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Gay Men of Wisdom: A Group-Centered Approach to Helping Gay Men Value Their Distinct Gifts

Raymond L. Rigoglioso¹

For more than a century, there has been a tradition among gay men of exploring the meaning and purpose of being gay. This tradition involves an extensive literature, dating back to Edward Carpenter's seminal 1908 book *The Intermediate Sex*, Donald Webster Cory's *The Homosexual in America* in 1951, and Mark Thompson's (1987, 1994, 1997) influential trilogy *Gay Spirit*, *Gay Soul*, and *Gay Body*.

While these books provide intellectual fodder and inspiration for gay men who seek to answer questions about their nature and purpose, the real work happens when they gather in groups. Harry Hay, founder of the Mattachine Foundation in 1950 (later the Mattachine Society) and leader of the modern gay rights movement, gathered men in circles and explored three questions: Who are we? Where do we come from? What are we for? In 1979, he cofounded the Radical Faeries, with an explicitly spiritual purpose to explore and celebrate the very different ("faerie") nature of gay men.

In 1999, Christian de la Huerta published *Coming Out Spiritually* and formed Q-Spirit, an international network of gays and lesbians in spirituality. Toby Johnson, author of numerous books on gay spirituality, including one by that very title (Johnson, 2004), led groups in Austin, Texas, toward a similar purpose. In 2002, David Nimmons published *The Soul Beneath the Skin: The Unseen Hearts and Habits of Gay Men* and formed the nonprofit Manifest Love, which, in addition to

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staging “loving disturbances,” gathered gay men in workshops around the country to explore their natures.

From the beginning—for reasons that still puzzle this author—this inquiry has taken place on the margins of the community of men-who-love-men. Even Harry Hay found himself the focus of resistance in the Mattachine Society for his emphasis on cultural transformation and, for several reasons, was forced to leave. Mattachine eventually chose a much more political direction.

Still, the drive to understand gay men’s nature and purpose persists, even if among a subset of gay men. It decidedly requires gathering in groups.

In 2012, I began a project inspired by this lineage of inquiry that I call *Gay Men of Wisdom*. In 2015, I published a book, *Gay Men and the New Way Forward*, which I describe in more detail later. Mark Thompson attended my book reading and workshop in Palm Springs in October 2015. Afterward, he took me out to dinner and grilled me: “Who are you? Why are you doing this? How did you come to this?”

Mark was arguably the most influential author in the genre and one of the guardians of this work in his generation. He attended the first Radical Faeries gathering in 1979 and counted Harry Hay as a personal friend. By the end of our time together, he had given me his blessing. I became the *de facto* leader of this inquiry for my generation. Mark died the following August.

A COMMUNITY-BASED NARRATIVE OF SOCIAL PURPOSE

I have always believed that this line of inquiry is extraordinary: A community forced to the margins of society gathers each generation to explore its very nature and purpose. This community generates a narrative about what makes its members different—by virtual, if not complete, consensus. It explores the distinct contributions—gifts—that these differences enable its members to make to society.

This inquiry is all the more remarkable for its singularity among LGBT people. To my knowledge (I welcome the opportunity to be proven wrong), lesbians, bisexuals, and transgender people have not developed narratives of social purpose. Some might argue that the existing literature includes L, B, and T people, but a closer look reveals otherwise: All of the books in the genre, with the exception of *Another Mother Tongue: Gay Words, Gay Worlds*, written by Judy Grahn in 1984, have been written by gay men. Most of the examples and discussion in the genre pertain to gay men. To say the genre includes other identities within the LGBT umbrella is disingenuous.

I had the fortune to meet Grahn in 2016 on a trip to the Bay Area, and we discussed this phenomenon. She acknowledged that lesbians likely do not have such a narrative—that no books have been published on the subject, and that if anything has been written, it might have been published in small, independent magazines. Grahn hypothesized that, for lesbians, distinguishing their differences from straight women

might cause rifts among women committed to feminism and equality. Maintaining bonds of sisterhood among all women might be a higher priority.

Gay men, however, have no such luxury. Being marginalized among men, as well as by the larger society, leaves those with the self-awareness and willingness to engage in reflection with no choice but to ponder Hay's original questions.

I have always believed that this inquiry has incredible potential to transform not just gay men but all human beings. If gay men can institutionalize this kind of questioning, we can provide a model for all people about how to value human differences. This is why I have devoted these years to running *Gay Men of Wisdom*.

A MODEL FOR HOW TO VALUE GAY MEN'S DIFFERENCES

My introduction to this genre of literature came through Will Fellows's 2004 book *A Passion to Preserve: Gay Men as Keepers of Culture*. In it, Fellows proposed that gay men serve different and important social functions and that characteristics of gay boys can be observed well before puberty. As one who had wholeheartedly believed our movement's political narrative—that we are just like everyone else, except for our sexual orientation—this insight hit me like a bolt of lightning. The book inspired me so much that I decided to create *Gay Men of Wisdom*.

Originally, I envisioned that *Gay Men of Wisdom* would provide a way to market my life-coaching practice. Ultimately, it became a consuming passion. When I finished Fellows's book, I ordered dozens of books from the bibliography. I created workshops for gay men to explore how the concepts I had been reading about applied to them. I facilitated a monthly discussion group at New York City's LGBT Center from 2012 to 2013, and I ran a 15-session version online from 2013 to 2014. The group attracted gay men from around the United States and Canada. I created a weekend program, which I offered three times at Easton Mountain, a (largely) gay men's retreat center north of Albany, New York.

I employ an iterative methodology in my programs:

- Explore the trait in general.
- Explore the trait as it applies to you.
- Bring awareness to your expression of that trait as you express it.
- Notice how others respond to your expression of that trait.
- Notice what changes in you as you recognize the impact you have on others.
- Reflect on this awareness in the next group session.

I faced a challenge, however: What distinct traits of gay men should I use? The literature contains inspiring narratives about gay men's differences, but those narratives meander, overlap, and sometimes (seemingly) conflict. For a while, I

organized the weekend program and workshops based on several archetypes that Christian de la Huerta (1999) proposed gay people embody,² but I found them incomplete. Where could I find a definitive list of gay men's distinct gifts to humanity?

It eventually occurred to me that none existed. I would need to create it. Thus I set out to write *Gay Men and The New Way Forward*. In this book, I synthesize the literature on gay men's nature and purpose. I had informally field-tested this literature through my discussion groups, workshops, and the weekend program. I made sure to take notes in every session I ran. In this way, my fieldwork amounted to another iteration of the exploration outlined in the literature: Gay men in my groups reaffirmed and deepened these concepts.

In my analysis, drawing from the literature, and from my notes and observations, I identify the 14 distinct gay male gifts (Figure 1). In 2015, I began a book tour that has, to date, taken me to 23 cities across the United States. At some of these stops, I have offered experiential workshops. Applying the iterative methodology I had used for the discussion groups, workshops, and weekend program, I created new group programs using the 14 distinct gay male gifts framework: a three-month online group I called Powerful U and Celebrating Gay Manhood, an in-person weekend program.

Gay Men of Wisdom has always been a grassroots effort. I have relied extensively on volunteers—to edit and design my book, to help organize book readings, to sponsor workshops, and to assist me in developing and refining my methodology. Late in 2016, a team of volunteers helped me turn Gay Men of Wisdom into a 501(c)(3) nonprofit.

THE DISTINCT GAY MALE GIFTS FRAMEWORK

Identifying and categorizing gay men's distinct gifts is no easy feat—it was the central challenge I faced when writing my book. To begin with, I defined what I mean by a distinct gift: a socially beneficial trait that characterizes one group of people and that does not necessarily characterize other groups. Not every gay man will possess all 14 gifts—and some may possess none of them. Some heterosexual men might possess some of these gifts, but these gifts do not characterize heterosexual men as a group.

Thus the gifts framework acknowledges variation. The group programs invite gay men to assess and explore the extent to which they express these gifts. The group process emphasizes self-reflection, empowerment, and appreciation for differences among group members.

The framework identifies the foundational gift as *masculine–feminine intel-*

2 De la Huerta (1999) identifies the following “roles that gay people have fulfilled for millennia: 1) Catalytic Transformers: A Taste for Revolution, 2) Outsiders: Mirroring Society, 3) Consciousness Scouts: Going First and Taking Risks, 4) Sacred Clowns and Eternal Youth: A Gay, Young Spirit, 5) Keepers of Beauty: Reaching for the Sacred, 6) Caregivers: Taking Care of Each Other, 7) Mediators: The In-between People, 8) Shamans and Priests: Sacred Functionaries, 9) The Divine Androgyne: An Evolutionary Role?, 10) Gatekeepers: Guardians of the Gates” (p. 7).

Gay Men's 14 Distinct Gifts to Humanity



These three circles, and the gifts they contain, overlap, reflecting the interrelated nature of gay men's distinct contributions to humanity. Masculine-feminine intelligence appears in nearly every distinct gift, making it foundational.

FIGURE 1. Gay men's 14 distinct gifts to humanity.

ligence, which refers to (a) the balance of masculine and feminine that gay men innately possess and (b) the seamless ability to move in and out of each as the need arises. This balance and the seamless ability to move in and out of the feminine and masculine inform nearly all of the other distinct gay male gifts. I group the other gifts into three categories: *serving and healing humanity*, *reinventing manhood*, and *freeing and enriching the human spirit*.

My book tour gave me feedback about my synthesis of gay men's distinct gifts to humanity—by and large, the framework resonates. It holds up. It resonates with gay men because it reflects what gay men say about what it means to be gay. I did not originate the ideas, though I believe I expanded and enriched them. Most importantly, I organized this literature into a structure and created a methodology to help gay men explore the extent to which they possess these gifts, in groups with other gay men.

Unbeknownst to me until this year, psychotherapist Ken Page had advanced what he terms gift theory, which intrigued me when I learned about it, because it seemed like a concept similar to mine. In a 2009 article in this journal, he explored

the application of this theory to GBT men. Page's theory postulates that "each of us has areas of unique sensitivities and passion . . . [or] gifts, and that in these areas we potentially experience both the greatest sense of meaning and the greatest pain" (p. 235).

Page (2009) further stated, "Gifts . . . are not necessarily capacities or talents; they are simply areas of our life where we feel the most deeply" (p. 236). Page clearly defined gifts differently than I do, but his application of this theory to GBT men echoes the purpose behind Gay Men of Wisdom. He wrote, "The more we embrace our gifts and grow to understand them, the more we relate to others from a foundation of self-esteem" (p. 236). Indeed, the Gay Men of Wisdom methodology aims to help gay men embrace their distinct gifts, express them for social good, honor how gay men are different from other men, and claim their personal power as people who make critical contributions to the welfare of humanity.

THE IMPORTANCE OF A SINGLE IDENTITY SPACE

The Gay Men of Wisdom group methodology requires the creation of a single-identity space—men-who-love-men, whether they identify as gay or queer. This requirement runs counter to the prevailing trend of including ever larger numbers of people into what for some has now become the LGBTQIAA umbrella. Some in this umbrella eschew claiming a specific identity altogether.

Still, while the group of people who share a queer persuasion has expanded, each member of this umbrella has a different identity. This work draws a very clear line between affinity and identity. We unite with our lesbian, bisexual, and transgender allies in friendship and political support (affinity), yet we gather among those who share our lived experience to truly understand who we are.

For any group to cohere, members must share a common experience or purpose. By creating a space for gay men to explore their lived experience with other gay men, we foster the capacity for members to relate to each other. Importantly, this methodology explores members' experiences from childhood to the present day. The presence of bisexual or transgender men, for instance, would create dissonance for those individuals and the gay men in the group, as the men's lived experiences will be significantly different. Even if the group could contain that level of variation, no underlying literature exploring the nature and purpose of bisexual and transgender men exists. Without a community-generated narrative, the exploration becomes conjecture and falls apart.

This challenge also points to the incredible potential to replicate this model for others in the LGBT umbrella. With adequate resources and partnerships with leaders of different identity groups, Gay Men of Wisdom could foster development of community-generated narratives and a framework of distinct gifts for lesbian, bisexual, and transgender people. In this way, the work itself could be a gift that gay men give to our allies and beyond.

CURRENT PROGRAMS AND RESEARCH

In 2017, Gay Men of Wisdom created an ambitious pilot project in three cities: Provincetown, Massachusetts; Orlando, Florida; and Seattle, Washington. We recruited facilitators to deliver a drop-in group that we called Living Out Your Gifts. Each session focused on one of the 14 distinct gay male gifts. I modified the curriculum from Powerful U—a committed, three-month online group—for a drop-in, in-person format. I facilitated the group in Provincetown. A former therapist facilitated the group in Orlando, and a psychologist and therapist cofacilitated the group in Seattle. We all used the same curriculum and met once a month to debrief on the sessions and refine the curriculum.

After running the groups for 10 months, with considerable measures of success and noticeable impact, declining attendance prompted us to rethink our strategy. We decided that a drop-in format did not create sufficient cohesion and that the work requires a commitment on the part of participants. In 2018, I reworked and expanded the curriculum to 16 sessions over five months. The new Living Out Your Gifts group devotes one session to each of the 14 gifts and includes an introduction and conclusion. We require participants to attend all 16 sessions.

I currently run a group online using the videoconference service Zoom, and Matthew Grant, PsyD, runs an in-person group in Indianapolis, Indiana. Dr. Grant has designed a study that will assess the impact of his group on five measures: depression, anxiety, self-esteem, self-efficacy, and substance use. Dr. Grant is collecting data at baseline and every two weeks. In a future article, we will report on our findings.

REPLICATION

As I mentioned earlier, I have training as a life coach, and my methodology takes inspiration from life-coaching models. While I do not have a clinical background, mental health professionals have donated their time and talent to help advance the methodology I have created.

This methodology does not fit neatly into any existing discipline. In fact, it is new. As many mental health professionals have told me, this work provides an excellent complement to therapy. In comments of support, and through volunteer efforts, clinicians have signaled their understanding that this work has incredible potential to help gay men heal from the wounds inflicted by homophobia.

I have designed the Living Out Your Gifts curriculum to be replicated by others. Gay Men of Wisdom intends to provide training to practitioners with mental health and other skills in group facilitation to replicate this group. We are currently in the process of creating a facilitator training program.

My intention in writing this article is to introduce this methodology to the field of mental health practitioners who facilitate groups. Gay Men of Wisdom has

operated on the grassroots level, and we hope to raise awareness and visibility among practitioners and others. I welcome comments, questions, and discussion. I can be reached at the contact information given in this article.

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