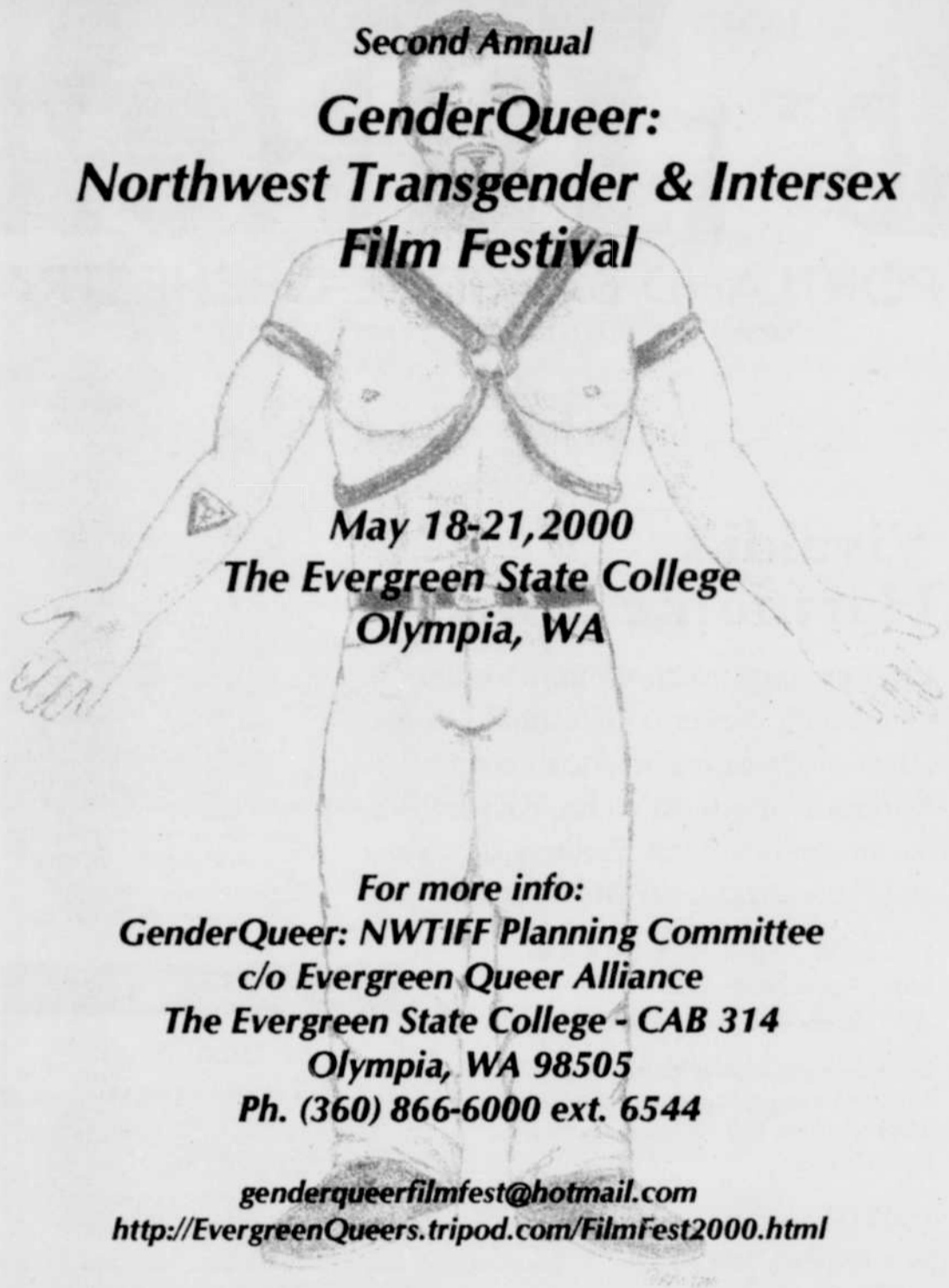


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Unnatural causes

Meditation on the dearth of Christlike compassion that leads Roman Catholic officials to cover up the deaths of priests with AIDS

One morning several weeks ago, I received two things in the mail. One was a clipping from *The Kansas City Star*, an article about the frighteningly high death rate from AIDS among Roman Catholic priests and how the church leadership has for years been covering up any links between HIV infection and their clergy. The other was a letter from my friend Dr. June Steffensen Hagen.

June was one of my English professors in college. At a school rampant with muddle-headed fundamentalist Christian teaching, she was a breath of fresh air, a fiercely intelligent, liberal Episcopalian determined to get her students to think for themselves instead of believing everything they were told.

Knowing June changed my life. Not only did she introduce me to writers and ideas I'd never encountered, she was the first person to let me know that being gay is OK. She was also the first person I ever met who I think genuinely loved God. Having grown up with a lot of people who feared God, or used him as a weapon, it was something of a shock to find someone who thought of God as her friend. Determined as I was because of my past experiences to believe the whole God thing was a lot of nonsense, June made me rethink that position.

June's husband, Jim, is a retired Episcopal priest. Her letter is filled with news about their lives: their recent trips to Ecuador and Mexico, the literature class June is teaching, her and Jim's involvement in the New York Choral Society, the activities of their two children. These are the pieces of a full and happy life. They're the things that I think of when I think of June.

And then I think of those priests dying from AIDS. According to the *Star* article, many of them were sent to hospices outside their parishes to die, alone and far from their friends and families so that no one would know what was killing them. In almost all cases, the cause of death was listed as "natural causes," and the occupation written on the death certificate was anything but priest. In the end, these servants of the church were reduced to lies, their years of duty to God wiped out with the stroke of a pen to protect the image of the institution to which they had devoted their lives.

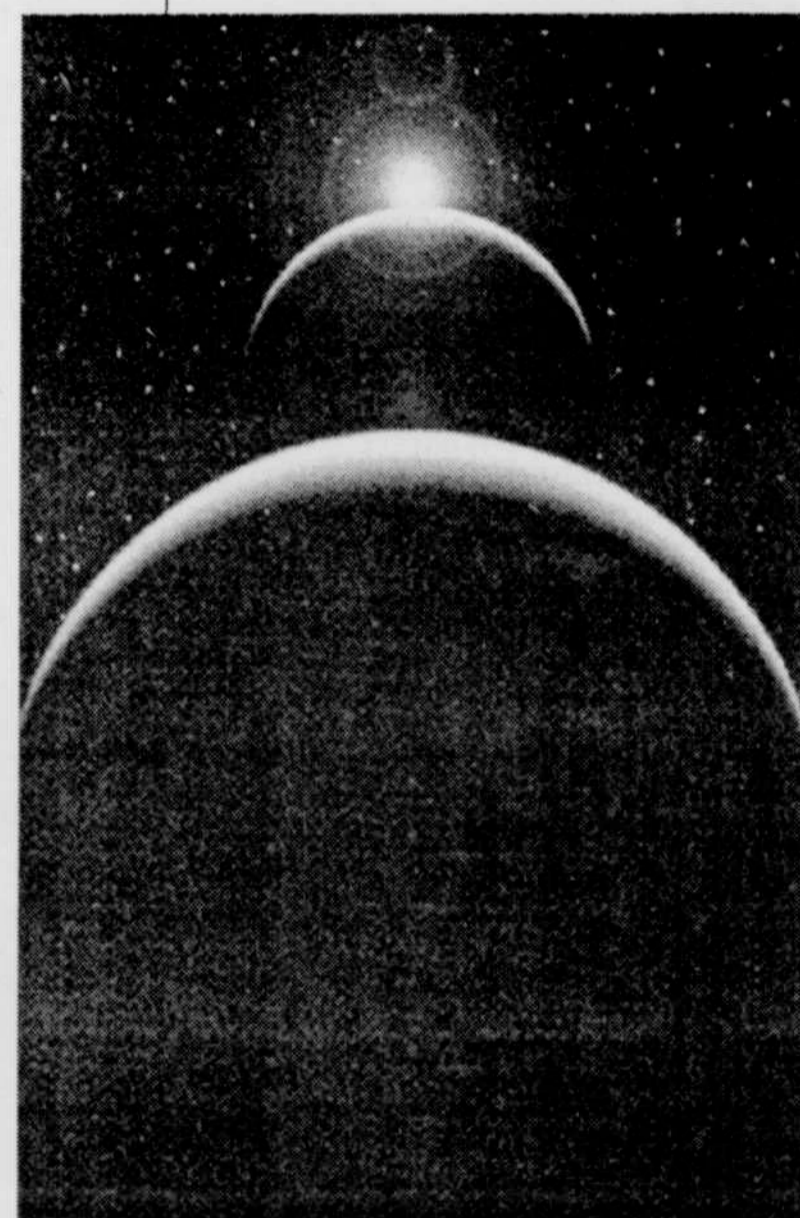
Tucked into June's letter is a photograph of her and Jim, taken on one of their trips. June's hair is grayer and Jim's is more absent, but the smiles on their faces still reflect all the love and joy I remember. The most wonderful thing about it, though, is how much they look like a couple. Jim has his arm around June, and she's leaning into him in a way that radiates familiarity and friendship. Looking at them, I see a

picture of a lifetime spent exploring the world and all its joys and challenges together.

I can't help but compare this picture to the images in my head of priests dying, alone and frightened, among strangers because their superiors sent them away to hide their shame. I want to believe that someone was there to hold their hands, to tell them that they were loved. I want to believe they died knowing that their lives meant something. But I don't think they did. I think that, in the end, they were betrayed in the cruelest way.

One of the things June taught me was that God—in whatever form you embrace him—loves joy. It saddens me that the Catholic priests who came to worship God with joy were met instead with betrayal and fear in the hour when they most needed love. I am also angered enough to want to comfort myself with disbelief in a God who would let this happen, just as I did back in college.

But once again June won't let me do that. I've put the picture of her and Jim on the wall



above my desk, right beside the picture of the stone circle and phallic rock monument my Radical Faerie brother, Ron, painstakingly built on his Maine sheep farm. When I look at these pictures, I am reminded that even the fear of an institution as large and imposing as the Catholic Church is nothing compared to the power of one or two people who truly understand what it is to live with joy and make a difference in the world. And I am reminded, too, that God comes in many forms, and that the God those priests were looking for really does exist somewhere, waiting for them.

I hope they've found him.

■ MICHAEL THOMAS FORD is the Lambda Literary Award-winning author of *Alec Baldwin Doesn't Love Me* and *That's Mr. Faggot to You*. He welcomes e-mail at Shopiltee@aol.com.

I MY QUEER LIFE BY MICHAEL THOMAS FORD