

From White Crane, Winter 2007/08, pp 7-12

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BEAR SPIRIT

By Les Wright

“Wenn jemand sucht, dann geschieht es leicht, daB sein Auge nur noch das Ding sieht, das er sucht, daB er nichts zu finden, nichts in sich einzulassen vermag, well er nur immer an das Gesuchte denkt, well er em Ziel hat, well er vom Ziel besessen 1st. Suchen heiBt: em Ziel haben. Finden aber heiBt: frel sein, offen stehen, kein Ziel haben.”

[“When someone is searching,” said Siddhartha, “then it might easily happen that the only thing his eyes still see is that what he searches for, that he is unable to find anything, to let anything enter his mind, because he always thinks of nothing but the object of his search, because he has a goal, because he is obsessed by the goal. Searching means: having a goal. But finding means: being free, being open, having no goal.”]

“Liebe kann man erbetteln, erkaufen, geschenkt bekommen, auf der Gasse finden, aber rauben kann man sie nicht.”

[“You are learning easily, Siddhartha, thus you should also learn this: love can be obtained by begging, buying, receiving it as a gift, finding it in the street, but it cannot be stolen.”]

— *Hermann Hesse, Siddhartha*

I

The first-born of two siblings, I grew up as a “lost” child, profoundly frightened by the world. My father was distant and alien, mom’s harsh criticisms of me, and mom’s sisters’ dire warnings that I would have a hard life, would utterly crush me. I was terrified by the older boys in my neighborhood who taunted me, called me names, and who would swoop out of nowhere to beat me up.

I felt enormous shame whenever I was attacked. Once, when I ran crying home to mom, she told me, “Grow up and act like a man, or else get used to it.” That devastated me. I bawled my little Gay heart out on the back stairs and burned with shame for being a “crybaby,” a “little girl,” a “sissy.”

I grew up in a traditional working—class community, in a large, tight-knit, extended family, a “middle child” among some dozen, mostly male cousins. When I was very small, I remember feeling safe and loved, and basked in the shelter of so many watchful adults. But, by age eight, when my older cousin Jimmy began making me suck his cock, I knew enough not to tell my mother, or his. Being forced to face the shame by my own mother — that I was somehow responsible for bringing this confounding state of affairs upon myself— was more than I could bear. I began finding myself all alone in a dark and dangerous world.

So, I began keeping secrets to myself and from myself and learned to suffer in silence or to submit whenever that might deflect an attack. Soon I began pursuing sex with as many older boys as possible, to render the world a safer place for myself. Better to placate the enemy before he hurts me.

Barely surviving what psychiatrist Leonard Shengold would later label “soul murder,” little did I realize the shadow of my emerging Gay soul had been cast for life. I had survived by my wits — I was smart, and education was my escape hatch. When I ran away from home at seventeen, I scarcely grasped the spiritual journey I was setting off on.

I had a gift for languages, and excelled at German. I had a great- grandfather who had escaped the Kaiser’s army on the eve of World War I. and this bit of familial ethnic difference (we were otherwise pure Anglo-Saxon) inspired me to take German in high school. I escaped into a Cinderella fantasy of an alternative life story for myself.

Once I began studying German, I felt I’d been born in the wrong decade. I yearned to live in 1920s Berlin, reveling in the decadent, anything goes, homoerotic El Dorado that Christopher Isherwood had recorded in his *Berlin Stories*. I knew full well I was a “(shudder) homosexual,” and wanted more than anything to be transported back to a place and time when I could have been free to be myself.

As luck would have it, I spent my high school senior year abroad, living with a prominent haute-bourgeois family in the industrial Ruhr Valley. Second son by proxy in a traditional German patriarchal family, this was my *Buddenbrooks* year. My late evening strolls smoking cigarettes along the Ruhr River, wildly hoping for a sexual encounter I had no idea how to orchestrate, dreaming of the next step of how to find a man to have adult sex, foreshadowed the later Thomas Mann I had yet to discover. The diseased-old-fag-in-love of *Death in Venice*, the homosexual as eternal diseased outsider would prove an uncomfortably recurrent trope in life as well as literature.

Returning to the US to start college, I tried on the “homosexuality is an adolescent phase” alibi, lived with my first (and only) woman lover. And in my precocious freshman year, I read, in German and from cover to cover, Hermann Hesse’s *Siddhartha*. Buddhist philosophy arrived wrapped in German, and I saw my own life in terms of dualistic clashes between discipline and chaos, decadent self—indulgence and severe ascetic self—denial, the mind at war with the body.

Of course I did not “get” it yet. The year was 1971, and the ripple effects of Stonewall had already hit Albany State campus. Joining the university poetry magazine staff and finding we shared our office space with the Gay Liberation Front, I lived in dread of being found out, petrified I’d stumble across some guy I’d picked up at the local Gay bar and gone home drunk out of my mind to have sex with.

Having been at war with myself all my life, at first no leap of faith could lead me out of my magical thinking and into the secret solution of spiritual transcendence. A year later, I came out, and was soon drowning in a sea of homosexual desire, devouring men sexually, no longer out of self-defense, but gorging on a feast of man-flesh, now a prisoner of my unbridled libido.

II

I returned to Germany in 1974, declaring myself completely out of the closet. First at the university in Wurzburg and then Tubingen, I would spend the next five years ostensibly studying German, Russian, and English. I got stoned on hashish and alcohol daily. I met and moved in with my first lover and mentor, a fellow American more than ten years my senior, a scholar of Stefan George and Bob Dylan. I became involved in Gay liberation, German-style.

During the Baader-Meinhof years, the *Schwulenbewegung* [Gay movement] was at first comprised of shadowy, semi-secret groups, of mostly students, in the major cities and universities towns. In Wurzburg our group rented an apartment, for clandestine meetings and play parties, under an alias. In Tubingen we leafleted, joined student protest marches as a visibly *schwul* faction, and even organized a regional Gay awareness conference in 1977.

I spent summer and intercession breaks traveling back to the US, mostly to New York and Boston. Especially in New York I would revel as a tourist in the giddy sexual joy of instant Gay community. Whether walking down Christopher Street, cruising the West Village bars, public toilets, or the piers and bathhouses — sex and connection was everywhere. Among these instant lovers I made many friendships, and many lasted until AIDS took everyone out.

The more I read in the US underground Gay press about Gay community-building, the more obsessed I became with Gay liberation, and the more alcohol and drugs were taking over my life. After translating Carl Wittman’s “Gay Manifesto” into German for the iht [*Initiativgruppe Homosexualitat Tubingen*], I felt the siren call to go to San Francisco. A chance affair in Munich with a San Francisco leather master clinched it for me.

Tad turned me on to “Tales of the City,” a column then running in a daily newspaper. He told me about the first-ever out Gay television reporter there, some guy named Randy Shilts. With his descriptions of Folsom Street and the San Francisco leather community, and the Gay neighborhood he lived in around Castro Street, the pied piper had me completely under his spell. And so off I went, little “Dorothea Geil,” to ask the wizard for a home, if you please, among Gay men of a certain type — in San Francisco.

III

Arriving in 1979 from Germany on Castro Street at the height of the never-ending party came as a complete shock. That first step off the plane was a long one, and I tumbled into ever more sex, ever more drugs, ever more chaos, spiraling into an alcoholic “bottom” in two short, yet torturously long, years. In 1981 I got sober, I was infected with HIV (at the time unknown), and returned to graduate school at UC Berkeley. As the fog lifted and my mental acuity began returning, I experienced a gradual spiritual awakening, of the “educational variety.” In Gay AA, on the eve of the AIDS Holocaust, I experienced for the first time consciously a sense of tribal community.

Around 1982, when denizens of the Castro began to realize the horrifying magnitude of the epidemic, everyone literally went into hiding. Shops and bars, restaurants and bathhouses shut down in rapid succession, as if a major economic depression had struck. In a two-year period, the Gay men’s community responded to the Gay plague by dramatically altering its sexual practices; mostly, we shut down and stopped having sex, a community response that remains unique in the history of STD epidemiology.

By 1983 or 1984, Gay men began reemerging from their bunkers. The bathhouses had been shut down and “private’ parties” became a legal way around that. These proved even more exclusive than the commercial scene’s practice of carding to screen out the old, the fat, the ugly. When AIDS hit, the Stonewall-era radical Gay community had only just begun to grasp itself as a multicultural LGBT tribe, and the new generation declared itself a Queer Nation. Some of us over-35 GWMs found ourselves increasingly pushed to the margins of Gay—assimilationist aspirations. Tribal adherence had become irrelevant to assimilationist respectability, a new-found respectability suddenly destabilized by the new re-stigmatizing scourge of AIDS.

Suddenly I found myself surrounded by and drawn to men who were calling themselves bears.

IV

Because of the self-concept of bears and the spirit of bear community have shifted so radically in the preceding quarter-century, an explanatory note seems necessary here. When I began exploring the history of bears, I discovered the self-labeling “bear” identity cropped up in the 1970s in anecdotal personal accounts from various cities across the US simultaneously. The LA-based Satyrs Motorcycle Club reported two 1966 entries from club minutes noting the formation of a “bear club.” Where was this coming from?

In 1966, Richard Amory’s novel *Song of the Loon* was published. (It was out of print for 30 years, coming back into print in 2005.) Very widely read, as both Gay erotica (mild by current standards) and as a visionary work of serious fiction, it became a lingua franca in pre-Stonewall Gay subculture. Gay cultural

commentator Michael Bronski recently explained why — “in the American pastoral tradition,” redolent of Walt Whitman and Thomas Eakins, it articulated “homoerotic fantasies of freedom.”

Amory (pseudonym of Richard Love) explicitly stated his method and intention in appropriating a Spanish Renaissance literary tradition to transplant it to an American Romantic trope, as a deliberate political strategy to create a radical, Gay-positive alternative vision of (tribal) community, and to establish enough “poetic distance from reality” so as to take “our experience out of and away from the bars and the baths” (Amory, 220).

The novel traces the journey of a European man transplanted into the “mythical world of trappers and Native Americans in the frontier forests of Oregon” in the latter nineteenth century. The protagonist Ephraim MacIver finds his way to an idealized Native American “Society of the Loon” through two of its members, Sing-song Heron and Bear-Who-Dreams.

The novel also serves as a sociopolitical bridge between earlier homophile impulses and the “disruptive” Stonewall movement. Its Romantic vision of “adhesive” egalitarian democracy echoes the queer traditions of American Transcendentalism and pays them forward — to Gay separatists, radical faeries and billys, outlaw bikers, bears and other (to borrow a phrase from Brent Calderwood) “sexual refuseniks.” Each subcultural group has explored impulses toward queer men’s tribal community; some have experimented with mystical sexual—spiritual approaches to community- building.

The legacy of *Song of the Loon* also specifically suggests the transfer of the archetypal “bear” label, from the novel’s fictitious Native American to queer men in search of tribal community in recent times and today. The totemic name both conveys the pastoral-utopian values of a homomale erotic community and visually embodies the “physically masculine” attributes of members of an idealized bear community.

Clearly, then, the emergence of the term “bear” in the Gay men’s community during the 1970s was both erratic and spontaneous. Around 1987 in San Francisco the first bear “play parties” were held, Richard Bulger launched *Bear* magazine, the original Lone Star Saloon opened its doors, and cy-bear-space became the new frontier for sexual community exploration. In the 1980s, it was consciously embraced as a self—identifying collective identity.

V

My immediate attraction to bears in the 1980s was to both to the “natural masculinity” bears celebrated — hairy, husky, bearded, big—bellied, and other “blue-collar” male characteristics Gay men have fetishized as ‘real-man’ manly — and to a “soft” sense of homomale tribal community expressed as a “non- attitude” of social “inclusivity.” They embraced the flaws of male bodies and embodied (or evinced) a camaraderie, a mix of frontier democracy (Whitman’s radical egalitarianism), a spirit of erotic democracy (bears rejected — and felt rejected by — the standards of sexual desirability of the day). In retrospect, I was hooked by the generosity of spirit, of opened hearts, of Gay men doing the best they

could to create sexual community in the midst of an epidemic that looked like the end of the world as we knew it.

In the late 1980s, as I gravitated to these bears as Gay men who were actively seeking a way to create sexual community, I struggled mightily with my new role as a “diseased pariah” (and still do today). Castro Street was a ghost town; Folsom Street was decimated; Gay sober circles were overloaded with grief. But some of us were emerging as survivors. It feels schizophrenic in the retelling today, but we doggedly kept on going on, trying to live as normal a life as we could.

Through the dark years of the epidemic, I sought spiritual nourishment. Starved and devastated, unable to take much in, I was unable to realize how numbed out I was, we all were. I followed several New Age fads that passed through town (such as Terry Cole-Whittaker and her snake-oil “share and declare” nonsense, or Radiant Light Ministries). I went to the Quakers and attended Friends meetings. I read a lot of Buddhist popularizers and participated in do-it-yourself spiritual therapy groups. I reaffirmed my vows to the Episcopal Church, glad to be welcomed as a New Age-Buddhist heretic.

I spent these years in therapy, individual, couple, and group. I volunteered with various AIDS social and psychological support organizations. I did a stint as a volunteer taking calls on the crisis hotline at Suicide Prevention. I began exploring my shadow in incest survivor therapeutic work, and put in five years of hard recovery work in the Al-Anon family of codependent recovery.

I had two “life partner” relationships, and several disastrous boyfriend relationships. My first, second, third, and fourth AA sponsors died, one ex-life partner, several boyfriends, numerous flick buddies, and most of my friends and neighbors all died. Eventually I gave up meditation, a daily practice since earliest sobriety, which had helped keep me stable, centered, sane.

And then I was diagnosed by Social Security as “permanently disabled,” with “disabling ARC” [AIDS-related condition] and “depression” (PTSD), and underwent a complete nervous breakdown. Yet somehow I managed to complete my dissertation, and graduated PhD from UC Berkeley. It was 1992.

VI

Another fifteen years have passed since then. In 1993, once again my life made a non sequitur leap – this time to Boston onto an academic tenure-track career. Out of as deep sense of gratitude for another second chance, I devoted myself to teaching and scholarship. I began the Bear History Project, and pursued that for ten years. I became a workaholic, working 60, 70, even 80 hours a week.

I could not connect with Gay community in Boston. I stopped attending 12-step meetings. I gave up trying to find a toehold into bear, leather, sober, or general Gay community. I went back into therapy and on heavy antidepressant medication. I found another life partner (my fourth) and we bought a house fifty miles outside Boston.

Academe had proven to be a waking nightmare, and I was flabbergasted to find the dynamics of my childhood sexual abuse so exactly reproduced in my relationships with senior administration. I had had two mentors at work, sympaticos of personal and political sensibilities. Ron died of a heart attack at age 47, and, a few years later, my soul-mate Tanya cracked completely from her losing battle of wills with the place. We were the lavender menace no more. With no allies, I was once again defenseless and isolated, in a hostile work environment.

I had participated in but then withdrew from the Gay Men' Health Summits, Creating Change conferences, bear events, sober conferences, academic conferences. I founded, led, then rebelled and quit, a rural bear group. Step by step, I withdrew completely from the world, wanting desperately to go home, to go back to San Francisco.

I gradually found my way to a circle of healing men, Gay and straight, in rural western Massachusetts. The Men's Resource Center of Amherst, and the loving tribe of men-healing men I befriended there, helped me back to my path of spiritual healing and social reintegration. (This came too late to follow the threads leading to Easton Mountain, Camp Destiny, or any of the other queer men's tribal spaces on the East Coast.) I had decided to head home to San Francisco and pick up the tracks of my own life where I had last seen them.

When I finally made the move back to San Francisco in 2005, I googled the Internet for "rural Gay men's community northern California." Every search turned up something called the Billy Club, based out of Ukiah. But it would take another two years before I would actually make it to a Billy Gathering. The moment I did, I knew I had found my home. There is not a shadow of doubt that I have finally come home, to a heart-centered circle of Gay men, a tribal community, *my* tribal community. I recognized the bear spirit there, and found it alive and well and thriving, in a place I had never thought to look.

VII

My personal sense of bear spirit had begun with the perhaps simplistic archetypal traditions of the American frontiersman folk hero, as intuitively embraced by Gay bears, from Daniel Boone to the Marlboro man to Grizzly Adams. However, this only scratches the surface of the deeply transformative, spiritual register of bear as Gay archetype.

Whether hunter or hunted, depending upon source legend, the bear embodies the cosmic pursuit, as embodied in the star constellation that marches nightly across the northern sky. It proceeds, not in frenetic motion but in "stately procession of final things, energy gained and spent, transferred, assimilated, and dissipated, only to be renewed again by the holy sun" (Shephard and Sanders, 67). In his complex, contradictory totemic roles, "an avatar of the forces that rule all life," the bear emerges as a multi-vocative embodiment of the Gay man as shaman, spiritual guide and healer, both endearing nurturer and fierce warrior foe, both cuddly and dangerous. In the Gay register, bear spirit openly embraces its sexual spirit and embodies the forces that bond Gay men in tribal community.

My own path to heart-centered Gay men's tribal community has taken many circuitous side routes. I found it only after I stopped looking and allowed it to find me. My civil war is over. I am creating a place in this new Billy community, where I am seen as a Gay warrior and spiritual healer. As my heart continues, however falteringly, to heal and become free and open to the world, I begin anew, post-AIDS Holocaust, to embrace my Gay/queer brothers.

"Welcome home, Billy!" is how they greeted me. When, in a tribal drumming and chanting ceremony my remaining defenses shattered, I knew I was finally reborn, and invited to embody and give voice to the Gay archetype of bear. I have been pondering "bear spirit" ever since.

Having always been drawn to older men, as mentors and lovers, I suddenly realize I have become the sort of older man I have always been drawn to. I now turn and face back, reaching out to my younger Gay brothers, just as I continue to reach out to my own mentors among the community elders. I'm just beginning to learn: I can leave a trail of crumbs behind me, as one elder kindly admonishes, but I cannot leave a trail ahead of me.

I am no longer imprisoned by old scripts, if I so choose. Unscripted means I have to fly by the seat of my pants. A lifetime's preparation — of overcoming psychological compartmentalization and fragmentation, of groping blindly, backsliding and willfully self-sabotaging, of emotions frozen or out of control, of personal will paralyzed, thwarted, run amok, or liberated from — has now transformed me. At 54, I begin to take my place in my community. And I begin to understand, from a broader perspective of the evolution of queer men's spirituality, the legacy of homoerotic community: we are perpetually engaged in liberating ourselves and each other, generation after generation.

Audre Lorde has long been a muse and mentor. When she wrote (in "Litany for Survival") "For those of us / who were imprinted with fear / ... learning to be afraid with our mother's milk," I understood. All my life I had been taught to mistrust — straight people, Gay people, my sense of home, my mission in life, even who I am. As I now learn to trust, for the first time, I am able to enter into tribal community.

"[W]hen we are loved we are afraid / love will vanish / when we are alone we are afraid / love will never return." After a lifetime of sexual mistrust, I am coming in from the cold. Falteringly, with many missteps, I now move forward. Learning to trust the very men I both fear most and most powerfully desire to merge in transcendent union with is no small task.

As I pondered how one becomes a community elder and why I seemed so far away from such a place, Audre's poem kept coming back to me, especially its shattering closing lines, "So it is better to speak / remembering / we were never meant to survive" (Lorde, 255-56). Today I surround myself with my Billy brethren and elders, and tap into their collective wisdom. We all of us, billys and bears and sexual misfit and refusnik brothers can come home at any time. Like Dorothy, we always had the power within us; we simply lacked the wisdom to know how to access it.

I have traveled a long path to come home and know it for the first time. I find before the vision I began to consciously embrace as a bear. Tribal community, as I have come to know it, exists in a mythic time and place outside of normal time and place. Each time I find my way back into Gay men's tribal

community, I know I am home. When I am in my practice of loving kindness, compassion, embracing the joy of community, and not discriminating judgmentally between self and other, — and I realize Hesse had placed the answers before me all those many years ago — I know I, too, belong.

Bear hugs, brother. Namaste.

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MID- MORNING

Frank Muzzy

The photograph was beautiful and intimate. But the story behind the image captivated me even more. The way Muzzy tells it, he had woken up in the morning to use the bathroom. When he returned to bed he saw his friend lying there sleeping peacefully and he reached for his camera to start taking pictures. He had just started taking pictures when his friend began to move. "DON'T MOVE A MUSCLE!" he insisted and his friend stayed still as Frank continued recording the image.

Some time later his friend came to the opening of his exhibit and was stunned by the image. He became emotional and said, "I never realized I was beautiful." A remarkable gift from simply paying attention to the tender gaze. -- Dan Vera

Passing stranger! you do not know how longingly I look upon you,
You must be he I was seeking, or she I was seeking,
 (it comes to me, as of a dream,)
I have somewhere surely lived a life of joy with you,
All is recalled as we flit by each other, fluid, affectionate, chaste,
 matured,
You grew up with me, were a boy with me, or a girl with me,
I ate with you, and slept with you—your body has become
 not yours only, nor left my body mine only,
You give me the pleasure of your eyes, face, flesh, as we pass—
 you take of my beard, breast, hands, in return,
I am not to speak to you—I am to think of you when I sit alone,
 or wake at night alone,
I am to wait—I do not doubt I am to meet you again,
I am to see to it that I do not lose you.

Walt Whitman, "Calamus 22"

Embracing the Bear

By Jeffrey L. Michels

Not too long after my introduction to the bear community, I had an opportunity to meet a Native American Elder who referred to herself as “A Woman Who Walks with Bears.” She had spent a good portion of her life tracking bears and had begun to create a museum dedicated to the animal. At that moment she had been tracking one particular bear whom she referred to as Grandfather. It would seem appropriate that I should now refer to her as Grandmother Bear.

Grandmother Bear was happy to share her knowledge with me, but was ever curious about my unforeseen visitation. While she spoke about both the habits and the nature of the physical animal, I began to share my story with her. I talked about how coming out as a Gay man marked the beginning of my spiritual quest to rediscover who I was. I explained about my artistic nature, how art had always been my way to bring peace into my life and my recent initiation into the healing art of Reiki. Grandmother Bear stressed the importance of embracing one’s roots and encouraged me to continue on the path that was currently laid out before me. I continued to talk about being Gay, explaining how the Native American culture’s tradition of honoring the “two-spirit” members of the tribe made me want to explore their customs. This desire, combined with my finding the Gay bears, were the two coincidences that caused me to stop.

Grandmother Bear offered that among her people, Bear is deemed a great healing spirit and that whenever there is a “bear sighting,” this bear has come to do healing work. I was the first person to speak to her of the bear phenomenon that was building in the Gay community. This new bear sighting excited her and she immediately asked “how does the bear heal the Gay community?”

At first glance the answer to this appeared simple, and could be found by examining genesis of the bear sub-culture. How the GLBT Community’s penchant for parading around the hairless, young and buff male body as their physical ideal effectively shunned anyone who did not obsess over perfecting their bodies or who could not be bothered by shaving be it their face, chest, back, underarms or even their pubic hairs. It was bad enough that society stigmatized “hairy and but here was the so-called haven for Gay men doing the same to many of its own. So the Gay men who fit a more rugged image of masculinity gathered together to offer an alternate view of homosexual men, affirming themselves as sexually desirable in the process. Hence, from a general — if not oversimplified — standpoint, the bears could heal the Gay community of its obsession with youth and their fear of aging by accepting heavysset, hairy men as a desirable Gay male model and honoring “maturity” in its many manifestations.

Grandmother Bear’s lessons fueled my growing curiosity about this fledgling community. Although I have never been a joiner, I began to frequent the various bear venues. I enjoyed how playful the men seemed to be and found it extremely comforting to go where I knew I could meet men who were attracted to guys like myself. Yet the healing characteristic remained the facet that boosted my ego the most, and I began to bask in the idea of personifying this powerful, mystical spirit.

But many of the men I was meeting did not necessarily embody this Bear Spirit of which Grandmother spoke. Although it seemed the survival instinct of the bear animal was firmly in place as they lashed out at those who threatened the very core of their being with such verbal attacks as, "I am Gay because I am attracted to men, not men pretending to be women." It did not matter if some of these non-bears were attracted to bears, casting doubt that the bears merely sought to be found desirable. Likewise, a bear might be looked upon as a traitor if they found thinner, or smooth men attractive. As a result, bears would congregate only with each other, maintaining their reclusive tendencies. And instead of fostering the healing that could stem from eliminating discrimination by acknowledging and accepting all people in all forms as loveable beings, the bears created polarities within the GLBT community.

I even began to question the nature of healing bears offered each other. Consider that whenever I would talk about trying to lose weight in this crowd, the reaction would inevitably be "don't you dare, you are great as you are!" Or, "But I love your belly" and etc. True these remarks can be reassuring and yes, believing I am loveable just as I am is an integral step towards healing the trauma caused by alienation. Still my visceral reaction to such comments was that of admonishment and anger. Receiving this adoration from others was not the true elixir. Instead of helping me to love myself, this behavior only served to enable me to remain lazy and living a somewhat unhealthy lifestyle. The problem was depending on others to do the healing for me. In reality the bear was simply revealing the areas I needed to address in order to evolve.

One lesson that I came across early on my spiritual quest was to first take care of myself so I can better take care of others. Up until this point, my experiences with the bears revealed to me how I have yet to fully incorporate this teaching into the depths of my being, not to mention my hunch that this remained a community-wide issue as well. So, out of the respect I had for the great healing spirit of which Grandmother Bear spoke, I resisted any temptation to identify as one. Conversely, it seemed that my trepidations about this subculture was more an indication of my reluctance to take charge of my own healing. And, just maybe, I had to more fully embrace Bear in order to truly benefit from its healing prowess.

My first instinct was to heed Grandmother's advice and return to my roots. In this instance, I went back to the time when I first displayed any physical characteristic that is associated with bears. I don't remember a time where I was *not* considered to be chubby. Next, memories of my embarrassment over being the first in my class to grow body hair surfaced. I had even avoided shaving in high school (as if by ignoring it, the fuzz on my face would cease to exist) while other boys would have eagerly embraced the task were they in my position. I initially saw my behavior as solely resulting from the trauma I had about my hirsuteness. But recently I have begun to view this in a different light; I was afraid of growing up. Was this simply my fear of taking personal responsibility for my life and having to become my own parents? Or, was I apprehensive of how I may or may not fit the typical images of how a man was supposed to behave? Maybe it was both.

Interestingly, as the bears evolve as a community, they have begun to stake a claim in the "masculine" lifestyle. While the idea that the bears should be seen as the epitome of maleness is at best moot, I choose to avoid making this provocative distinction. But once again, the bears' growth seems intimately

linked with my own, and I see the value of scrutinizing what it means to be a man. *Is* masculine defined by such stereotypes as husky, hairy men who don't fret over their physical bodies? Perhaps the rugged cowboy image comes to mind? Or, do we really infer "straight" when we say masculine, rife with qualities like obsessing over athletics, power hungry and mechanically inclined?

Looking at myself, I saw a person who continues to give away his power by depending on others for validation. I continue to hold onto old habits of lounging around eating, drinking beer and watching sports all weekend (this began as my attempt to fit in with the boys.) While I was still unsure of what it meant to be a man I was certain that the stereotypical "couch potato" playing the victim was not the positive male archetype I truly wished to portray.

So what *are* some of those established archetypes? Traditionally, the rule of the tribe was the hunter, the warrior, the protector, and the mentor to name a few. When I scrutinize these roles and the traits one might need to possess to be successful at them, the word that keeps emerging is *discipline*. If you are on a hunt, you must remain quiet; take deliberate steps as you stalk your prey. Likewise, the armed forces stress, from day one, the importance of following orders and the potential repercussions should you disobey them. Protecting ones family requires a systematic approach to ensure that "no stone is left unturned." The mental focus it takes to study, spiritually evolve and gain the necessary wisdom to be deemed a mentor is also quite considerable.

It seems that the ultimate indicator of maleness is much less tangible than any overt characteristic one might possess. (Just as fitting the physical stereotype of the bear does not guarantee that I embody the Bear Spirit.) The type of man who peaks my interest, is someone who is self-assured, who's every movement has a specific intention and is carried out with careful consideration. He maintains a presence of mind as he goes through his day and remains true to his personal ideals. He inspires in others a sense that everything will be fine, and is there to offer to his community the fruits of his own experiences when needed.

Seeing as we attract the various energies that we emit, I would have to become this type of man in order to meet him. But in light of my recent physical ailments, all of which were attributable to excess weight, I saw that my conduct rarely lived up to such ideals, especially when it came to cultivating this love of myself that the bears were (according to my initial account) purported to bestow upon me. In fact I have stubbornly resisted the role of nurturer, which happens to be a *female* archetype, throughout my entire life. By taking great pains to ensure I fit the male stereotype, like the bears were wont to do, did I dismiss traditionally female traits by default?

It is curious behavior, considering how homophiles are apt to embody a greater balance between the masculine and feminine energies. As a sub-culture the bears, by definition, share this quality. I am realizing that deep down; I have always taken pride in knowing I was not the stereotypical man. I also now believe that my inherent quality to move between both masculine and feminine is a key component in the healing work that I could offer to others. Yet, instead of finding the joy from spontaneously shifting between the two, I have internalized the established belief that the two remain opposite and that one must remain in one camp or the other. This has created an internal rift, which

keeps me detached from my roots. What starts to crystallize is just how deep internalized homophobia and shame runs if it causes me to categorically reject those essential aspects the female energy provides at the expense of my own health and integrity. Likewise, how big a factor was this in the birth of the bear community?

It now dawns on me that meeting a female elder was no mere happenstance. Had Grandmother Bear appeared to me, in fact, to help me heal my split with the feminine? In order to wholly Integrate her teachings, I need to fully embrace my Gay roots, take what the bears have taught me — from looking to myself for the validation I require to what masculinity means for me — and reclaim the feminine. By interweaving self-discipline with the nurturer I can be my own father *and* mother. Applying this to each my mind, body and spirit, I will be more completely loving myself. Then, not only will this particular bear be better suited to serve his Gay brothers and sisters, but he will also show how the Gay spirit helped heal this bear.

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