

Coming Home and Finding Community?

By Les Wright

It has been two years since I moved back to San Francisco. Living here now, it is impossible for me not to notice the radical remaking of the city. Post-dot-com-bust San Francisco is a boomtown again, reminiscent of post-Wall Berlin. An entirely new 21st-century urban high-density city is rising. Dire, street-survival poverty jostles up against an unprecedented exuberance of über-conspicuous consumption.

All across the country, as cities have again become desirable, deeper-pocket interests have been gentrifying gays out of our urban enclaves. The Castro, our own homegrown “ethnically” gay neighborhood and symbolic gay capital of the United States, suddenly looks like the last “traditional” gay neighborhood. The Castro has been turning a bit seedy, but local queer pride and, increasingly, the city planning and tourism boards see it as the Gay Capital of the World. Herein lies the ironic paradox today: As gay folk have been disappeared by AIDS or sucked into the queer diaspora, gays and straights alike see this newly “ethnic” community through gently softening lenses, engulfed in cloud-shrouded images of quaint, nostalgic, queer white picket fences.

My return nearly two years ago, portending no such evolution, began very painfully. In 2005, I returned to the emotional scene as I had left it in San Francisco 12 years before. By 1993 I was subsisting on SSI, waiting to die of AIDS, with no future, nor even the capacity to dream of a future. Indeed, I had explicitly organized my life around not surviving.

But I did. I completed a long doctoral program at UC Berkeley, and was hired out of permanent disabled status into a tenure-track college teaching post in Boston. I won tenure, settled down with a life partner, got a mortgage, and swiftly atrophied in middle-class happily-ever-after.

Then came a moment of clarity: The life I was living was not mine. It may have been someone else’s, perhaps the dream of a much younger me. But the longer I willed myself to stay on this path, the more miserable, insane, isolated, and despairing I became. The last time I had seen my “real” life, it was still in San Francisco, among the AIDS ghosts and other debris of living life messily.

Returning to San Francisco, I found everything changed, and I felt lost in a kind of time-and-space misalignment. My entire social reality had perished before I left in 1993, and now it was long forgotten. During my first six months back, I encountered the ghosts of my past at every turn. Old familiar places, sounds and smells would trigger them, reminding me of the future that never happened. As I had encountered while teaching about Holocaust survivorship in my Death and Dying humanities course, I too had come back from a world which history had forgotten.

I first found re-engagement in the world by returning to the rooms of recovery. In this way I have been able to mourn and heal and move on. Like many gay men who unexpectedly survived the AIDS

epidemic, I am now exploring my “mid-lessness.” I am discovering how to be of service, to contribute meaningfully to the world, to earn a living again. Between the social services available to AIDS survivors returning to the workforce and the rich and diverse spiritual communities I participate in, I am reconnecting with my particular tribe and finding “community” in many different but overlapping communities.

Profound healing has occurred through reconnecting with my fellow survivors. Recently, I participated in a Community Forum put on by the San Francisco Gay Men’s Community Initiative (www.isparksf.com) on the “poz/neg divide” in gay San Francisco today. As Greg Rowe, the meeting facilitator, commented to me privately, it is still far too painful for the queer community at large to hear about or acknowledge our generation. Did you know, he asked me rhetorically, that when Holocaust survivors immigrated to Israel, they were asked to shut up about their experiences and get on with building a future?

I have sought out and connected to agencies that I have found particularly helpful in providing support services for long-term poz folks. At the AIDS Health Project I have received individual counseling, been in a poz writers group, and participate in an ongoing support group for long-term poz gay men survivors. (I have lived with HIV for over 26 years now.) I originally signed up in 1993 as a client of the Positive Resource Center. Over the last year and a half, they have helped me ex

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explore alternative career paths and pursue employment retraining.

After two years of exploration, I am relishing recommitting to the life I continue to be called to, as a writer, an educator, a gay community activist, adding to that grant writer/ development specialist in the culture and arts nonprofit world. I've taken two semesters of intensive Spanish, have screened and penned reviews of a couple hundred films, and recently joined a writers' group (all HIV-ers). I work daily with recovering alcoholics. I have found fun and fellowship in the Bear community, and The Bear History Project, which I founded in 1994, is rising from old cyber ashes. The Billy Club, a rural collective of socially engaged and spiritually awakened gay, bi, and queer men, has welcomed me with open arms. And I am contributing my skills and energy to the SF Gay Men's Community Initiative as it grows as an independent grass-roots community-building group.

As I trudge my spiritual path, as ordinary and unconventional as it comes, I find the world makes sense when I live in San Francisco. I know that I am of this place. I have come home where I belong.

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