

# Community, Intimacy & the Art of Conversation

**By Rodger Brooks**

***Once upon a time, from the Village in the East to Lalaland in the West, magical kingdoms beckoned to a generation of fair young princes. Multitudes of these magnificent boymen harkened to a siren song, enticing each to abandon the confines of stifling hamlets for the freedom of shining cities and to escape the prisons of repressed psyches for the joy of liberation. Just Over the Rainbow in the Land of Oz, lay the most enchanted urban enclave of all ... the charming and charmed neighborhood known as the Castro.***

***For the brief decade or so -- after the Stonewall Rebellion, but before the Great Plague -- the Castro Clones lived in a fantasy land where every whim was welcomed, every wish fulfilled, seemingly content that they would live happily ever after in the embrace of what they called The Gay Community.***

Or so the myth goes. It's one that lives on in the hearts and minds of survivors, whose nostalgic recollections are colored rose by the selective memories which age affords. Younger men, with a wistful yearning for what might have been, seem to accept those versions of the legend which tell of ecstatic tribal rituals in discos and baths and of lusty men riding bareback. While myths always contain a core of truth, over time they evolve to reflect the inner needs of later generations. The line between legend and history increasingly blurs.

The Gay Liberation Movement of the early 1970s was ignited

by those who came of age in the tumult of the previous decade. Many of its prominent theorists/activists had participated in or at least identified with the great movements of their time: civil rights, free speech, anti-war and the so-called "sexual revolution." Some emerged from the New Left. Still others found inspiration in the drug-fueled counterculture of Beats, Bohemians and Hippies. Most embraced Feminism. Gay Lib sounded a clarion call to undermine rigid gender roles and to create a cultural revolution, one in which homosexuals would proudly demonstrate how our particular perspectives, skills and talents could contribute significantly to the quality of -- perhaps even the very survival of -- life on this planet. It was not a plea for acceptance and assimilation!

Gay Liberation was wildly successful at unlocking closet doors and inspiring pride, but it failed fundamentally in shaping the consciousness of the masses of newly emboldened gay men who flocked to the favored cities. Hot & horny men stormed the Castro, lookin' for action, not insight. Few among them had any awareness of liberation theories or interest in politics. To identify themselves as out and available, they donned the uniform of the day, 501s with one button strategically undone and a color-coded hanky in the appropriate pocket. Conformity was the norm; white, young and butch was the ideal. For me and many others who couldn't or wouldn't join in, it was disheartening.

Gay Libbers believed that Queers

were inherently non-conforming, individualistic, sometimes eccentric and extremely inventive folk. I was close to Harry Hay, who always maintained that Queers should emphasize our uniqueness, not our similarities to straights. Now, with hindsight, I can see how conformity was perhaps a necessary developmental stage for a community in its adolescence.

Recently deceased Eric Rofes, in his book "Reviving the Tribe," notes that "by 1976, paralleling the mass co-opting of progressive movements by reformist elements, gay liberation was enmeshed in a duel with gay rights advocacy. The ascendancy of gay rights advocates was driven by a desire to integrate gay men and women into the mainstream of American life, while their liberationist colleagues' goal had been the overthrow of the existing order and creation of a new society reflecting antipatriarchal and anticapitalist values."

Ironically, while I felt estranged from the emerging "lifestyle," I was acknowledged as a community leader. I was a spokesperson for the 1977 Coalition for Human Rights, which, in response to Anita Bryant's "Save Our Children Campaign," State Senator John Brigg's Anti-Gay Teachers Initiative and the brutal murder of Robert Hillborough, mobilized 200,000 for the previously small "Gay Freedom Parade." In 1978 I co-chaired the Gay Freedom "Celebration" determined to make it far more political than any "Pride" event before (or since). 1978 was the year that Prop 6, "the Brigg's

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Initiative," made it to the ballot in California. I pushed for the "celebration" to become a rally and the "parade" a "march." The theme which I fashioned, was "Come Out with Joy, Speak Out for Justice." My former partner and closest friend, Larry Berner, a Healdsburg teacher, had stage-managed his own "outing," enabling him to go on the offensive against Briggs. With my urging and support, Larry had chosen to personify the issue. "No on 6" activists, oblivious to our calculated efforts, viewed Larry as a victim, rather than the brilliant strategist that he was.

The "Gay Community" has been wildly successful at creating events, fighting for rights and building organizations like Operation Concern (now New Leaf) and the Gay National Educational Switchboard, each of which I was fortunate to work for. Its failure, I feel, has been in meeting the profound emotional needs of gay men for true intimacy – in nurturing the joy that arises out of being really known and really knowing other men.

"Reviving the Tribe" ends with this thought: "During a period when many gay men experience feelings of isolation and alienation, increasing effort might be focused on community building. Gay men do not need additional pseudo-communities which tell us what to say, how to feel, and whom to be, or promote a false sense of connection based on limited identity constructs or disjointed sexual politics. We need small, accessible networks which offer safe opportunities for intimate exchange of real feelings, and provide support

and shared pleasures out of which to grow true community."

The San Francisco Gay Men's Community Initiative (SFGMCI), using an affinity group model, is bringing together men from across the spectrum of MSM identities to re-ignite a spark of creativity, to reopen a dialogue about who we as gay men are and who we want to become. It asks us to define what true community is about. THRIVING IN SF brings together poz gay guys whose comradeship is anchored in their experience of living with HIV. Each of these groups serves to satiate my craving for genuine intimacy and gives me great hope for shaping a more nurturing "community." While cyber-community has its place, it's not a substitute for face-to-face communication and bear hugs. In an era of support groups and online serosorting, conversation is something of a lost art. Yet the internet need not further isolate us; it can be utilized to bring us closer together. My suggestion: if you have a home that allows for it, invite others over; if not, arrange to meet in a coffeehouse or some other cozy venue. Put the word out on internet sites like SFGMCI ([www.ispark.com](http://www.ispark.com)), THRIVING ([www.thriving@yahoo.com](http://www.thriving@yahoo.com)) -- anywhere you are likely to find men interested in sharing what's on your mind and in your heart. Starting a meaningful conversation need not be difficult; all it takes is willingness and a little imagination.

I've made particularly deep bonds with those who have accepted my invitations to participate in "Sunday Salons," weekly conver-

sations about things that matter deeply to me. I've utilized books like "Golden Men, the Power of Gay Midlife" and "Living Our Dying, a Way to the Sacred in Everyday Life," to give some focus to our dialogues. My role is not so much facilitator as it is host(ess). How Queer is that?

Rodger Brooks, after acting in key roles on the Kaiser Permanente San Francisco HIV/AIDS Advisory Board, currently serves on the Editorial Board of Kaiser's HIV UPDATE, for which he writes the "ol' codger Rodger" column. He also is a member of the Thriving in SF Steering Council and the SFGMCI Leadership Council. The ol' codger welcomes your comments: [rodgernick@hotmail.com](mailto:rodgernick@hotmail.com). 415-863-6974.