

Keeping the FAITH

Finding a path to wholeness that embraces spirit and flesh

by Andy Simon
Photos by Marty Davis

Coming out is not just telling people an interesting fact about ourselves. When we come out we make a claim on wholeness. We express a determination that a part of our being—our need for intimacy with people of the same sex—will be a part of our consciously lived lives.

People who grow up in conservative religious communities but who come to feel same-sex yearnings face a cruel dilemma. Wholeness seems impossible to them, for embracing their physical selves seems to demand abandoning their spiritual lives.

We cannot know how many people don't make it out, how many manage to suppress their sexuality and live the lives of "quiet desperation" Thoreau spoke of 150 years ago. On the other hand, we do know many gay men and lesbians simply walk away from religion and spirituality, having been hurt too much to have anything more to do with that aspect of their lives.

Increasing numbers of gay men and lesbians, however, are determined not to choose between spirit and flesh but to embrace them both. They are returning to spiritual paths, often after fleeing from religious congregations that once provided them spiritual homes.

Dale Rhodes is a spiritual director at the Interfaith Spiritual Center in Southeast Portland. He provides guidance for people who are seeking to develop and understand their "relationship with the Divine." Many of his clients are gay men and lesbians, and he has studied and written on gay men's spirituality.

Rhodes sees a growing trend of gay men and lesbians re-entering organized religion and feeling safer about returning to communities that once shunned them. The trend is the result of

to add to this dialogue. "We have a unique combination of experiences that shape our spiritual development. We see a bigger reality. If we choose to return to our religious homes, we come with gifts to share."

Rhodes notes a pattern in the spiritual development of gay men and lesbians. The first stage is "dissonance," which he describes as a conflict between external teachings and self-knowledge. For some people this dissonance eventually leads to coming out, which then leads to a period of exile—estrangement in the literal sense from their religious communities but also from their internal spiritual selves.

Described in this way, these categories seem clinical and bloodless. But to see them in the context of the life experiences of real people is to look on deep suffering and great pain on the one hand and inspiring acts of courage, authenticity and integrity on the other.

"Religious persecution" is how the Rev. Ann Duffy describes the treatment gay men and lesbians are subject to within many conservative religious denominations. She has been a pastor with the United Church of Christ for 23 years. Her harsher description of what Rhodes calls dissonance



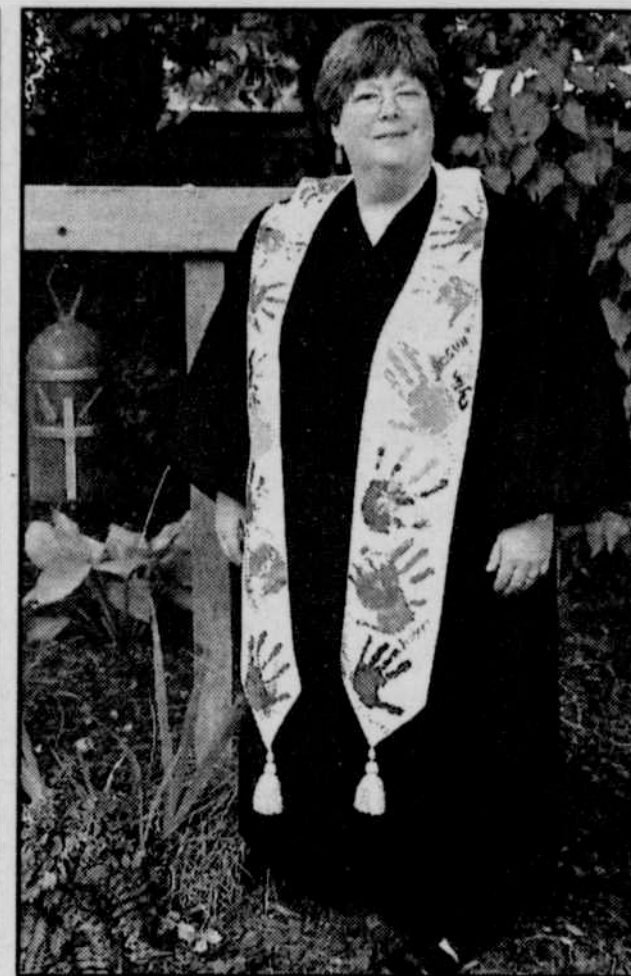
Dale Rhodes helps gay men and lesbians navigate their spiritual paths

larger developments that he views with enthusiasm. "The world is in conversation with itself, and as a result all the world's religious traditions are in dialogue."

And gay men and lesbians have something

seems to fit the experience of Verlin Byers.

Throughout his 31 years, Byers has devoted himself to one thing: being a good person. For the first 24 of these years, being a good person meant to him being a Godly person in the



The Rev. Ann Duffy understands the dilemma

strict and specific sense defined by the Church of the Nazarene, which he had participated in all his life.

The Nazarenes are very clear: A good person doesn't feel attractions for people of the same sex, let alone act on those feelings. More than once during his teen years, Byers' gay feelings became so strong that he confessed them to his pastors. In each case he got the same message: Pray harder and memorize more Scripture, and God will take these feelings away from you.

He was caught in a vicious cycle: He would feel attractions for another boy. He would feel guilty and pray intensely, sometimes for days at a time. The feelings eventually would fade, and he would be sure God finally had intervened and changed him. But then someone else would catch his eye.

Finally, while doing community development work in Brazil with the Mennonites, he met a man who became his first partner. They were very discrete; they lived in different cities and saw each other only during vacations. But they were found out, and the Mennonites invoked a rule that demanded single people remain celibate while working on their project—a rule they often bent when heterosexual people had affairs.

Two months later, Byers was on an airplane home, returning in disgrace. He was too honest to hide the facts, so he circulated to several rel-



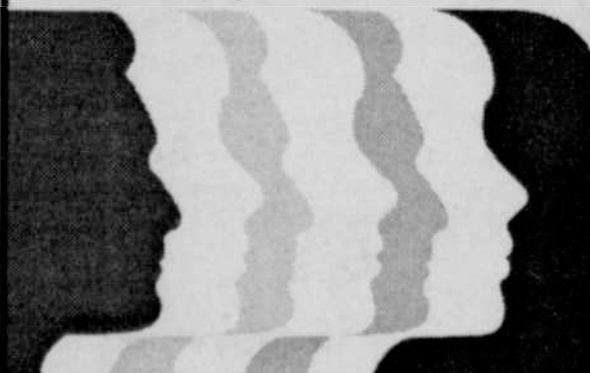
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