

# FAIRIES, LEATHERMEN AND QUEENS SHARE THE SPIRIT

By Michael Bronski

A year-and-a-half ago I received a call from Mark Thompson asking if he could reprint a section of my book *Culture Clash: The Making of a Gay Sensibility* in his anthology on gay male spirituality *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning*. While Mark and I had had a good working relationship through his editing of my work for the *Advocate*, I was surprised that he wanted me to contribute anything to a book on spirituality. I generally harbor grievous anti-religious sentiments and have been known, upon occasion, to be a rabid anti-cleric. But, always eager to have my work appear anywhere, I consented.

When I saw the uncorrected proofs of *Gay Spirit*, I realized that what I mean by "spirituality" and what Mark means are quite different. The book is a fascinating collection of gay history and theory, as well as thoughts on the essence of being a gay person. For Mark — and this is beautifully represented in *Gay Spirit* — spirituality is the continuing attempt to understand what it means, deep down inside each one of us, to be gay. Not necessarily to have sex with our like gender, or to go to homosexual meeting places, or even to belong to homophile political groups — what Mark is interested in is how this gayness, this otherness, this differentness, affects everything we think and do.

The other aspect of *Gay Spirit* which impressed me was its generosity in embracing all aspects of the gay community. Radical fairies, drag queens, leather queens, politicians, mystics and organizers are all given their full due; their work and insight given praise and value. It is an attitude and a politic which has much to offer us all.

For the past 11 years, Mark has been the cultural editor of the *Advocate* where he has dealt with the ever-burgeoning world of gay movies, theater, books and whatever else is being produced by lesbians and gay men. He grew up in the Monterey, California, area and has a strong background in community journalism and independent filmmaking. He has been active in the gay community for almost 20 years. At the present, he is engrossed in his efforts as a "dream worker" with the "Tree Roots" collective of gay men who look at — or to use the group's term "amplify" — their dreams in light of their gayness.

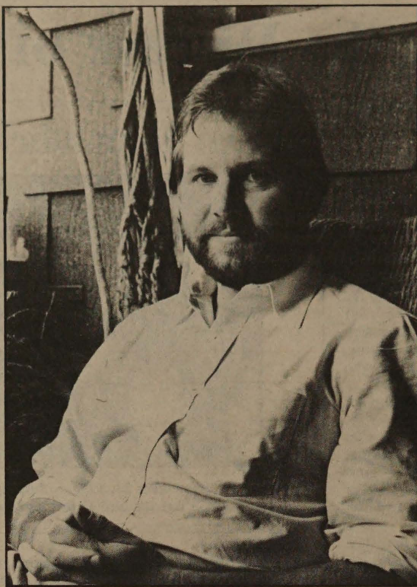
MB: How did *Gay Spirit* first occur to you?

MT: About two years ago I was in a very dark place. I had just moved to Los Angeles after many years of living in San Francisco. AIDS was beginning to hit the Bay Area very hard. Not only were a lot of my friends dying, the whole world I had grown up in was dying. In L.A. all I could see were fragments of a dying culture, and this all led to the feelings about my own possible death. I felt that I wanted to preserve some of my experience, and I also wanted to do something which would be of value to the community, not just another book of memoirs, or a novel, or some bullshit non-fiction. As a gay journalist I had been dealing with queer cultural phenomena which dealt with matters of the soul. So I started to collect all of the voices of gay poets, and visionaries who have inspired my experience as a gay man.

I wanted a book for the gay community, something that would tell us about who we are and where we came from. And even though the book is an anthology, I also wanted to edit it, to arrange it, to tell a story.

MB: What is the story?

MT: Very simply, *Gay Spirit* is saying that being gay is different than being non-gay in ways that are far more subtle and vast than the politics of Gay Liberation, up to this time, would allow. Up to now the whole gay movement has been posited on the "myth of the homosexual." This is a myth system which has been constructed by people who are not gay. It came out of the nineteenth



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century's medical and psychological theories which were meant to contain and control the psychic and creative energies of all the people whom we now call "gay." It is a myth not unique to us; we have never really had the opportunity to define, to invent, ourselves on our own terms.

MB: But gay people have invented, pulled together, a worldwide Gay Liberation movement.

MT: There were brief flurries of this self-invention in the 1950s and the 1970s when radical — meaning: from the root — impulses were being acted on. But those impulses were quickly co-opted by homosexual people who basically just wanted to take the word "gay" and use it as a preface to gay churches, gay social and political groups, gay gyms. All this left us with was a pale reflection of everything — the institutions, the values, the mores — which had been instituted by heterosexual, white, patriarchal, sexist, racist standards. This co-optation of gay spirit was not totally a bad thing; gay people have needed some of these things for their survival. But the question we have to ask ourselves now is at what price to our inner selves have we created this gay world.

The questions I wanted to raise in *Gay Spirit* are: What does it mean to be gay? What is being gay all about? Who are we gay people? Why are we here? Where have we been?

MB: Do you feel that *Gay Spirit* does all of that?

MT: One of the things the book does is create a new paradigm. The old, accepted paradigm stated that "gay people are just like everyone else — except for what they do in bed." But I think that the opposite is true. Sexuality, as in gender, is a constructed thing. Trying to define gay people through their sexuality is what the straight world has always done. We have had enough of it. What *Gay Spirit* is trying to say — in its many voices and experiences — is that we as gay people should look at ourselves through the cultural roles we perform and enact; the roles which we seem to do best.

MB: Such as?

MT: I think that gay people excel in the roles of interpretation, enabling, healing. All of this comes out of our perspective which is a very prophetic one. It is very subtle thing — which is one of the reasons it escapes us so often. But it is inescapably there. This type of vision is a very vital, very necessary function within human culture. In the past 20 years there has been a lot of work done by lesbians and feminists around spirituality. And although *Gay Spirit* is concerned with the gay male experience, I think that there is a lot to be learned from this history of women's spirituality. If gay men can more consciously affirm the work they are so obviously being called to do, then in the 1990s I think that gay men and lesbians will have a much more common ground. Coalition building is where it's at, not only within our own community, but with other disenfranchised peoples too. Many gay men have bought the myth of success, and it is a very limiting one, difficult to break out of and leading nowhere, often at great spiritual cost.

MB: Where do you see gay men as being now?

MT: I think that gay men are on the verge of a new breakthrough. We need to be always rejuvenating our language of self; in the 1950s we had "homosexual" and "homophile," and in the 1960s the word "gay." But we need a new word now, or even a new notion, to describe our collective experience. In order for this to happen I think that we have to begin addressing basic questions of who we are, deep within ourselves. AIDS is forcing this issue for many of us. But on a larger, planet-

ary scale, we are being called forth to bring our gifts to a world which is desperately in need of our vision.

I think that death — and, in particular, the myth of the descent to the underworld — plays a very important part in this. No only our friends and loved ones dying, but we live in a time when many indigenous life-forms and people around the world are dying. The planet itself may be dying. And while this is frightening and terrifying it is also an opportunity to change, to call up those special parts of ourselves which make us gay. We are being initiated into a new way of being whether we like it or not. And this initiation is basically a shamanic one, which usually comes through intense experience of death, ecstasy and dreams.

MB: How are gay men going to reach that place?

MT: There are many ways to actualize the business of our souls. Look at what most mainstream gay society considers to be marginal experiences — ritualized leather sexuality, cross-dressing, fairy gatherings, even dreams — and you will find a germ of hidden truth about the gay spirit. For instance, rather than considering what leathermen do as a mere playing out of repressed power games or sick desire, my experience has many times been that it is an intense experience of one man leading another to a deep, previously hidden place — an underworld, if you like — where he can come to new revelations about his sexuality and spirituality and their intertwining. Or take cross-dressers. Men who have cross-dressed have always been the revolutionaries of the gay movement. In San Francisco they have been instrumental in building the basic political and cultural foundations of gay life. Challenging the community with their daring images and visions, they have played the role of the *berdache* — the cultural mediators which is a traditional "gay" role in many cultures. The fairy movement is an underground, nationwide movement of gay men who have gathered in isolated rural areas to heal themselves and to let what is inside them bubble up and come out. To let what is truly gay, truly queer, be experienced clearly and purely — that is spiritual.

This is something that a lot of gay people just have not addressed. Part of this is because what is spiritual in this culture has always been co-opted by what is "religious," and those are two different things. Gay people who are striving to integrate themselves within an established religious structure are following deep, true instincts — but it is a futile task. I can't imagine anything

## Gay Spirit: The Essence of Being a Gay Man

### Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning

Mark Thompson, editor  
St. Martin's Press, New York, 1987  
\$18.95 cloth, 320 pp.

Reviewed by Dimid Hayes

There is a profound awakening taking place in the hearts and souls of gay men. As we come together to try to understand, and respond to, the devastation and dramatic reordering of our lives through the current health crisis, it's as though we've been forced to mature. We are growing from the stage of adolescence, where we focused solely on our identity as awkward sexual beings, to a newer, wiser, more fully whole realization of ourselves as more than flesh. We are beings of spirit.

The appearance of *Gay Spirit: Myth and Meaning*, a compilation of pieces edited, and in some cases written, by *Advocate* associate editor Mark Thompson, comes with a timeliness many will appreciate. Had it been published ten or even five years earlier, there would've been many more deaf ears to its call.

As is pointed out in piece after piece, we gay men have been prey to much of what society thinks of us. The message epitomized by Anita Bryant's now-dim crusade, "You are loved, but what you do is bad. You are okay, just don't make yourself known to me," has



more pathetic than gay people knocking on the door of the Catholic Church, asking to be let in. Yet paradoxically — if you look at the history of gay people and religion — the Christian churches have always been informed by gay spiritual energy.

MB: Then why isn't Christianity more gay now?

MT: The trouble was that gay people's instincts were correct, but the forms in which they were trying to express those instincts weren't. This always comes back to the fact that gay people have to create our own forms. We have to find out what spirituality means to us. We have to go down into the well of our own psyches, and find out what is there. Gay people are, by our very nature, a very spiritual people; we cannot live unexamined lives, if we are to remain true to our life experience. It is issues of the spirit and soul which are going to define the next wave of gay liberation which is constellating within ourselves at this very moment. Many lesbians and many feminists have already done important work around this issue; now it is gay men's task to find new meanings to our lives. It will be a scary and painful journey, because it means embracing the dark and the unresolved, and speaking the unspoken, but the journey is a vitally necessary one at this time.

MB: In *Gay Spirit* you have written about gay men and their dreams and include a chapter in which gay men in a dream group discuss their insights and feelings.

MT: I think it is very important for gay people, and again I am talking primarily to gay men in the book, to begin looking inside ourselves. And looking at dreams is one way of doing that. In the dream group, we refer to "coming out inside" when speaking out of the experience of finding and connecting with our dreams. Dreams are very important, both literally and metaphorically. They are the vocabulary of our inner world; they manifest the shadow side and the underworld realm of our gay souls. It is wonderful in the group to see men begin to relate to dreams in a new way. Often for the first time, they are beginning to see and understand something which comes out of an authentic, uncensored experience — to something which is not fabricated. History is fabricated. Culture is fabricated. But dreams and myths come from a deeper place. What is fascinating about dreams — and we have to remember that myths, true myths, always come from dreams — is that they do not lie. They can reveal only the truth. One gay man's dream has more validity to it than any of the institutionalized gay culture

we have constructed for ourselves over the past two decades, however important that has been.

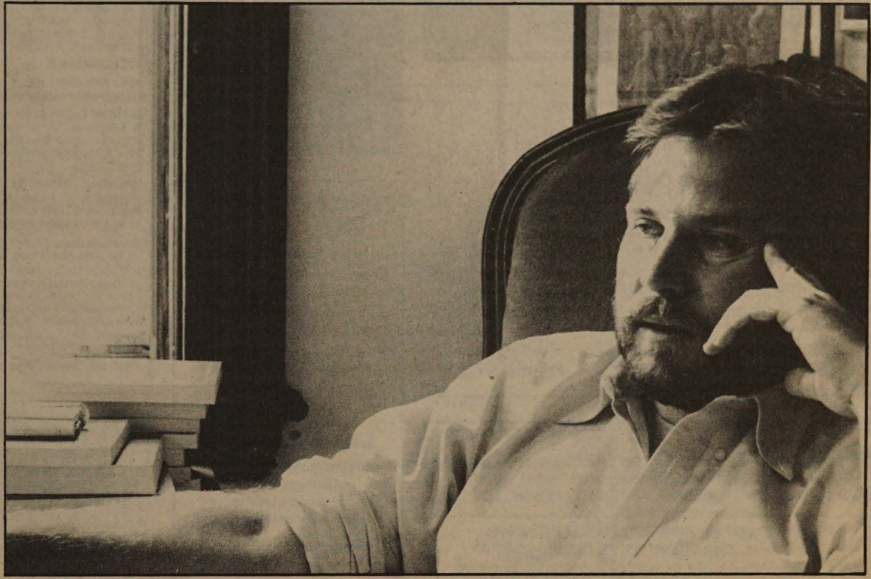
We are at a point in our collective unfolding where we have to re-imagine, re-invent, re-connect, at the deepest most imaginable level. We must continue to invent ourselves. Only then will we be able to go on with any degree of honesty and purpose.

MB: Do we invent from nothing?

MT: No. First we look inside ourselves, and then to others. And it is important to look at our history. That is why I wanted *Gay Spirit* to be an anthology. We have so many voices who have been lost, or relatively unheard: Harry Hay, Arthur Evans, Walt Whitman, Edward Carpenter, Gerald Heard, Don Kilhefner, James Broughton, Mitch Walker, to mention a few. We have to discover and rediscover all of the gay men who have spoken about their inner lives. And then see what it

means to us. We also have to look at other cultures — the Greeks, the Native Americans, the aboriginals. But we have to be careful to understand that their lives are not our lives, that their identities have been constructed within different contexts. Those people may display some behavior and feeling which is relevant to how we may feel about ourselves now and we can learn from this. But we can't say that it is the same, only use their examples as guides to begin to construct our own powerful and authentic identity.

The very basic question is how the "gay" perspective is unique. We have to find that innateness, that spiritual core, and affirm our special visions and ways of looking at the world. It comes from the world within. For our own sakes, and perhaps for the sake of the world, we have to discover and claim that vision as identity as something authentic, powerful and very, very important.



been accepted by "mainstream" gay culture. As a result many have been satisfied with ghettoization and commercialization. We may have needed this isolation in preparation for our next stage of social evolution: our moving out into the rest of the dominant "dominate" culture as people of compassion and heart. Edward Carpenter, a prominent English turn-of-the-century gay progressive, argues this point:

It is possible that the Uranian [gay] spirit may lead us to something like a general enthusiasm of humanity, and that the Uranian people may be destined to form the advance guard of that great movement which will one day transform the common life by substituting the bond of personal affection and compassion for the monetary, legal and other external ties which now control and confine society.

At the same time that we are offering the dominant culture our visions, many of that culture's participants are running away from it. They are aware that technology for technology's sake, accumulation for accumulation's sake, and progress for progress' sake are destroying this planet. Civilization is on the edge of a

major shift from a world view based on, in the words of Harry Hay (a prominent figure both in the book and in the evolution of gay realities), "Subject-to-object — that is in terms of opportunism, competitiveness and self-advantage; to one based on Subject-to-subject, in terms of equal sharing, loving, healing." This paradigm shift — glimpsed in such events as LIVE-AID, FARM-AID, Hands Across America, the World Peace Vigil and the upcoming August 16-17 Harmonic Convergence — is what the unfolding of gay spirit is all about. We delve into this way of seeing the world that gay people possess, and its importance today, in "Harry Hay: A Voice from the Past, A Vision for the Future" by Thompson, and in "A Separate People Whose Time Has Come" by Hay himself.

*Gay Spirit's* repeated theme — that we are different from heterosexuals in a fundamental (not necessarily superior) way — calls us to no longer accept the dominant culture's perception of us as errant appendages of the body politic. This call states that we have a multi-level history, vibrant traditions alive today, and that we have a specific purpose: to each discover our gifts and to share them unabashedly. This book calls gay people back to the Circle of Life as full participants in the dance of survival and joy.

I have known of Mark Thompson and his writings for several years and have always appreciated his original insights and his being one of the few (if not the only) gay men writing about this unfolding spirituality in the larger mainstream gay papers. He has gone where few men dared to go and come back to blab about it to a curious but often distracted audience.

As a neo-pagan, radical-faerie and bio-sexual (I love the earth and everyone on it), a lot of this material struck chords of resonance in me. I have never been satisfied with any of the terms defining sexuality — hetero-, homo-, bi-, etc., and even gay has now passed into common use in a way that feels limiting to me. The essence of spirit is rarely, and then only temporarily, contained in the written or spoken word. Spirit is much more an aspect of our dreams — both nocturnal and life-time — our memories and myths. The pieces by Tobias Schneebaum, "We, the Fairy Headhunters," and William Moritz, "Seven Glimpses of Walt Whitman," both succeed in evoking this quality of life-as-dream and dream-as-life. These pieces provided me with a dazzling new framework from which to view my own life situation as a 1987 U.S. gay man.

One of the things being said in this book is a paradox for feeling and developing one's gay spirit: at the same time that one claims gay spirit as different from hetero-spirit, in essence, this state is greater than both, and thus beyond the limitations of either label.

Allowing a freer movement of the male/female polarity, gay spirit is beyond the world of polarity. Putting this into words is one of the challenges this book faces, and it does a pretty good job of succeeding.

A criticism I've heard, and agree with, about this book is that it is very West Coast, U.S.-oriented. Thompson acknowledges this and offers it in opposition to "the picture usually presented in gay studies, one that is often highly political and reflects an East Coast bias." While concepts of "radical faeries" were being developed on the West Coast, a community of Southeastern men was meeting regularly. They didn't use the word faerie, but everything in their practice was faerie consciousness. Poets and writers such as Franklin Abbott of Atlanta, Jim Long of the Missouri Ozarks, Michael Mason of Washington, D.C., Clovr Chango of New York City and the former LaSIS (Louisiana Sissies in Struggle), all reflected in the gay men's magazine *RFD*, attest to the vibrancy of gay spirit in places other than the West Coast. I wish the writings of men like these could've also been included. Thompson attributes the flowering of gay spirit on the West Coast to U.S. myths of western freedom. But, just as gay culture has developed in every major, most smaller, and many rural areas of the U.S., so too has gay spirit awakened in many communities across the land.

Not including previous publication information with each piece was disappointing because I didn't find it on the copyright page until I'd finished the book. Also, I wish Thompson would've included addresses for the various communities, networks and circles now functioning. One can get a good bit of this information by subscribing to *RFD*, the address for which is given in the piece "This Gay Tribe: A Brief History of Fairies" by Thompson, but having had the addresses included in the book would've helped much more. Maybe these can be included in a future edition.

Last any reader get the idea that *Gay Spirit* is about radical faeries and nothing else, let me mention just a few of the other pieces given voice in this book: "Sex and the Politics of Identity: An Interview with Michel Foucault" by Bob Gallagher and Alexander Wilson, "Living the Tradition: Gay American Indians" by Will Roscoe, "Telling a Lie for Christ?" by Malcolm Boyd, and "Urban Aboriginals and the Celebration of Leather Magic" by Geoff Mains. One is easily impressed by this panorama. *Gay Spirit* would make an excellent guide for a study group of like-minded men, for a single discussion or taking it one chapter at a time. The seeds of a distinct and kaliedoscopic gay spirit were planted in each of our hearts. This anthology is like the rains of spring hastening our unique growth, flowering and fruition.

GAY  
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