

## KEEPING THE FAITH

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Catholicism has played a part in Deas' life since his birth in Portland in 1947. From spirituality to culture to education, the church has been there, and it's left Deas with an unwavering faith.

"I don't know that there's room for conflict as much as there's room for my own individual conscience," says Deas, referring to how he incorporates his homosexuality with his faith. "There's not conflict in my faith in the church. I can live my life as a gay man without conflict... The church does not say it's wrong to be a homosexual—but it does say to practice homosexuality is wrong."

While Deas may have no spiritual conflict, church politics are another issue. "I've had priests...tell me to leave the church," says Deas, explaining that he's been a thorn in the sides of some clergy with his unyielding advocacy of queer Catholics. One archbishop, says Deas, suggested Dignity USA members take an easier path by breaking away and beginning their own denomination.

Some queer people indeed do leave the church, and that's the thorn in Deas' side. "When I see people leaving the church I become frustrated," he says. "We need people from within to make change happen. My greater frustration is not so much with the church, but with the church driving people away."

Despite the church's formidable infrastructure, Deas says he's hopeful that Dignity's efforts will lead to a more accommodating tomorrow. "We do have a hierarchy that we have to deal with and answer to," Deas acknowledges, adding that change "is going to happen from the bottom up."

He adds: "I'm very excited as I see the future, because the church now is more moving toward the center point; they've always been to the extreme right. I'm seeing more and more parishes becoming welcoming."

And his Catholic faith, it seems, will be a source of strength in his efforts. "It's given me a very strong sense of my own personal being, of my self worth," says Deas. "I feel very good about who I am and where I am in my spiritual life."



Nelly Kaufer

## 'THERE'S A REAL DIFFERENCE BETWEEN SPIRITUALITY AND RELIGION'

If anyone should be nominated spiritualist-at-large, it's Nelly Kaufer. The self-described "Jew-Bu" (a person born to Jewish heritage who has strong Buddhist leanings), says that when she arrived in Oregon in 1970, spirituality was not considered politically correct.

"I was torn apart for talking about it," she says of her experience at Womanshare, a piece of lesbian-owned land in Southern Oregon. "But it was there that I looked at the hillside and felt a sense of how connected I was. I began teaching meditation, and started understanding what it was like to experience this thing called life."

This thing called life is something Kaufer has embraced wholeheartedly. Since her early days as an Oregonian, she's put her degree in transpersonal counseling—"teaching people how to be present to themselves as a way to deal with the craziness of our modern lives," as she describes it—to work as a therapist for individuals and couples. She wrote a book, *A Woman's Guide to Spiritual Renewal* (Harpers, 1994), and is currently at work on a book about mindfulness.

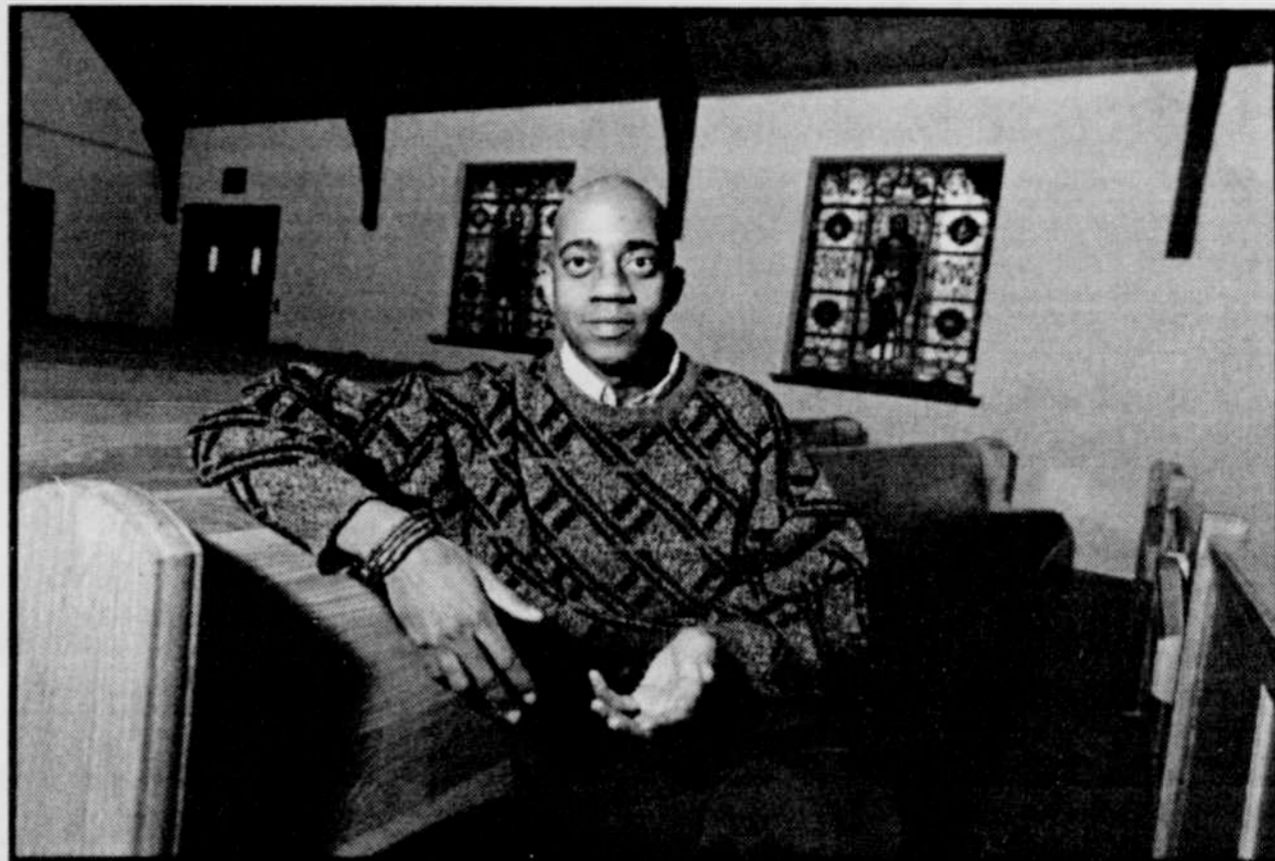
She is also an active member of P'nai Or, which she describes as a Jewish renewal congregation.

"When I was growing up in the 1950s, Judaism was pretty bankrupt for a lot of us," she says, explaining her thirst for renewal. "There's a real difference between spirituality and religion. Spirituality is making a deep connection with yourself and something greater. Hopefully communities can nurture that, but often times they don't, and that's where my story starts."

Kaufer describes P'nai Or as a wonderfully inclusive community, citing the dropping of the word "he" and sensitivity around issues such as homophobia.

Still, she says, her spiritual journey is far from complete. She feels a definite split between her lesbian community and its spiritual counterpart.

"My religious community is very welcoming and supportive, but I feel different," she says. "I'm not getting married and doing lots of other



The Rev. Cecil Prescod

things, and consequently it's not my primary community."

Her primary community, she says, is equally accommodating but still not fully understanding.

"My friends respect my spirituality, but they don't understand it, so I feel a little split," she says. "I'm always trying to bring these different parts of my life together, but I think that's pretty much what everyone does."

## 'MULTIRACIAL, OPEN AND AFFIRMING'

It's a peculiar turn of events.

"Back then we burned them at the stake," says the Rev. Cecil Prescod facetiously. The ordained minister with the United Church of Christ is answering the question of whether the UCC shares any similarities with Quakers.

He adds, ironically, "Historically the UCC has been a denomination that's put a heavy focus on social justice."

Prescod, who is African American and bisexual, is quick to offer more examples of how the UCC has grown and departed from its violent past. He points to the church ordaining an openly gay person in 1970.

"I was raised in the UCC—a liberal, Protestant denomination," adds Prescod, explaining that the church has always been part of his life, though to varying degrees.

The New York City native recalls going to Sunday school, being raised in the church, but not feeling particularly spiritual until he was about 16.

"When I was a teenager, I experienced an epiphany, a conversion experience," Prescod says. "I became aware of a personal God and came to experience the love of God through Jesus Christ.... Prior to that experience, I'd pretty much decided I was agnostic."

Because of the UCC's brand of progressive theology, his newfound faith posed no problems with newfound sexuality. "In the church I was raised in, you never heard any anti-gay rhetoric. It wasn't an issue," Prescod says, adding a clarification: "At the same time, while I never heard any anti-gay preaching, I never heard anything pro-queer. But it was an environment that was affirming of human rights."

Today, Prescod worships at the Ainsworth United Church of Christ in Northeast Portland.

He describes the church as "multiracial, open and affirming."

As a reverend, though he currently leads no parish, he has had the opportunity to inject a pro-queer element into theology. "A lot of times there are certainly people, and maybe more than one category, who have questions about their sexuality," Prescod explains. "I try to help them work through their process and get to a place where they can affirm who they are. Then there are people who've been injured by what they've heard in churches."

Such injuries in mind, Prescod is aware of a perception that traditionally African American churches have sometimes been labeled as less tolerant than even some mainstream churches. "I certainly think it's a misconception," he says. "I think homophobia is in all of society. It's manifested differently in different organizations."

What makes the charge so inappropriate, says Prescod, is that "traditionally...African American churches have taken in those who've been rejected, persecuted. African American churches have a history of welcoming the stranger and the oppressed."

Prescod does grant that these days he sees "more of an influence of white religious conservatives" in some African American church communities.

"When that occurs," Prescod warns, "it's really important to look at the history of those...religious conservatives—who've historically been on the wrong side of civil rights."

## 'I HAVE PASSION FOR GOD'

The Rev. Berdell Moffett remembers a picnic in Las Vegas in 1983 when she met her partner, the Rev. Casey Chaney. "When I met her," recalls Moffett, "she didn't have any beliefs."

Chaney agrees. "Berdell was more spiritual at the time," she admits. "I was mainly a hostile agnostic. Berdell said, 'Maybe your God is too small. Maybe you need to look at God in another way.'"

Chaney says she did that, but not till she got to a very low point in her life. "During a painful time, I was sitting alone," she relates. "I said, 'OK, God, whoever you are, whatever you are, if

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