gender quest

THE QUARTERLY PUBLICATION OF KINDRED SPIRITS SUMMER 2000

Gender, Integrity, and Spirituality

A Personal Journey, by Petra Doan

(edited by Holly Boswell)

For most of the first 40 years of my life I would not have said that I was a very spiritual person. I was drawn to Quakerism as a student at Westtown School and during my senior year joined that Meeting. I was powerfully attracted to the idea that there is something of God in everyone. It made such sense to me that "bad" behavior could be explained by not being aware of or able to listen to that of God within oneself. Change was clearly possible through a loving acceptance of the presence of God within oneself.

While I accepted this core notion of Quakerism, for a long time I was unable to establish a clear connection with that of God within myself. I attended Meeting for Worship regularly, and felt a presence within but only rarely felt a clarity of direction or movement of spirit. Something seemed to be "getting in the way" of the spiritual work I had to do in order to be able to listen internally. Only recently have I come to realize that it was my lifelong struggle with gender which was creating a kind of blockage inside me.

I have a clear memory of knowing I was different at age four, while playing dress-up with my cousin. Confusion over my gender identity continued throughout adolescence. I coped by continuing to keep the "who am I" question buried deeply, knowing that I couldn't answer it. In high school I did not date much, but by senior year did become involved in a more serious relationship with a girl. It was on and off for a while, but after sharing something of my gender variance, our love deepened and eventually we married.

However, my feeling of being very differently gendered did not go away. Mostly it remained lurking just beneath the surface, but sometimes I simply had to express that inner reality. I began experimenting more seriously with clothes and makeup, and began to make contact with others like myself. I sensed that I would need a lot of support as I tried to cope with the powerful feelings that I was trying to keep bottled up.

After we finished both of our dissertations, my wife took a post doctoral fellowship, and I began looking for work. During this transitional period my need to meet others like myself reached a high point. I joined a support group that met in a city three hours away from where we were living. When I returned from my first meeting, I came home and tried to share with my wife what had happened over the weekend and spent several hours in tears. I am not sure whether this was from the joy of finding a group of supportive new friends, or from the fear engendered by a realization that my life had changed in some fundamental way.

There was an almost mind-numbing fear of being discovered, and the humiliation which I was sure would follow, but I could not turn back. I knew that somehow I would find my way forward, but the prospect of losing my family and friends was agonizing. During this time, presenting as a man began to feel so wrong that I found it more and more difficult to function in that role. I began to slip into a deep despair.

It was reading "The Testimony of Integrity in the Society of Friends" (Pendle Hill pamphlet # 296) by Wilmer Cooper that helped me to realize how my gender journey and my spirituality were intimately connected. Cooper's analysis of integrity's four parts: truthfulness, authenticity, obedience to God, and wholeness cast a spotlight on my own lack of integrity. I was comfortable with the basic truthfulness part, but it was in authenticity that I suddenly felt completely hollow. By denying my authentic identity for so many years, I had created a huge roadblock for myself, for my spirituality, and for my survival. As I contemplated the illusory life I had created, I felt such distress that for a while it seemed like I could not continue living. I sought out a therapist who had worked with other transgendered people, and he helped me to come to terms with myself.

I set out to see what steps I needed to take to reclaim integrity and live an authentic life. I knew that meant risking nearly everything that I held dear. I might lose my wife, my children, my spiritual community, and my career if I proceeded. But I also knew that if I did not, I was not sure if I could continue living. One day in the midst of this agony over how to proceed, I was trying to vent some of my pain through exercise. As I

Cont'd. on 6th page

Phoenix Transgender Support
Upcoming Meetings in Asheville
9/16, 11/11, 1/13, 3/10, 5/12

Autumn Circle at the BodhiTree House

Due to the strong response we received for the Summer Solstice Circle, and the fact that the 8th Annual Circle in Hot Springs (Aug. 17-20) is booked full, we believe the time has come to offer this event.

This Circle will occur over Labor Day weekend, Sept. 1-4. While this is three weeks before the Equinox, it will hopefully be an open time for many, and not too close to Southern Comfort in Atlanta. The day to travel here would be Friday, with an Opening Circle that evening. Departure will be Monday, after a Closing Circle and brunch.

There will be outings to Lake Lure (a spectacular mountain lake where "Dirty Dancing" & "Last of the Mohicans" were filmed), The Light Center (a devotional dome with surreal acoustics for drumming), and adjacent wilderness (350 acres of high trails to hike in silent, meditative reverence). Saturday night will feature a soiree with local kindred spirits. Imagine yourself among a couple dozen gaily clad revelers, spilling out onto 5 decks with tiki torches, drumming and laughter wafting through ripe leaves in the crisp mountain air… Sunday night relaxes into a slumber party, entitled "The Decline & Fall". Devoted to fun and nostalgia -- this will be a last hurrah, in the bittersweet spirit of Autumn.

The fee, which covers everything for three days and nights, is $175. Camping is available on premises for $125. To reserve your space, send $100, payable to Kindred Spirits at 395 Lakey Gap Acres, Black Mtn., NC 28711. Suggested deadline is Aug. 19.

Kindred Spirits Retreats & Guesthouse

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

UPCOMING KINDRED SPIRITS EVENTS

September 1 - 4 (Fri. - Mon.)
AUTUMN CIRCLE - BTH, Black Mountain, NC
Celebrate the sweet end of summer with a Mabon Circle, outings to Lake Lure and The Light Center, hiking, drumming, evening revelry, and a slumber party whose theme is "The Decline & Fall".

September 24 (Sunday)
CIRCLE of CHANGE - SF Bay area, CA
Inaugural gathering on a beach (tba) for trans & allies, celebrating the transformational power of spirit, drawing on ancient and modern practices. Contact Joy at: transcengender@yahoo.com / 831-438-4515

September 29 (Friday)
GATHERING of the TRANSCLANS - Atlanta, GA
The Traveling Medicine Show returns to the Southern Comfort Conference for a ritual theatre performance with audience participation of up to 600 attendees. An honoring of our transgender strength and magic.

October 28 - 29 (Sat. - Sun).
HALLOWEEN - Asheville, NC
While this may be the "Crossdresser's National Holiday", Kindred Spirits enjoy taking our magic out into Asheville's biggest party night, in the transformative, pagan spirit of Samhain. Lodging at BT House.

November 2 - 5 (Thurs. - Sun.)
ZEN RETREAT - BTH, Black Mountain, NC
Silent, meditative space to sit, walk, work outdoors, and be replenished in a natural space with nourishing food and evening discussion sessions. A powerful tool to do your real inner work. Led by Zantui Rose.

November 23 - 26 (Thurs. - Sun.)
ALE-HELI'STI - BTH, Black Mountain, NC
For this feast of thanksgiving we use the Cherokee word for "gratitude", honoring the core of their spirituality in this, their ancestral home. No place at the table with blood kin? Count your blessings with us.

December 29 - Jan. 1 (Fri. - Mon.)
WINTER CIRCLE - BTH, Black Mountain, NC
After the fever pitch of commercialized holidays, you are invited to retreat in quiet reverence with kindred spirits. Bring a log for the bonfire on the mountain under the waxing moon, and sit in Yule Circle.

The BodhiTree House is available for you to host your own gatherings. You may schedule a Vision Quest at Dixon Mountain any time.

BODHITREE HOUSE OPENS with SOLSTICE CIRCLE

as described by Angela Brightfeather

Walking up the driveway and seeing the house for the fist time was a great feeling. The BodhiTree House is now a reality that exists in this dimension, and will serve our community as a retreat place where we can spiritually experience being transgendered and all the things that means. Not like the big bashes at our conventions -- more like a rest spot for people who are searching or, teaching, as well as a place for people who just want to get away from the hectic part of life with other TG's. You don't have to go to a fetish bar, or go out to dinner and put your best clothes on. All you have to do is be there and relax and experience the woods and trails… and the Bodhi Tree.

Holly and Zantui have really hit the chords of every TG heart, with their vision and dedication to an idea that we will all benefit from. The BodhiTree House offers a win-win scenario that will continue to be a special place in this world for people like us, who are interested in their gender diversity enough to look beyond their gender and into their total being with gender in perspective.

What did we do when we were there? Nothing, absolutely nothing, except to make more friends and walk in the woods and make a little noise. It was a first for everything that we did, because it was in a totally different place than the other gatherings. It was in OUR place. At least that is how it felt, thanks to Holly and Zantui. We all know how much they worked to build this house, and the sacrifices they have made for their vision for others. I also know they own the land and everything in the house. But it still felt like our place, more than any other thing. That would not be possible without their generosity and sharing way.

We had a great time, and a lot of fun breaking in this new place -- this gift to our community. Now it is up to us to bring others to this spot so they can gain from it also. As I left, I turned to Holly and said "thanks for my second home in North Carolina". It's very exciting to be a part of it all.

***The land** retains an identity of its own, still deeper and more subtle than we can know. Our obligation toward it then becomes simple: to approach with an uncalculating mind, with an attitude of regard… be alert for its openings, for that moment when something sacred reveals itself within the mundane, and you know the land knows you are there.*

from Arctic Dreams
by Barry Lopez

Passing As Privilege

from a series on Transfeminism, by Jessica Xavier

The concept of privilege is one which feminists use as a tool to critically analyze societal and personal power imbalances. While the majority of transgendered and transsexual people are not feminists, most of us are nevertheless somewhat familiar with male privilege, since we are bashed so often for either retaining it (MTFs) or selling out to obtain it (FTMs). Besides male privilege, there are other traditional forms of privilege based on class and race that are important considerations for feminists and progressive lefties like me. However, the new transfeminist formulations of privilege are far more important to transgendered people, since they address the power imbalances experienced by us.

Birth privilege is being born into a physical sex that matches your internal gender identity, and possessing it allows non-transsexuals to avoid the many deleterious consequences of gender dysphoria. No matter how many surgeries we have, we can never gain birth privilege – a fact that many transsexual women seem to have difficulty accepting. Like other traditional forms of privilege, it's possessors are clueless about it, since they were (surprise) born with it. For the birth privileged, being born into bodies that don't torture them with the absurdity of inappropriate genitalia is simply a given, taken immediately for granted. Without understanding their birth privilege, the "nons" simply cannot understand transsexual people, a failing which produces and perpetuates a social ill only transgendered people experience -- transphobia.

The lack of birth privilege is a permanent deficit that not only shapes but dominates our existence. Thus passing privilege becomes far more significant to us throughout the course of our lives. Passing privilege is passing undetected as a member of the majority – white, straight or non-transgendered. In Erving Goffman's "Stigma: Notes on the Management of Spoiled Identity" (1963: Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ), he explores the dichotomy of socially stigmatized groups. Those who lack passing privilege are the discredited, with obvious and unconcealable stigma. They cope with their stigma through management – various tactics which reduce the impact of their stigma on their interpersonal relationships. But the passing privileged are discreditable – their stigma is concealable, yet they remain vulnerable to its disclosure. Their concern is with information control – "to tell or not to tell, to let on or not, to lie or not to lie, and in each case, to whom, when and where."

People who cannot or chose not to conform to rigid cultural norms for their gender, as based upon their physical sex, I call gender variant. While we trans people are familiar with gender variant expressions and cross gender identities, there are many other forms of gender variance exhibited by all kinds of people -- regardless of their sexual or gender identities. The most common examples of gender variance are the reproductive and marriage choices of many non-transgendered women, who choose not to get married nor to have children. Another is working in a stereotypically opposite gender based occupation – like men who are nurses and women who are construction workers. There's also grooming (such as men with long hair or earrings, or women with short hair or facial hair), types of male clothing worn by women and girls, and effeminate mannerisms in men or masculine mannerisms in women. And although most of them don't realize it, gay, lesbian and bisexual people also are gender variant, because they are defying cultural norms for their sexualities in their same-gender sexual relationships. Because passing privilege explains the power imbalances between overt and covert forms of gender variance amongst the sexual minorities,it becomes equally relevant to gay, lesbian and bisexual people as well as to transgendered people. As such, it is a key component of transfeminist analysis, as important as male privilege has been to earlier waves of feminism.

With the exception of some no-ho/no-op trans people (who live full-time and are not interested in hormonal and surgical sex reassignment), obtaining the ability to pass in our chosen genders is a major focus (if not obsession) of transgendered people of both gender vectors (MTF and FTM), from part-time crossdressers to transsexuals seeking to live full-time. Passing affords all of us physical safety in public spaces, and for those of us living full-time, job security and access to the social, economic and professional pathways of the non-transgendered. Thus the vast majority of MTFs, and many if not most FTMs, become careful observers of those with birth privilege in their chosen genders. The observations and evaluations we make about gender roles, behaviors and especially appearances are incorporated over time into our own chosen gender expressions. Many of us consider ourselves to be experts about gender expression and passing itself. Thus passing as a member of the majority assumes a saliency in our psyches, while remaining largely unconsidered by the other sexual minorities.

However, passing privilege, like other forms of privilege, is based upon full-time living status. Thus almost all crossdressers who do not live full-time, regardless of their ability to pass as women, still have passing privilege – since they pass for the majority of their lives as straight, non-transgendered men. It's true that a small minority of crossdressers retain some overt evidence of their transgendered status (long hair, long fingernails, absence of facial and body hair, etc.). However, they are more likely to be perceived as gay, not transgendered, due to trans-ignorance among the "nons". In this regard, most crossdressers are similar to gay and bisexual men who are straight-acting and straight-appearing. Since same-gender sex is usually not performed in public view, their gender variant behaviors are covert and episodic, and so they too have passing privilege – they pass as heterosexual men.

Passing privilege creates a significant power imbalance in the gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgender community, since it allows its possessors to escape the intense societal stigmatization and marginalization associated with being queer. Those who pass as non-transgendered or straight simply do not experience as much external oppression as those who do not. The lack of passing privilege makes it far more likely for someone, regardless of their sexual identity, to fall victim to discrimination, harassment and violence. Indeed, anyone perceived as queer – regardless of their sexual orientation – either lacks passing privilege or has forfeited it, either by choice or by an overt act.

The impact of passing privilege on the political LGBT movement has been painfully obvious. Because the majority of gay men and lesbians possess it, they have the luxury of dominating the movement with their gay and lesbian identity politics, which erases the sizable visible gender variance within their own communities. Gay and lesbian identity politics "dumbs down" the reason for their oppression to invisible acts committed mostly in the privacy of bedrooms. But who you sleep with doesn't get you into trouble – it's what you look like and how you act. One would think that visibly gender variant gay men and lesbians would be our immediate allies, but traditionally they have been almost as marginalized as trans people by their passing privileged peers. The covert and overt forms of gender variance, as manifested by the passing privileged and the visibly queer, have created deep divisions within and amongst the sexual minorities. One of the most glaring consequences is a "civil rights" movement that seeks to protect only the (already passing) privileged, with a leadership all too willing to sacrifice its community's most vulnerable members, as it panders to the genderphobia of straight legislators.

But the impact of passing privilege is felt far beyond just the LGBT political movement. Passing privilege has some unique qualities that separate it from other traditional forms of privilege which are bestowed at birth. For some transgendered and transsexual people seeking to live full-time, passing privilege can be acquired through the administration of exogenous hormones, various cosmetic procedures and surgeries. However, the majority ultimately fail to obtain passing privilege, ironically prevented by their lack of birth privilege. There are simply too many physical characteristics produced by the surge of hormones during adolescence that cannot be erased by hormones and surgery in later years. Moreover, accessing these medical technologies is difficult and expensive, and usually a function of class and race privilege. Thus all transgendered people who go full-time will, at least at some point during their gender transitions, lack passing privilege. Even those who pass well enough while clothed or made-up lose their passing privilege in intimate situations – which is why many do not get routine medical check-ups, or even seek treatment for acute illnesses.

And there is an even darker side to passing privilege. Although no one talks about it, a hierarchy exists among transsexual women based upon it. In my own estimation, only about a third of transsexual women pass perfectly – thus allowing them to conceal their transsexual status. Passing privilege creates friction in our support groups between those with and without it. The passing privileged are usually a group's most

popular members, and coveted as companions. Sadly, those who lack passing privilege are often rudely rebuffed by those who possess it when their friendship is sought. Thus passing privilege creates divisiveness even within our support groups, as it destroys solidarity and cripples our community-building efforts.

Goffman presented an interesting paradox, in that those with the ability to pass and conceal their stigma are simultaneously admired and despised by those who cannot. He also noted that the passing fortunate pay significant psychic costs, in order to continuously maintain the concealment of their stigma. Thus transsexual women living in stealth must not only remain constantly on guard, but also silently accept the non-transgendered majority's pejorative perspective of themselves when they encounter it. For example, I know one transsexual woman who must listen silently to her intensely transphobic but unsuspecting husband rant and rave through any talk show featuring trans people. I am amazed at how these stealthy transsexual women can suffer the emotional and spiritual consequences of living in stealth, their new lives made possible solely through their passing privilege. Surely this must be our Faustian bargain – the costly price we must pay for "real" womanhood -- that total assimilation extracts and subtracts from us.

Yet we transsexual women will still move heaven and earth to obtain the prize of passing privilege which, for many, is still sadly beyond their physical reach. There are even those of us who are post-operative and passing privileged, who nevertheless continue to undergo additional surgeries in a fruitless pursuit of that which they will never have – birth privilege. No privilege of any kind can ever erase the facts of our births – we will never be non-transsexual.

It is interesting to contrast this passionate pursuit of passing privilege by transsexual women with the attitudes of transsexual men regarding it. I estimate that 90% of transsexual men eventually gain passing privilege, but there is a painful irony here. Spending half-lives developing a queer consciousness within their lesbian communities, many transsexual men of my acquaintance are not only aware but also ambivalent about their passing privilege. Passing perfectly as non-transgendered, usually straight men, their queerness becomes erased and taken from them. They even become viewed as the oppressor (if white) or as a potential predator (if black) by their former peers. Some therefore consider their passing privilege to be a curse, echoing Jess Goldberg's lament from Stone Butch Blues: *"As far as the world's concerned, I was born the day I began to pass. I have no past, no loved ones, no memories, no me. No one really sees me or speaks to me or touches me."*

The unwitting possession of privilege perpetuates the oppression caused by it. Those who are not part of the solution are not part of the problem – they are the problem itself. To own one's privilege is to take responsibility for the underlying social constructs that gave it to you in the first place. When informed consciousness is transformed into socio-political action, change results. But the failure of feminism and identity politics to make people aware of their privilege and to motivate them to act on it has left us with a racist, classist, sexist, homophobic and transphobic culture. The message may be correct, but its delivery simply fails to resonate with the privileged majority, who continue to be almost wholly ignorant of their privilege.

However, it's different with the transgendered passing privileged who live full-time. We know we are privileged – it becomes obvious to us when we begin to pass in our new genders. Yet that awareness has motivated only a few of us to own our privilege – and to fight transphobia as best we can. The traditional model of transition, surgery and assimilation is in effect a long struggle to obtain passing privilege, thus avoiding the stigma of transsexualism. Once obtained, most will forget they have passing privilege – while others of their own kind suffer mightily due to their lack of it. In a future column, I will address how this failure to own our passing privilege not only perpetuates but also creates our oppression.

Petra Doan, cont'd.

struggled to take each step, I heard a quiet voice telling me firmly, "Lift it up, Petra! Lift it up!" This sudden sense that I was not alone and need not carry the weight of this decision by myself lifted my spirits and gave me the courage to continue.

I asked for a Clearness Committee from my Monthly Meeting to help me discern whether this was in fact "a leading". The committee met with me for six months and explored the nature of my leading and the probable impacts of my following it on my family and on the Meeting. They helped me to see that my children were unlikely to stop loving me for being authentic, and that the Meeting community would accept me no matter what. This discernment helped enormously, but I knew that I still had to face the difficult issue of whether my marriage could continue if I proceeded to live as the woman I knew I needed to be.

This period was probably the hardest. The love between us was, and continues to be, wonderfully deep. But gender is such a fundamental part of marriage, it changes everything. I was extremely fortunate to have a partner whose love was tenacious enough to allow us to spend long hours trying to vision how we might enable our partnership to survive. But she was clear that she did NOT want to be married to a woman, and as I became clearer about who I was, it slowly became obvious that this was an insurmountable obstacle.

I did not feel that I had the strength to take the next step. I lengthened my daily prayer and meditation sessions to a full hour each morning, seeking the divine guidance that we had invoked in our marriage vows. How could I take action that might cause the dissolution of my marriage and the possible break-up of my family? But could I continue living if I did not acknowledge my increasing certainty that I needed to live at least part of my life as a woman?

In my seeking, I discovered the group of Quakers known as FLGC (Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns) and was welcomed into this amazing spiritual community where I found a powerful refuge and source of strength. The depth of the worship within this community of gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered Friends who have struggled with similar issues of authenticity and identity allowed me to reach new spiritual depths within myself. In one Meeting for Worship I had an incredible experience of my journey unfolding before me that I have come to realize was a kind of vision. There was a profound sense of "having to move forward", and this gave me the strength to be fully honest with myself and begin the process of gender transition.

I had walked into Meeting for Worship a bit tired and not feeling very centered. I sank into my chair, settled into a comfortable position, and closed my eyes to begin the process of centering down. As the silence enveloped me, I realized that I was seeing a wondrous technicolor reality unfolding before me:

I found myself walking along a clearly defined path through some woods on a high plateau. The path led to an open space and then straight on to the edge of the plateau. As I approached this space I realized that I was at the edge of a precipice. Looking carefully over the edge I saw that the bottom was a very long way down. It appeared to be a barren and rather desolate landscape.

I turned to look for the path once more and realized that it went straight up to the edge and then went over the edge. I walked along the path until just before it dropped out of sight and then peered over the edge once more. It seemed as if the precipice was not so much a sheer cliff, as an overhanging rock formation extending out and over the valley floor below. I felt waves of fear rise with in me. I remember feeling that "I can't do this". I stayed at the edge and wrestled with myself for a while. I am not sure how I found the courage to move onward, but I think that I felt like staying at the edge was just not possible. So I finally managed to gather my physical and emotional resources and moved slowly forward one step at a time. Instead of the rapid uprush of wind as I stepped off and fell, I found that as I moved forward my shoes were gripping the walkway ever so tightly. Within a very short period I was no longer walking over the edge without a path, but was following some other procedure. Perhaps I was walking on angel's wings.... Sure enough within a few seconds the path twisted and turned and I was walking right side up in a gentle downward spiral.

When I reached the bottom I discovered that it was not barren or desolate. It was filled with rich colors and lots of interesting textures. Pretty amazing!! Whatever it was it does seem to show fairly clearly that I feel that I need to go over the edge and trust in God that I will find that softly spiraling path to a better place.

The next summer, I was visiting my wife's family in the mountains and felt so clearly the beauty and companionship which I would be missing if my marriage ended. I became sad and withdrawn from the group. When an unfortunate misunderstanding caused me to be excluded from a family hike to the top of a mountain, I found myself falling into a deeper despair than I had ever known. My mind kept re-playing a hike of the previous day in which I had crossed a raging river and then walked along a very steep cliff. Except this time, when I came to those dangerous situations I let myself drop from the cable car into the torrent and be swept away. Later I saw myself sliding off the cliff to fall hundreds of feet onto the rocks below. I wanted so much for these events to have happened so that I would not have to face my self.

After everyone else left, I went out and stared at the mountains and wondered whether I should take one of the cars parked nearby and find a cliff to put an end to my suffering. Besides, I reasoned, throwing myself off the cliff would test the reality of the vision I'd had during FLGC worship. Suddenly an image flashed into my head of Jesus on the Mount of Temptations where the devil tempts him by saying "Throw yourself off this mountain, God won't let you fall." As I was contemplating this image I suddenly felt a warm loving voice once more that said simply "I am with you, I am always with you". With a huge sense of relief, I sat back in the summer sunshine and felt all my death wishes fade away.

I knew suddenly that God was with me on this path to authenticity. Indeed, in following this path in spite of my fears and tears, I was taking a first step in understanding the obedience part of integrity. I can't pretend to have reached a place of wholeness; but I can feel a presence within that stills the fear. The break-up of my marriage still feels like a gaping hole in my heart that can never be filled, and the pain of the dissolution of our relationship continues to be full of pain for me. After nearly 20 years of being together and depending upon each other for solace and support, it was so hard to feel presence being tenderly, but firmly withdrawn. I have tried to learn from that pain and strive to understand it as a way of maintaining a connection with God, but it is a continuing journey. I am grateful for the love and understanding of my children, my parents, and the rest of my family whose unconditional love has been a blessing.

I have given up asking why and am concentrating on becoming the woman that I have always needed to be. Because I am physically large I am aware that I can not be unobtrusive. I try to project the strong and confident woman that I am becoming and avoid unnecessary stereotyping, but I am also aware that my very presence is part of my witness. Gender is just not the simple dichotomy that our culture would have us believe. While many people suffer from the oppression of rigid gender expectations, it is those of us who physically transition across accepted gender boundaries who become the most visible targets for hatred and intolerance. As I continue along my journey I am acutely aware of that visibility, and place my trust in God that the openness of my journey will increase understanding for my transgendered sisters and brothers whatever it costs me. Knowing that a wide circle of Friends is holding me in the light makes each step a bit easier.

My Altars

Notes from the Ceremonialist, Zantui Rose

Altar #2

I have a snug corner next to the woodburning stove that has become a "special" place. I consider it my "relationship altar". The backdrop for this sacred corner are two identical, rounded at the top, antique, 4 foot high, narrow mirrors. Upon my commitment to my relationship, in honor of the union, I purchased these mirrors. Several years before, while experiencing my now partner as only a dear friend, I stated that this person was a mirror for me. I recognized that I saw myself -- both the tough and the wonderful parts -- reflected back in our interactions. These mirrors symbolize the reflection of this dance.

Nestled in between the mirrors are tall fronds of sea grass I have collected over the years during my many beach excursions. Twinkle lights hiding in the tall grass are often the only lights on at night.

A white porcelain meditative Buddha sits on a table in front of one of the mirrors and is reflected in it. This Buddha, as well as the lace doily it rests on, were given to me by a neighbor woman shortly before her death. I had just returned from a month long silent retreat at a Buddhist monastery. She innocently handed me this beautiful rendition of peace and tranquility, almost as though "someone" directed her to do so.

In front of the Buddha, in his lap, are two figures. One is a paperdoll of a child about 5 years old. She is smiling and waving energetically, full of life. This rendition of childhood looks amazingly like myself when I was that age. She appears to be waving to the figurine next to her, a childlike faery with flying blond hair. This faery has her hand up to her mouth and is whispering something back to the little paper doll. My partner feels this energy of the faeries and looks, in her innocence, a bit like this figurine. There we are, the two of us, resting in the lap of the Buddha, exactly like I envision our relationship to be, an expression of the Beloved Love of the Universe.

A small candle rests on the table, ready to be lit as an offering of fire and light to the expressions of our relationship. This corner is one of my favorites, yet it is so simple. The beauty it reflects enhances the beauty of our life journey together.

Where is your altar? What does it say?