attack people, you can know for sure that the source is evil, not sacred. What is suggested by an agent of the Holy Spirit is always loving, kind, reconciling, and peaceable.

For a quick summary: the way to handle hostility without absorbing it is to clean your shoes after any encounter with hostility. And these are the four ways I’ve suggested doing that:

1. Leave all ultimate judgment to God.
2. Locate the problem accurately and leave it where it occurred since it is about the hostile person or group and is not about you.
3. Keep yourself informed about whatever it is that seems to frighten people into becoming hostile – in our case, homosexuality or gender queerness.
4. Test the validity of peoples’ judgment by the results or fruits of what would happen if their agenda were carried out.

There is no reason on earth to burden ourselves with other peoples’ hostilities. We may feel compassion for their fear and ignorance, but it does not do them, or us, any good whatsoever to stagger under the burden of hostile judgementalism. Walk free!

Okay then, let me turn to talking about some of the very special gifts we queer people have been selected to share with the world. We are “queer” precisely because we are always somewhere in the middle ground, in between what our society deems proper for “real men” or “real women,” who are supposed to be attracted only and exclusively to the so-called “opposite sex.” Some of us are queer because we love people of our own gender/sex; some of us are queer because we can be attracted to anybody of any gender/sex; some of us are queer because we feel ourselves to be a gender/sex that is different from the form of our body; some of us are queer because we have a mixture of both male and female genitalia or chromosomes; some of us are queer because we feel ourselves to be both masculine and feminine and dress and act accordingly; some of us are queer because we are bored by gender stereotyped rules and regulations and refuse to obey them. Whatever form our queerness may take, it places us outside of what society considers “normal.” For that very reason, transpeople or queer people were recognized, historically, as being especially gifted at building bridges between the seen and the unseen, between time and eternity.

For instance, the priests of the ancient goddess Inanna were eunuchs who today would be called transwomen, as were the priests of Cybele. To this day many African tribal people have religious leaders who are queer. It is ironic that so many Christians regard queer people as lacking in spirituality, when in fact the opposite is true. Do not let anyone put down your queer spirituality! If you have ever been tempted to abandon Spirit because of such put-downs, I urge you to read Leslie Feinberg’s book *Transgender Warriors* or my own book *Omnigender* for further details about queer people who have acted as gate-keepers or bridges to more fully spirited states of being. And if you sense that you have psychic gifts of channeling or various healing modalities, I urge you to develop them as ways of

honoring your own queerness.

Another queer gift is this: by the circumstances of our queerness we have been forced to do a lot of introspection about the interconnectedness of sex, gender, justice, and spirituality. Many folks in our society see human sexual pleasure as something that is opposite to spirituality. Right-wing Christians especially have fallen into such a fear of embodiment and sexual pleasure that they spend inordinate amounts of time and money combating same-sex marriage, contraception, and abortion instead of showing concern for the fact that 1.3 billion people are starving, that climate change is catastrophic, that huge military budgets are killing world economies, and that health care needs are unmet for millions of people. Many Christian congregations are still supporting the expenditure of millions of dollars on sex-education that urges teenagers to pledge celibacy until marriage, despite the mounting evidence that teens who take virginity pledges are four times more likely to have oral sex and six times more likely to have anal sex than those who refused to take the pledge. What a waste of money and human potential!

We queer people have demonstrated a certain courage simply by accepting that we are queer, anomalies, living outside acceptable gender/sexual norms. So we are in a good position to challenge our society to think more clearly about the facts that pleasure-denying societies are unjust and warlike societies; that there is some truth to the idea of making love rather than making war. We have also felt the sting of being considered outsiders and lesser than others who fit traditional norms more easily; so we are in a position to work hard to bring respect and justice to everyone in our society, especially those who have been devalued and diminished, such as immigrants and poor people and people with handicaps. According to Jesus, love is about mutual concern, deference, and compassion – the kind of fair-minded egalitarian love that good friends feel for one another. It is our challenge as queer people to work toward a loving society that values bodily pleasure and seeks to share the good basics of life with every body, everywhere.

One of our greatest queer gifts to society is to help people overcome the gender stereotypes that alienate men from women, alienate almost everyone from their own bodies, and oppress women and girls all over the world. As the somewhat masculine mother of a son whom I dearly love, I resent that boys are still told that “real men don’t cry” and “real men are always in control of every situation.” What nonsense! And I grieve over the fact that around the world, women perform most of the hard labor but often receive only whatever food is left after the men have eaten. In Africa, thousands of women are dying of AIDS because they have no right to refuse unprotected sex with husbands who are HIV+. Such facts reveal that the binary gender construct does not merely **differentiate** men from women, but also **elevates** men above women. But because we queer people combine male and female traits in a multitude of ways, we offer society some visual and embodied assistance in putting aside such unjust perceptions and practices.

Yet another queer gift is that because we queers occupy a forgotten middle ground of unlabeled ambiguity about sex and gender, we can help to heal religious addictions to certainty. Today there seems to be an increasing assumption that the world is divided into good and evil empires, with our nation and our religion representing everything that is good, yet confronted with evil all around. Unless we learn better, this addiction to dualistic certainty will cause us to destroy our entire planet. Conditions in this world are so dangerously charged with “us-vs-them” religious and political bitterness

that we might begin to feel that things are hopeless. But as historians like Karen Armstrong have shown us, all the great religions and philosophic traditions have begun by nourishing hope for humankind – and most of them had their beginnings between the 9<sup>th</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> centuries B.C. E. – centuries of hideous violence.

Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Monotheism, Philosophic Rationalism, Rabbinic Judaism, Christianity, and Islam - all the world's great religions - emphasize the abandonment of egocentricity in favor of a spirituality centered in loving kindness and compassion. Yet in our era, society seems to be turning religion into something opposite to its founder's original teaching. Instead of allowing religion to make us more humane and loving, many of our contemporaries are willing to fight vicious battles over belief systems and differences of behavior.

In her book, *The Great Transformation*, Armstrong points out that to the sages of all religions, **religion is compassion**. What all the sages have always known is that “sympathy cannot be confined to our own group. We must all agree to 'yield' to one another.” And remember: the first catalyst for founding new religions was “a principled rejection of the aggression that the sages had witnessed all around them.” Our catalysts are events like the Holocaust, Bosnia, the disasters of 9/11, Iraq, Darfur, bullying and its resultant suicides. Of course, the love taught by the sages does not refer exclusively to sexual love, but neither does it exclude sexual love. Our sexual drive (our eros) is a spiritual urge, driving us toward connectedness. Our queer eros is a gift that can inspire us to reach out in compassion toward others.

I was moved to read Cris Beams' book, *Transparent* (2008), about a group of teenage queers in Los Angeles and elsewhere who mentor and assist one another in learning the skills necessary for survival in a hostile society. Who taught these trans-queer-teenagers to be so helpful and faithful to one another? Cris Beam found that “whether they're still being parented at home or not, many transgender teenagers will find new parents. These parents are called drag mothers and drag fathers, and often they are just a few years older than their 'children.' They'll mentor anywhere from a handful to dozens of the young street kids, sometimes renting out large apartments [as] shelter for the more transitory kids. This especially happens in Harlem....” I suggest that we think of ways we queer people can emulate those queer drag parents in our love and concern for those who are coming along after us, and for the world in general.

So we have many queer gifts to offer to the world we live in! The final point I want to make is that as important as our queerness is, it is vital that we understand that we are neither better nor worse than people who are conventional, traditional, normal, and not like ourselves.

According to Ephesians 4:6, God our Parent is “above all, through all, and in you all.” A secular way of saying the same thing is that we all stem from and are sustained by a single unified energy field. If that is true, then in order to gain a realistic composite image of the Divine Being, or Ground of Being, we would have to view every single created being as contributing specific attributes to the whole picture, and give appropriate respect and kindness to everyone.

What would that mean for a transperson or otherwise queer person who might be hiding silently in a closet for fear of social disapproval? It would mean that such a person is depriving the world of the

unique transpersonhood, of their very own queerness that God wanted to reveal to the world through precisely his or her personality. And at the same time, the closeted queer is depriving hm/herself of the joy of channeling divine embodiment into the world.

The great mystic Meister Eckhart wrote that “The eye with which I see God is the same eye with which God sees me.” What could be more spiritual than looking in the mirror and seeing God looking back at us through our own eyes? And why fear the disapproval of bigots when we can sense divine energy pulsing within ourselves and reaching out in love to others within our sphere of influence?

When I was a young transgender lesbian in a fundamental Christian college, I was taught that God is a jealous God who will not stand for idolatry, meaning any object of worship other than Himself. Yet at the same time I was taught that it was entirely wrong for me to want to be the center of attention. I tried for a long time to make sense of that discrepancy.

But eventually I realized that since God really is above all, through all, and in us all, then God is dishonored when we limit our respect, worship, and cherishing to anything less than everyone. Some folks worship their lovers, spouses, or children, some worship money, some worship themselves and those just like themselves. But whether the object of worship is hugely significant or trivial, secular or religious, if it is something less than God as all-in-all, then it is idolatry. God is being obscured because we have devoted ourselves to something less than the fulness of Her/His/Its transbeing in all its queerness, as well as all its so-called “normalcy.” So let us affirm our queer gifts without imagining that this makes us better than anybody else. And at the same time, let us firmly and happily wipe off the dust of anyone who tries to tell us we are less than they.