1001 Beds
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Tim Miller wrote this essay for a collection of “stories of lesbian and gay faith.” It incorporates materials from the performance art sermons he prepared and delivered with an Episcopal priest, Malcolm Boyd, in 1989 and 1990, as well as from journal entries discussing Miller’s re-encounter with religion. The sermons at St. Augustine-by-the-Sea parish, where Miller attended services, began with alternating reminiscences: Boyd’s primarily of his work in the civil rights movement, Miller’s drawing on childhood memories as well as experiences during the ongoing AIDS crisis. Eventually the activist memories melded appropriately for the Easter season’s commemoration of Jesus’s arrest and execution, with Miller portraying a bullhorn-equipped civil authority arresting Boyd. As he notes in this essay, his creative activities with Boyd were hardly a radical departure for Tim Miller: his work always has had a mystical component, which he often humorously attributes to his upbringing in New Age California. The sense of religious awe is prominent in this essay, which ends with a remembered epiphany in the Sierra mountains. But perhaps most significant is Tim Miller’s newly realized, delicately expressed sense of Jesus as performer, activist, and role model.
1990 was a very strange year for me. I am a performance artist, a gay man, and a member of the Parish Church St. Augustine-by-the-Sea in Santa Monica, California. This year, I found myself in two very different and intense situations, both pushing at each other in seeming contradiction.

I whirled around in the center of the nation-wide media circus controversy surrounding the National Endowment for the Arts. Unanimously recommended Theater Fellowships to Holy (ooops, that’s Holly) Hughes, Karen Finley, John Fleck and myself were overturned by NEA Chairman John Frohnmayer because of the content of our work. You see, three of us were gay, Karen Finley was an angry feminist, and all of us explore sexual content and refer in very different ways to Christian imagery and archetypes as a way of exposing and healing the lies and hurt of our society. We all exist in a highly ethical and moral framework of compassion for suffering. We were being fashioned as sacrificial lambs to the great slathering mouth of the lunatic right wing of Jesse Helms and his ilk. Our work was shown on network TV, misrepresented in the major press, and lied about in Congress. It became clear we were being hung out to dry. This was in order to soothe the nutso religious right who need to see gay men, lesbians and feminists censored and vilified for speaking the truth about the pain and hurt in our land to Caesar and King George.

Cross fade to a few weeks earlier. I was part of the Mass at St. Augustine, doing a performance art sermon with Priest Malcolm Boyd. This work, presented as the sermon for the 10:30 a.m. service on Passion Sunday, tried to interpret the intensity of Lent, Easter and the crucifixion in terms of social justice. Through humor, performance actions and audience participation we asked the congregation to search their hearts in order to identify the ways we crucify one another through racism, homophobia, economic injustice, AIDS, and environmental disaster. Building towards a powerful chaotic moment, the performers in the congregation began springing to their feet in the pews, hurling and receiving insults, being both crucified
and crucifier. The craziness finished with a shout from a bullhorn, recalling a peace mass Malcolm had celebrated in the Pentagon during the Vietnam War. The policeman who arrested Malcolm said “You are disturbing the peace.” I spoke over the cacophony: “This is my body, which is given for you. Do this for the remembrance of me.” The sermon ended with Malcolm telling a story of an unexpected communion in a shack during the civil rights movement. I would break into the story with my genuine need to find the acts of love in this world. To find the gesture of redemption, whether that gesture is seen in an AIDS buddy or someone feeding the homeless. The point is that all of us put each other on crosses and are crucified. Malcolm and I asked the congregation to make the crucifixion personal; to acknowledge the sacrifices, miracles and evils all of us take part in. The performance art sermon was a charged event that moved and energized the audience who came that day to witness this happening and share in this fusion of liturgy and performance art.

Malcolm and I did disturb the peace that morning; but we also provided a journey for some folks through something strong. When the words “peace be with you” were spoken after the sermon, they carried a call and an urgency that was full of possibility.

I bring up these two events to pinpoint the strangeness of our time. The same year that I explore issues in my own faith as a Christian through a performance art sermon, I am also under assault from the Christian Right for being a visible gay artist. This might be seen as an interesting model of reality for gay people who are culturally Christian and trying to create a new relationship to Jesus and this complicated religious tradition.

OK. Honesty time. Enough with all the intellectual-cum-historical-slash-political-hyphen-contextual business. What is all this about? What do I actually feel about my Christian identity? I was raised with a lazy smattering of Sunday school, WASP spiritual cool, pro forma golden rule, confirmation, and then out the door into my intellectual artist self. At the time, my strongest experience within the church I grew up in, the Whittier Hillcrest Congregational
Tim Miller and Reverend Malcolm Boyd during the performance art sermon at St. Augustine-by-the-Sea parish, Santa Monica, 1990. Photo by Chuck Stallard.
Church, was that on a youth group field trip to the beach I managed to make out with one of the other boys in a cave. It was a kind of epiphany, without a doubt.

It is so confusing. . . . I feel that I was pushed away into exile from my Christian self. A whole part of my identity got left out in the rain. There I was devouring Das Kapital, Buddha’s Four Noble Truths, teenage existentialism, and fellatio while ignoring Liberation Theology, the prayer of St. Francis, the love commandment, and the kiss of peace. Oooops. Why does this happen? It is certainly not uncommon. First, I was turned off by the blandness of organized suburban Christianity. Strike one. Then, I was driven away by the bloodstained history of inquisition, imagined heresy and conquest, those fucked up oppressive parts of the tradition and the exclusionary signals that are sent to gay people by the bigoted religious Right. Strike two. Finally, there seemed to be no way to incorporate my basically good feelings about Jesus into my post-adolescent intellectual/artistic/political hit parade. Strike three. You’re out. Nothing personal, Jesus—I just can’t stand the company you keep. It seemed to make more sense to chuck the whole thing. Get out of my face, Jesus.

A few tears—I mean years—later, the cultural crisis alarm bells start to go off. To go into hiding from my cultural and religious stuff is a tricky business for me. I clearly desired a spiritual underpinning to my life. This had led me to zazen meditation, Plato, and worship of Nature. Wanting the feeling of a higher power, I began also to search within my Christian self for the purpose of life and was moved by the message of compassion and social equality in the Gospel.

I have a desperate need to know who I am and to know where I come from. This means to snoop around the secrets in the attic and sift through your ancestors’ faded papers that are stuck in a trunk somewhere in Kansas or Mesopotamia.

I am involved within a multi-cultural arts community where people from many different backgrounds and experiences are creating art that helps articulate identity. This search often leads artists to
their deep spiritual roots, whether an African-American exploring a connection to Yoruban spiritual practice or a Celt tapping into earth-based practices of the tribes of the British Isles. I need to understand why my heart and spirit are moved and illuminated by the need for renewal, the passion of sacrifice for social justice, the desire to find the way to love each other, the need to discover compassion as a building block for our culture. These are all spiritual needs that weren’t really finding an answer in my art life and political activism.

In my work as a performance artist, themes that are clearly informed by a deep current of Christian identity keep coming up: crucifixion and rebirth, conflict and communion, epiphany and despair. The desire for moments of peace. Sorrow about the sadness in the world. A radical desire to ease suffering, my own and others’. For me, to finally comprehend these long-hidden emotions led me to look into my heart and soul, as well as into my culture, to see precisely what was there.

Journal Entry 3/14/89

Things have gone completely crazy . . . everything in this art-life terrain feels up for grabs. I’ve never been more excited. I’m collaborating with Malcolm on what we are calling a performance art sermon. This has been a great experience. Dealing with my whole confused Christian thing. The weird text of performance artist and priest. Vocation. Shamanism. Lesson through parable. The sermon is going to deal with AIDS, the love commandment and social responsibility. St. A’s is a great liberation theology type place. After the service last week Malcolm and I rehearsed on the altar. Making plans. Talking about the big stuff. What we want this experience to be for ourselves and for the parish. What is communion? The kiss of peace? It’s making me dealing with my long suppressed Jesus stuff. Blood and body hey hey hey. Who is that guy up on the cross and what does he have to do with me?
I wanted to at least get on speaking terms with Jesus. This just seemed to make sense. But more important, it seemed to me that I needed to develop this relationship. The pressures of my world were pushing me into experiences of great spiritual challenge. The skinny guy up on the cross hits me stronger now after seeing so many emaciated friends wither away. I.N.R.I. over the cross has been replaced by A.I.D.S. over the hospital bed. The loss of so many friends and lovers to AIDS has pushed and aged me in ways I can’t even begin to understand. The deaths of young men, whose bodies and spirits I had loved as much as my semi-retarded emotional abilities were able, have been an earthquake in the heart zone for me and my generation. Death scares me shitless. I have had to confront it at this early point in my life in a very powerful way. My friends and I have also had to create or rediscover rituals for burying our dead and marking their passing. This has thrown us back to our spiritual upbringing (if any) and meant a new call to recreate our relation to the universe and God/Goddess. For me, this also challenges me again and again with that question from my journal, “Who is that guy up on the cross and what does he have to do with me?”

Journal Entry 2/12/90

My first understanding of this Jesus guy is that he was a carpenter. This always made sense to me because I was always a carpenter, too. It just seemed reasonable to me that there was this dude long ago who made things: tables, chairs, useful things. When the church I went to as a kid was being built, I’d climb all over it with my friends, looking for metal slugs, saving them as treasure, climbing up plaster stairs, hiding in half-built steeples. It was like the holiness in the building was in the construction. The nuts and bolts of it, the nails and wood. I always felt good about the carpenter stuff since it was one of the few boy-type endeavors that I was really good at. That cutting and smoothing and building was a good thing and probably a holy thing—that rang true for me. And so it was good that Jesus was a carpenter.
Jesus and the Queer Performance Artist

and did those things too. I loved tacky biblical movies as a kid. There were those low-angle shots of chips of wood coming off of the hand planer as Ben Hur comes into sight on his way to the galley slave ships. Religious music, please. We would see Jesus only from behind, offering water to the sexy suffering Charlton Heston.

Later on, Jesus seemed to be much more something out of books. I was more comfortable with books because they were intellectual and appealed to my fat brain. Jesus hanging out with Alyosha Karamazov, trying to understand his brother’s parable about Christ coming back during the Spanish Inquisition and then having to be crucified again by the Grand Inquisitor. Jesus in the bathtub with J. D. Salinger as Franny and Zooey battle about trying to turn Jesus into St. Francis, and then the final realization over the telephone that the fat lady with the big ankles is Jesus. All morality comes down to doing it for the fat lady, offering compassion and love. It was like these books, in my world that was built of such books, were the way to get at this thing. Alyosha and Zooey Glass became boyfriends, moved in together, and tried to make sense of the world.

Now, my hit on the Jesus thing, and the effort to try to get a sense of who he was and what it means now: I get this mostly through Jesus as activist. The ways the mad-dog message of love and social justice within the gospel Señor Jesus preached resonates politically in Central America, or through Gandhi’s Satyagraha or Martin Luther King and the civil rights movement. Jesus as a member of ACT UP. The crucifixion as the ultimate civil disobedience. This guy building chairs. Trying to create a reality where people actually might love one another. Getting ready to go on a game show, offering love to the fat lady in the front row. The Jesuit priests killed in San Salvador. They could have been me and my friends.

I need to short circuit my intellectualizing a little. I need to find the way to be with and comfort the dying, feel the pain in
the world, confront my own fears and faults, listen to my heart and soul. All of us in some way are trying to live up to this big challenge not to treat each other like shit. This is a tall order. And, oh, the sorrow that I feel at the impossiibilty of the task.

So this is where I am now. I have opened up a line of communication with Jesus and even found some part of me that is able to pray. I talk to him. Say hello. I have begun to heal a place inside me that was alienated and adrift from a deep sense of my family and where I come from, these strange northern European Anglo-Saxon tribes finding the way to bring their forest gods into the new religion from the desert. We mark the birth of the man who sacrificed himself for others by bringing a cut tree into our living rooms at solstice time.

And, I am a carpenter. I have felt awe toward certain priests who have given their lives or labor for justice in El Salvador and other places, who display total commitment and faith and a willingness to work toward a world with a little less suffering and a little more compassion. This humbles my own well-meaning gestures. I approach Jesus as a friend and helper. He is someone I meet at an ACT UP action. He is there in the circle with us in my performance art workshop. He is part of the fellowship of my gay friends. I know his lips. He is around to help me find my way through the biggest challenges of understanding my own heart, the pain in my world, the Gospel as a social document, and the love commandment as an ultimate moral yardstick. We must love one another.

Meanwhile, I am still a performance artist. Still a sexualized gay man. Still a political activist working towards making this society start to work for the sick and poor, and to open its arms to diversity. I have found a way to incorporate the part of myself that is Christian into my identity and creative work. I try not to close my heart to feelings of grace, forgiveness, fellowship. The times of the year have become more layered and powerful: the birth of the light at Christmas and the planting and resurrection of Easter. I am part of a community of artists, social workers and political activists who are also Christian.
Jesus and the Queer Performance Artist

I felt that the two performance art sermons with Malcolm were the most controversial works I had done in terms of the community of artists and gay people. There was a strange sense of Why is Tim doing this? This Jesus stuff makes me nervous! I just don’t feel comfortable dealing with this Christian routine! I had a feeling of simultaneous censorship: from the nutso Right—that I should keep my queer mouth shut—and from some people in the secular community of artists and intellectuals, that I should soft pedal the religion thing. Some people seemed to be saying: It’s bad enough if this is moving in your life, but can’t you at least keep quiet about it, or at least have the decency to be a Tibetan Buddhist? Stick to Goddess worship, buddy, or else!

Whew! I know these are real questions. I know there are no easy answers. I am a gay man yet I also am clearly connected to my self as a Christian. I love having sex; I am not monogamous. I believe in the healing power of sex and the role sex can play in creating communion in my body and spirit. It seems like Jesus and his friends were a passionate community of fellowship. Free from macho bullshit and focused on spirit energy. This is very familiar to the fellowships in my life. Jesus was ready to embarrass the idiots who wanted to stone the woman. This is a very important moment for me, the lesson where Jesus tells us to cut each other a little slack. This resonates for me as a gay man. It speaks to my heart as someone who has been vilified and attacked for being who I am. I love men. I love their bodies. I love their souls. I love their collection of characteristics, phobias and geniuses, all that makes them who they are. To be with a man physically is often to know him and value his personhood, and to create a communion and bond.

Journal Entry 10/18/89

In Minneapolis for an Arts Conference. Met a nice boy from Philadelphia who was way cute. He works at one of the artsplaces there. He’s also a performance artist and he’s doing a piece where he cuts down a big tree and then puts it in the gallery. He called it “the ultimate Duchampian ready-made.” He
was sweeter and dearer than this kind of art-school stunt would let on, and I felt a strong love for him. We were good to each other and had a sexy time. So strange: the last two men I’ve slept with (other than the boyfriend, of course): one cutting down a tree, the other the refugee from Peru who works planting trees on Martin Luther King Boulevard. One a boy in a leather jacket smoking cigarettes, the other tie died and recycling, and a faerie. I like them both. I love them both. A graceful and odd circle of styles and upper bodies, penises and souls, wardrobes and lifeforce. Between each other, between them and me. I know my body and spirit better from my time with them. I feel closer to the world with them both in my heart.

The first man I was ever in love with was Jesus. He was sweet. He was strong. He didn’t play football or scream at me and he wore great clothes. This feeling I had for him from a very early age is part of my love for other men. I imagine him as a generous and sensitive lover, ready to give and receive pleasure. I see him there for the other person. Rubbing tired muscles with all those sweet smelling balms and ointments that they keep talking about in the New Testament. My relationship to Jesus is in a direct heartbeat to my gay identity. So for me there is not a contradiction. I feel firmly in line with the spiritual vocation gay men often feel, which has been an enormous influence on the church and toward the shamanic impulse in other spirit journeys.

The man I have loved and lived with longest is not Jesus, but my boyfriend Doug. Like Jesus, Doug is a Jew, a bit of a rabbi, and very much a troublemaker. We have shared the last cataclysmic eight years. His Jewish identity is very strongly defined both culturally and spiritually. Our connection is not challenged by the separation of our faiths. Neither of us excludes other metaphysical influences from our spirit lives, whether it be Jungian therapy, Sri Ramakrishna, Walt Whitman, or Earth worship. Our connection is not through what we don’t share in specific cultural religious practice,
but what we do share: the basic belief in a higher power and something outside ourselves that we can communicate with; that we find the way to honor the universe. It would be difficult if one of us had no kind of spiritual practice or foundation. That would be a conflict, a place with no dialogue. Our spirit journey is so intimate, so much a part of our relationship, that stereotyped ideas about a practicing Jew and Christian not getting along seem absurd. A moment where Doug and I recently waited to hear our HIV test results was an intense example of this. We were in about as existential a spot as I’ve been. Doug covered his head and prayed; I crossed myself and prayed. Our spirits were alive as these two queers called up Jesus/Goddess/Moses and anyone else who might help us at that moment, in that time of trial.

My identity as a spiritual person includes eucharist, zen meditation, sex between men, the Passover ritual, and planting my garden each year. The poetry and almost sexual intimacy of drinking the blood and eating the body of Christ connects me to the congregation, God, and the possibility for magic. The challenge of zazen, to just sit and breathe, tames my mind and craziness. The ritual meal of the Seder helps me understand my own liberation and flights from slavery. The miracle of planting seeds and harvest time tunes me in to the cycles of life and death. My compost heap is another resurrection. All of these are part of savoring the body I am blessed with and the universe I am part of. All challenge me to nurture growing things (including my soul), and to work to care for our world and to ease the pain that exists.

Journal Entry 4/1/90

I have had a certain dream my whole life, or at least as long as I can remember. I am with a bunch of other people. We are connected by a kind of bond, a bond built on a work towards justice. Sometimes it’s like a concentration camp thing, sometimes it’s like that Andreyev novelette The Seven That Were Hanged, about the friends who were rebelling against
the czar and are taken out and hanged in the snow. Often it’s set in Burbank or somewhere like that. The shit has hit the fan and people are being blown away. In this dream in all its forms, we are there about to suffer and die—but there is a feeling of purpose and reason, if nothing else than that we’re trying to understand the world, why there is injustice and pain, finding a way to explain it, adjust, change. . . . I dunno.

I think this has informed in the biggest fattest way my search through all my religious/spiritual/mega-bigtime understanding of the world. Whether it’s the years tuning in to cool Buddha here in my Southern California polyglot spirit heritage, or more and more my vibe on Jesus—teaching, working, forgiving, dying. Why do we do what we do? how do we respond to the horrors of our time? the particulars, the Jesuit priests’ brains smeared on the wall by fascists in El Salvador. . . . Oh God.

I was climbing a mountain when I was about seventeen. I had hiked for about two hundred miles with my brother through the Sierras. We had heard gunshots and screams the night before. It was probably just people fucking around, though we hadn’t seen anybody for days. I got real scared, as scared as I had ever been in my life. I was sure I was going to die. I stayed awake all night in my sleeping bag, waiting for some crazed lunatic types to blow us away after mutilating us or something. Well, it didn’t happen and I finally greeted the day amazed that I was still alive.

My brother and I began to climb again before it was even light. Climbing step by step up a very steep trail up a two-thousand-foot rock face. I was feeling every molecule tingle and tune in to the miracle of being alive, reborn from my night of fear. I was ready for the big resurrection, the big satori, the goods were about to come my way! I was a great big satellite dish tuned in on God. Just send some my direction!

We got to the top of the pass. I expected some major chord epiphany, a brass band of the Virgin of Guadalupe, something. . . . But
there were just more mountains, stretching as far as I could see, twelve-thousand-foot-tall mountains.

I was pissed off. I threw off my pack and began to climb some more, up the sides of this path, throwing rocks down as I climbed almost straight up. My breath exploding, I climbed up another five hundred feet. My brain pounding, almost bursting. Dizzy and angry and wanting, I got to the top and there was a big flat rock. I looked again and saw the mountains, and then saw the mountains, almost passing out. The big ecstasy, the big everything at once. Lying on this flat rock at thirteen thousand feet with Jesus, and Buddha, and the old mountain gods of my tribes of the forests.

Whew! it was all there . . . some kind of wordless thing . . . big voices, big feeling, and my heart getting as full as it has ever gotten, where my living and my dying were at the same time, my works and my death as one, the pain of Christ on the cross and a zillion acts of lovemaking through the ages as one . . . my life now and what is to come, long after my body is feeding somebody’s California poppies. My breath quieted and I ate some peanuts and raisins, then climbed back down, ready to go back to the world.

It is not simple. The chasm that exists in my heart, in our society and between one another, is full of pain. I have experienced this first-hand as I debate crazed neo-nazis during this time of controversy around my performance art works. There are many wounds that need to be healed. The battles around inclusive spiritual practice have pushed and challenged our society for two centuries, over issues of slavery, the women’s movement, civil rights, the war in Vietnam, and now lesbian and gay rights. The closer we can get to ourselves spiritually and find a generous place to include the diversity of our journeys, the sooner the hurts of our time may finally be healed.

For me, even as the hate mongering of the religious Right attacks me and my queerness, I still feel that I have my own relationship to God/Goddess and Nature. I will not let their hatred and racism and bigotry hijack Jesus to their polyester Bible Theme Park or make
PART 4: THE TEACHER

him a hostage in the Wedding at Cana water slide. Because I believe Jesus would be happier in bed with Zooey Glass and Alyosha Karamazov: planning to save the world, staying up late, talking philosophy. Making love.