

## **Spirituality and Homosexual Persons**

Transcript of An Address to a  
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**by Bishop Melvin Wheatley**

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## SPIRITUALITY AND HOMOSEXUAL PERSONS

ADDRESS BY BISHOP MELVIN WHEATLEY

February 28 - March 1, 1986

I vividly recall the first time I ever came out of my own closet publicly to declare Lucille's and my great loves for some beautiful gay men and lesbians in our lives. It was November 16, 1978. The United Methodist Council of Bishops was meeting at the Antlers Hotel in Colorado Springs. Dr. Harvey Potthoff was in the hospital at that time. The reason I know it was because he was supposed to M.C. one of the events at that meeting of the Council of Bishops and was unable to because of hospitalization. But the fact that they were meeting in Colorado Springs made Lucille and me official hosts. Now you know that civilian protocol instructs hosts to be hospitable and accommodating, to answer questions, not to raise them, to solve problems, not create them.

But a closed session, that is an executive session, which is a closed session of the Council of Bishops forced me to offend my host role as defined. The agenda of the session was set by a written question submitted from the board of the Good News Fellowship to the Council of Bishops. The Good News Fellowship in our denomination self defines itself as a forum of scriptural Christianity within The United Methodist Church. Their written question to the Council of Bishops was this: "Does the Council of Bishops still stand solidly in support of the sentence, in the United Methodist Discipline law book that says we consider the practice of homosexuality incompatible with Christian teaching. A number of colleagues began to offer their answers, unanimously in the affirmative. As they spoke, I began to scribble my opposing response on hotel stationary. Granted the floor from shaking pages--I've never been brave--from shaking pages of Antlers Hotel stationary I began to read. The notes were so hot I could still read them as scribble. But I have translated those scribbles to read more distinctly to you precisely as they were scribbled.

A part of the inescapable loneliness of life is that I cannot and do not know your story very well and you cannot and do not know mine. I therefore reluctantly share a most intimate part of my story with you at this time, not primarily as an argument in debate to affect the way you vote, but rather as a sincere effort toward helping you understand the way I'm going to vote. Because my story is what it is, I cannot approach any statement on homosexuality as basically a position on an academic though highly emotionalized subject to be identified as an "it."

I approach any statement on homosexuality as basically an intentional stance toward intimately personal relations involving "THOUs." Whenever I'm asked to permit my name to be attached to any public pronouncement on homosexual persons, for that is what any such statement always is, a pronouncement on real and particular persons, not a pronouncement on a subject, without a face. I do not hear the meanings of that pronouncement transmitted through the editorialized columns of any of our publications. I hear the meanings of that pronouncement transmitted through the eyes and ears of my great medical doctor Bill, who 23 years ago literally saved my life and who before that and after that was one of Lucille's and my most cherished friends.

I hear the meanings of that pronouncement transmitted through the eyes and ears of that superb pipe organist and highly and respected accompanist for an international concertizer whose name every one of you would recognize, Roy, who is another of Lucille's and my most cherished friends. I hear the meanings of that pronouncement transmitted through the eyes and ears of that midwest United Methodist parsonage p.k. (preacher's kid), Rhea, who in personal charm, intellectual perception and spiritual endowment is another Georgia Harkness, and who is one of Lucille's and my most cherished

friends as well as a pastor in the system of Metropolitan churches. I hear the meanings of that pronouncement transmitted through the eyes and ears of Lucille's and my beloved son, John, who from the earliest months of his life to these moments has convinced us that we were providentially guided in giving him the name associated with the beloved disciple. Why do I hear the meanings of any public pronouncement on homosexual persons through the eyes and ears of these persons?

For one reason, because all four have in common same sex rather than other sex orientation. That same sex orientation is perceived by all of them not as something they have learned and practiced like piano playing, but as something they are. Something they recognize and affirm like thumbprints and skin color.

For a second reason that is substantive for me, I hear the pronouncement of support for the 1976 Discipline wording on homosexuality through their eyes and ears. Because all four of them and many of the millions they symbolize would read from our statement one clearly intended meaning. That in the judgment of the Council of Bishops, they as homosexual persons, are automatically eliminated from eligibility as authentic Christians.

But for a third reason I see and hear through their eyes and ears, because in my judgment and in Lucille's, not necessarily in their own, the total life of each one of the four is set against the criteria of the gifts and graces and fruits of the spirit delineated in our New Testament. Indeed it gets the criterion of a life motivated and predated by Agape love. Each one of them appears to me and to Lucille to be as close to, authentic Christian living as we would dare perceive ourselves to be.

This part of my story, experientially received and recorded, radically affects the way I hear the proposal before us. To reaffirm the 1976 Discipline judgmentally rejecting wording on homosexuality. It's words sound brave and strong and all but believable when addressed to a highly emotional and crassly exploited subject. Yet the same words strike me as naive, harsh and categorically false, when addressed to the Bills, the Roys, the Rheas, and Johns of my day experience. Therefore, not only is it impossible for me to consent to add my name to any such public pronouncement as here proposed, but also it is imperative for me out of my own sense of integrity to insist that any such public pronouncement carry the unmistakable message that the vote that lost it was not unanimous.

Seven and one-half years later my dialogue with you tonight carries essentially the same message. What we confer about is not an "it" but a cluster of vows, not an emotionally charged subject to be hotly debated, but warmly personal and relational realities to be respectfully shared, experientially informed and reformed. A few of those relational realities need to be noted even as we begin this gathering, but we still do not know each others stories very well, do we? Even though we've been together, some of us, most of the time, since noon. But in many matters of critical importance to each one of us, we are all but total strangers, but also that as various as our individual journeys have been we arrived here tonight sharing one reality in common. This is not the first dialogue we have had as gay and lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual persons. We have been in daily dialogue all our lives. Now to be sure, that dialogue, at least until the Stonewall break out of gays in 1969, was almost totally unconscious and almost always intentionally anonymous. We conversed in unspoken assumptions and with kneejerk responses, in whispered insinuations, or veiled identifications through unexamined myths and stereotypings or out of cruel closets. Since Stonewall, more and more of the dialogue has been forced to the level of consciousness and that to many is an offense in itself. Cities, do I have to tell you here in Lincoln, have voted on civil rights.

Church denominations have passed resolutions and enacted legislation and all United Methodists may now take the position of confession. But most of the consciousness has still been raised only to the level of negatively charged debate over a subject without a face. Yet how powerfully and how spiritually destructive such "I-it" dialogue has been and continues to be. How else do you explain Martha's letter to me? Three and a half pages, neatly written, lucidly articulated, warmly affirming of Lucille and me even identifying some of the reasons for her sympathy. "I have read the venomous letters that flood the papers of our denominational publications and shuddered at the meanness of spirit that prompted that." But then she goes on and note, the "I-it" language. "But I did not know until a few days ago that the issue would strike our own family. Our daughter in her early twenties told us that she is gay. We are struggling together to understand her, ourselves and the future." And then, she goes on for a page and a half telling what a wonderful person that daughter is, or at least has been. She also says, "I am writing partly for the need to talk to someone." And then she goes on, and how many of our groups have run on this today, "we do feel very abandoned by the Church, both as a denomination and its local incarnation. We dare not confide in our minister or in any members of our congregation in this our time of greatest need." And having identified her desperate need to dialogue, and writing three and a half pages to open up the possibility, abruptly she closes out the letter admitting that even talking about it she becomes too fear-filled to continue the dialogue. And so she signs just her first name, Martha. And though she enclosed one envelope in another envelope, nowhere did she supply a return address.

Again, except on the basis of the incredibly powerful but tragically destructive "I-it" dialogue that has been going on in all of us, about all of us, all the while, how do you explain Dave's story to Lucille about a gay man with advanced age with whom Dave has been working in Denver. Before Christmas, the United Methodist preacher father and mother of the patient sent word to their son in Denver that they wanted him to travel the 1,000 plus miles to the southeast part of our country to spend his last days at home with them. But on two conditions, first, he was to tell no one that he was gay, and second, he was to call his illness something other than AIDS. On the basis of that conditional invitation the patient is opting to spend his last days in Denver supported by Dave and other friends who affirm him as he honest to God is and who he is rather than to rejoin his parents at the price of denying his true identity.

But now, join me, if you will, in thanking God for the positive readout that this same relational reality has at least potentially. If predominately fear-filled and negative "I-it" dialogue about a subject without a face continues to be powerful to keep mother Martha in her closet and a gay p.k.'s parents apart from their dying son, intentionally open and honest "I-Thou" dialogue among us has real and particular gay and lesbian, bisexual and heterosexual persons is powerful enough to light up lives and let the face of God shine through.

Martin Buber said it would be so. In every true meeting of the "I" and the "Thou," there is "The Thou." An eighty year old member of Phillips United Methodist Church experienced what Martin Buber promised. In a letter to her pastor which he published in their church mailing, she testified:

Dear Bill: I'm writing this letter to you but you are more than welcome to use any part of it. I have not attended any of the classes on homosexuality that our church has been having (a series of six) because I have been prejudiced. I have, without reading or understanding, leaning on Scripture, believe that homosexuality was a sin. This morning I decided to hear what Bishop Wheatley had to say. I am very glad I went to the class. My mind raced on and on as the Bishop spoke and I used my usual mental rebuttals. However when Carol spoke, Carol you remember, was the lesbian woman who came with Bishop and Mrs. Wheatley. When Carol spoke God pulled out the cotton from my ears and I heard a human being, a child of God speak. I am now questioning why one group of

people must be labeled before being understood. I am guilty along with many others. I'm not proud of this and I pray that I will be willing to listen and to learn.

This past November, Lucille and I were attending the monthly meeting of PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. During the rap sessions, I was in a group of 14 persons. Five of the 14 were from the same family. The father, the mother, two sisters, and a son. How come? And why did they stay in the same group? They explained, four of them were there were tell how much they, as heterosexual persons, had learned and were still learning from their gay son and brother and how dearly they loved him before they knew he was gay and how dearly they loved him now that they knew he was gay. The gay son and brother wanted to stay in that same group to tell everybody how open and loving his family had been to him. Two further details about the family of five. Their ethnic heritage was Hispanic, and second, and I discovered I still have some stereotyping that needs shattering, the father of the family had just retired from 18 years as a ranking officer in the Marine Corps.

These happy stories highlight a common denominator I'm ready to nominate as the indispensable dynamic and any true meaning of the I and Thou and it's elemental to many of you people so forgive by underscoring it.

The eighty year old member of Phillips church upon hearing Carol presented as Lesbian, did not from that one word label presume instantly thereafter and therefore to know any thing and everything else about Carol that could possibly matter. They let Carol, or she the member of Phillips Church, let Carol tell her who Carol was. And as she put it, "God pulled out the cotton from my ears and I heard a human being, a child of God speak." When son and brother in the Hispanic family told them he was gay, they did not take that new bit of information about their son and with it cancel out everything of value and significant meaning to them that they had learned about him over accumulated years. They let him tell them what they knew he knew and what he knew he knew much more about than did they. And that is what it means and how it feels to be gay.

As I understand the commitment of this conference and as Ben reinforced it again this morning and this evening. That quality of the true meaning of the I and Thou is the kind of dialogue we are about. That being the case, I feel the need to note one other relational reality. Any true meetings of the I and the Thou in which The Thou is present, are as strenuous as they are rewarding. A revelatory signal came through to me this year as an answer to another persistent wonderment of mine specifically related to what we're dealing with here. That wonderment, why do our efforts to increase true meeting between gay and lesbian, bisexual, and homosexual persons so often elicit such volatile outbursts? I have an answer I am willing to try. I shared some of it with the group I was with this afternoon. My answer that I venture is because we cannot deal with homosexuality, we cannot meet as gay and lesbian and bisexual and homosexual persons without turning loose inevitably our meetings with four other dynamically difficult aspects of our spirituality. Each of which of these--did I say four?--five other, each of these five being as tough a meeting as any other we have, yet all five of them being decisively determinative. As to our spiritual formation or reformation and what are those meetings? Again, your groups talked about most of them this afternoon in one shape or another. Our meetings with our own sexuality, our meetings with otherness, our meetings with change not the desire to change, the necessity to change, our meetings with burnout, or what the Scriptures refer to as weariness and well-doing or what I sometimes refer to as civilian combat fatigue and then that other meeting that has been dramatically introduced with the entrance of AIDS catastrophically in many ways upon our scene, our meeting with death, with our own creaturehood, our finitude, our mortality. Now obviously each of these meetings deserves at the least a full weekend workshop all its own and as I labored over this Lucille came to the conclusion I was going to take that much time.

But what I do want to try to report to you to encourage on-going dialogue--hopefully I'll leave enough time for some of it right here--are a few of the ways my heterosexual meetings with these realities have been decisively nudged and nurtured, informed and transformed by on-going dialogue with you who are gay and lesbian and bisexual persons.

Start with the matter of sexuality: The on-going insistence in many places of making what is an over-exaggerated distinction between being homosexual and behaving as a homosexual is one of the points at which my understanding of sexuality has been informed and transformed.

Particularly to two outlooks on sexuality. But my sexuality is much more a "Thou" I am, than it is an "it" I do. And second, my approximation of wholeness as a human being is inseparable from whatever I do with whoever I sexually am.

Now, out in California you wouldn't be so gross here to do this or where you come from, but out in California the "I-it" mode of meeting sexuality is kept explicitly before us all the time on the highways, bumper stickers, all sizes and shapes, insist upon telling us who does it better, cowboys or bowlers, and in which model pickup it can be done best. That would be gross if it weren't so naive. Sexuality is not an "it," either to do or don't. Sexuality is a "Thou" to be, a mysterious given of our creaturehood. One of God's words of ongoing creation, made flesh in us. It's meanings are experienced in a grip as well as in the groin. In sacrificial caring for one another, as well as genital excitement by another. James Nelson keeps trying to remind us, sexuality is our embodied mode of being in the world as male and female. And, also, I would add for emphasis, yes, and as masculine and feminine persons as well. With all our incredibly individualized gender differentiations, genetically programmed and/or developmentally patterned. And the reason I underscore this is because I'm convinced as many of you would be, I'm sure, that the rapidly changing masculine/feminine stereotyping that has remained so static for so long, the changing in role expectations and aspirations for masculine as well as feminine persons, that this is the radical sexual revolution on in our time. The most radical sexual revolution, of this period will be recorded in history, not as a genital revolution, but as a gender revolution.

In any case, sexuality, like so many other gifts we receive, once unwrapped proves to be a do-it-yourself kit. It comes custom packaged for each unique one of us. Awaiting our responsible actualization of its individualized potential. See how being and behaving have become inseparable. I am a self-avowed, practicing heterosexual male. I thought of writing a book on true confessions of a self-avowed, practicing heterosexual male. Is my heterosexuality a sign of righteousness, an accomplishment of some kind on my part? Of course not. I had nothing whatsoever to do with my being heterosexual. My sexual orientation is a mysterious given communicated through an exceedingly complex set of chemical, biological, chromosomal, hormonal, environmental, developmental factors outside my control. In God language, if you prefer that, my heterosexuality is a gift of God's grace. Neither a virtue nor a sin. What I do with my heterosexuality however, is my personal, moral and spiritual responsibility. My behavior as a heterosexual man, therefore, may be sinful, brutal, exploitive, selfish, promiscuous, irresponsible. My behavior on the other hand may be beautiful, tender, considerate, loyal, other centered, profound.

Some of you gay and lesbian colleagues and others have shared precisely the same self understanding of your own sexuality. Is your homosexuality a sign of righteousness, an accomplishment of some kind on your part? Of course not. You had nothing whatsoever to do with being homosexual. Your sexual orientation is a mysterious given, communicated through an exceedingly complex set of chemical, biological, chromosomal, hormonal, environmental, developmental factors outside your control. In God language, your gayness is a gift of God's grace.

Neither a virtue nor a sin. What you do with your sexual orientation, however, you readily acknowledge to be your personal, moral, and spiritual responsibility. Your behavior as homosexual persons may therefore be sinful, brutal, exploitive, selfish, promiscuous, irresponsible, superficial. Your behavior on the other hand may be beautiful, tender, considerate, loyal, other centered, responsible, profound. Just how beautiful and loyal, I have not told you gays and lesbians, you gays and lesbians have told me.

A letter from Hollywood, California: This one dated January 29, 1982.

Dear Dr. Wheatley, I just finished reading the article in the current New Yorker about the Julian Rush case and your sympathetic handling of it. During the 50's with my mother I was a regular attendant of your Church in Westwood. And if "preacher" may have such a thing, a true fan. I probably would never have admitted to you my own homosexuality but I must have felt instinctively that had an occasion arisen for me to do so, I would have had a warm and understanding reception. I have just celebrated my 81st birthday. And my 55th year of living with the same friend who is 78. I doubt whether many marriages have been happier. Congratulations on your understanding.

And there followed the name of a man that would be easily recognized by most of the people in the entertainment world who have been there over the span of years anywhere close to his span of years.

The next communication that I received before *The Color Purple* was either Alice Walker's beautiful book or the recent movie that many of us have seen. It says, and you'll get the date, "you're cordially invited to join us for cocktails to celebrate our 20th anniversary. Thursday, December 31, 1981, three to six, 1235 Decatur Street, Betty Caldwell, Nicky Kirby" and the letter comes from New Orleans. And you heard the date. That means that this year Nicky and Betty will be celebrating their 25th anniversary. And this time next weekend, we will be in Betty and Nicky's home in the French Quarter of New Orleans helping them get ready for their 25th celebration.

But following show and tell comes confession time. It would be tempting to let this letter and this invitation establish in your mind that openness to otherness has always been an automatic attitude for Mel Wheatley. But Mel Wheatley knows better.

Indeed, three summers ago Lucille and I were asked by the Rocky Mountain and Yellowstone Conference Cabinets to share parts of our spiritual journeys with them, in our final retreats with them. Preparing for that sharing forced up into consciousness a lot of material I'd apparently repressed because I began to recall with vivid awareness the collision course formation of my spirit to which I had been exposed as a child on youth. As with many of you, I grew up heartily singing and warmly believing "Jesus loves me, this I know, for the Bible tells me so." Thus I experienced the very personal half of the good news of the Gospel. In Wesley's words, the spirit of God witnessed directly to my spirit that I was a beloved child of God. But I now thank God that I also grew up singing another song which introduced me to the other half of the Gospel, the social, the communal, the universal half. "Jesus loves the little children, all the children of the world, red and yellow, black and white, all are precious in his sight. Jesus loves the little children of the world." Well, the same Jesus who taught me how much God loves me, also was teaching me that I was not God's only or necessarily favorite child. God loves all the children of the world. Each one as much as anyone. Thus again in Wesley's words, I rejoice because the sense of God's love to me hath by the same spirit, brought me to love God and to love for God's sake every child of creation, every soul that God had made. So it was my Sunday School songs had me off running toward openness to others. But at precisely the same time I was learning from Jesus and from my Wesleyan heritage when I prayed to say "our," I was being very carefully and powerfully taught by

other forces shaping my spirit to be coldly excluding rather than warmly including in my living and my loving.

Quite specifically, though quite unconsciously, I was being systematically formed into a racist white, a sexist male, a narrow-minded Methodist Episcopalian, and I grew up in Denton, Maryland in the late 20s and 30s and we had back there, who was it--try and remember it, the Methodist Protestant group of the union back in those days, we had Methodist Protestant Church and the Methodist Episcopal Church (north of God) in Denton, Maryland, and it really is no exaggeration to say that in those days, in the late 20s and the early 30s when a Methodist Episcopalian married a Methodist Protestant, that was considered an interfaith marriage. But I was being socialized to be a parochial Protestant.

We talked about parochial Roman Catholics, but I was being socialized to be a parochial Protestant, an arrogant imperialistic Christian, an elitist male member of the clergy--I was a p.k.--a provincial eastern shoreman of Maryland, a nationalistic, often militaristic American, a materialistic, too often greedy, and sometimes even wasteful consumer of the earth's limited resources, a crooked straight, and that is a heterosexist who had no notion whatsoever that there was even another stance to take toward a person of same sex orientation and lifestyle, then to be judgmentally rejecting at best or punitively persecuting at worst and the latest in my sequence of consciousness raisings many of you have just recently begun to catch on to, I was socialized into being a person proud to have no handicapping conditions at all, except what may well be the greatest handicapping condition at all, and that is insensitivity to and toward persons who do have handicapping conditions.

In other words, in spite of the Sunday School songs I had learned, I was being carefully taught to meet every other as an "it," to identify differences as inferiorities, and to feel good enough only when I could feel better than. As a consequence most of my older youth had to be spent and as each new day of my adulthood continues to need to be spent in daily re-formations of my spirit. In permitting either one set or the other of these contradictory indoctrinations to dilute or to prevail over the other set. My only justification in taking this much time to give you the details of my journey is the workable, I think viable assumption that with multiple differences in detail to be sure, your journey parallels mine at many, many points. Take the time to go back and try to recover the variables in your socialization and I would bet you will find that you have been torn by indoctrinations that are so contradictory as to be on an absolute collision course. So each new day each of us tilts a little bit more either toward the secularizing of our religion or the sacralizing of our relationships. Either toward the trivializing of God into a heterosexual idol or a denominational chaplain, or toward permitting the same Jesus through whom we learn how much God loves the world also to instruct us on how much of the world God loves--all of it, including all of its creation, and all of its creatures.

Thirty five years ago J.B. Phillips' *Letters to Young Churches* came just at the right time to help me tilt a little bit more toward openness to others. In his translation of the first letter to Corinth, to the Church of Corinth, chapter 12, he spoke to my condition. I have updated his translation from 35 years ago to today, but not changed the essence of it.

Persons have different gifts, but it is the same spirit who gives them. There are different ways of serving God but it is the same God who is served. God works through different persons in different ways but it is the same God who achieves creation's purposes through them all. All persons are given their gifts by the spirit that they may make the most of them.



Another very familiar question in all liberation movements: "What do they want from us?" And the answer tilts what is in the back of the mind of the one who asked the question. What they really want is not their place, but our place. They want to be in the position of the oppressor and they want to take our place from them and put us in their place.

I have an experience that as what you gay and lesbian and bisexual persons are after. Julian Rush came much closer, I think, to stating basically what it is you want, not the place of the oppressor but in his musical "The Man Who Can Save the Day," it is the homosexual among the disciples who says,

I never asked to be the way that I am at all. And I cannot recall a time when I was not this way so why do people have to put me down and say that I am as bad as murderers and rapists? I feel so misjudged, it's sad, it's sad God. I don't like this rejection, but if I am to be, then please God, let me find a place, a place that's just for me, a quiet place, a loving place, my special place.

Robert Frost's "Death of a Hired Man" has a poignantly powerful passage which is one of my favorites, in which that special place is vividly imaged and amplified. Silas, the old shiftless and proud hired man has returned once more, as he says, to work for Warren. But Warren's wife knows better. Warren, she says, "Silas has come home to die." Image sound familiar? Warren mocks her gently, arguing that Silas in that case if he's come home to die, should be going to his blood brother's place, a mere 13 miles down the road. But Mary insists, "Yes, but what else but home? It all depends on what you mean by home, Silas." Warren's mocking definition then is offered first: "But home is where when you have to go there they have to take you in." To which, Mary, with reproving mildness replies, "I should have called home rather, the place you somehow happen to deserve."

Rosemary Curopat--this is her professional card--is the Director of Administration and Finance of the National Gay Task Force, left a very lucrative position in order to take this position in which she has to raise every cent she receives and yet do the work of the gay task force as well.

In the name of civil rights, Rosemary is lobbying to effect legal guarantees that whenever gays and lesbians knock on doors of schools and businesses, of organizations and institutions, seeking their special place which they have legitimate claims to as citizens, as human beings, as co-creators with God who has provided that kind of special place for them in the creation plan, that the persons on the other side of those doors will have to take them in. But an impressive thing happened, as this articulate activist, courageous and brilliant lobbyist, began to make her pitch for pledges for the work of the National Gay Task Force, to those of us who were present in Atlanta, Georgia, last October who were attending the convention of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. Quietly, Rosemary paused, then in a mellow mood, she began to confess, as hard as she was working for and as much as she wanted gay rights, and she was going to keep on working for gay rights, there was one thing she wanted even more: Sometime to get up in front of a group of parents and friends of lesbians and gays and to look out and see her own mother proudly sitting there.

All of us need our special place, but not just by works, by grace! A cluster of relating we happen to deserve from which cluster we receive high and steady regard, not because of any "it" we have or of any "it" even that we do, but just because of who we are: ourselves.

Progress toward that special place even by works much less by grace seems so, so slow in coming but burnout, civilian combat fatigue, weariness in well-doing constantly threatens the sturdiest among us. Part of that problem, all of you know, is that by the time gays made their move in 1969, to claim their special places many of us, many of you, gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons as well as heterosexual persons were already tired from working for the special places that properly belong to blacks and

Hispanics, Jews and Japanese, original Americans and women. And so our mood was "not another cause! Not more consciousness raising! Who dares ask for that much more?"

I don't know about you, but I have various ways when that weariness comes on me of waiting upon God to renew my strength, one of them is to meditate on the first stanza of a favorite hymn of mine, which was deleted--I happen to think quite tragically from our United Methodist Hymnal, just when it should have become our marching song for the second half of this century--"Be Strong, We Are Not Here To Play, to Dream, to Drift, we have hard work to do and loads to lift. Shun not the struggle, face it. 'Tis God's gift."

Surely this Lenten season ought to help us rediscover by way of the cross that whenever we have an I-Thou meeting with struggle, there is The Thou.

That remembrance that the struggle is God's gift turns me on to living by some lines of one of my favorite mentors, Banera Overstreet. "You say the little efforts that I make will do no good, they never will prevail to tip the hovering scale where justice hangs in balance. I'm not sure I ever really thought they would, but I am prejudiced beyond debate in favor of my right to choose which side shall feel the stubborn ounces of my weight." And Banera Overstreet called those lines the importance of doing something when you can't do everything.

Of course, for as we have said over and over again, our calling is not to be successful, but to be faithful. Or as Abraham Heschel puts it beautifully in a copy of a book, another of Lucille's and my favorite mentors, Harvey Potthoff, sent to us of Abraham Heschel's. Heschel says, "Our destiny is not to accomplish, but to contribute." But the pilot light I can most assuredly press to rekindle my flickering flame is not any of these but it's particular gays and lesbians with very special names and faces.

Those of you and those whom many of you represent, whom Lucille and I have assigned, to whom we have assigned permanently reserved seats in the cheering sections of our souls. But just as many, were getting our second wind, indeed just as a few signs of accelerated change in a right direction began to appear, so did AIDS. And as the workshop on AIDS under B.J. examined this afternoon, that casts much more than a pall over the gay male population. It reduced ranks with death, it has dumped an overload of grief work to be done, it further complicated already intimately intricate relationships, it depleted limited resources, but what I am wanting to highlight here that is pertinent to this point is that for those who have AIDS, it is a disease, it's known as a disease of vulnerability, right? The fact that the intricate immune system is destroyed allowing otherwise non-threatening diseases to attack at will. What I'm saying is that for us who do not have it and who are least likely to get it, AIDS is also a disease of vulnerability. Its present incurability offends our pride, our hubris, but also even worse, it destroys our defenses. It penetrates the intricate immune system of the mind we have carefully constructed to block out all honest-to-God meeting with our own mortality.

As some of you know, without the forcing of AIDS, Lucille and I recently dealt with death in an I-Thou, rather than an I-it meeting. We dealt with it not as an "it" that was happening to us, but as a Thou in which we and one of our most cherished loved ones were happening. Yet out of that experience we would be dishonest not to report to you that we have a much fresher appreciation for the attractiveness of our elaborate systems of deception about death than we ever had before. And yet because we found our I-Thou meeting with it, many profound ways and rewarding as it was strenuous, we would not go back.

Two years ago, next month, we stood on the beach of Venice, California. Our oldest son, Paul, was along with us, along with Paul's wife Susan. Our fourteen year-old grandson Ben was there with his

mother Jane. Emily, John's dog was also there. But John was not there with us in the usual sense. Indeed, we were there because John has asked us to go there when he died. We were there because John, almost daily for a dozen years on late afternoons, come sunset, would walk there on the Pacific beach with Emily. John had died the week before. He had told his mother that rather than be buried, he wanted to feel free to dance on the beach. So at 6:11 p.m., we were there, standing, sitting, kneeling, as the other member of our family party, John's committed and devoted companion of the past six and a half years, Jim, walked into the water, silhouetted against the setting sun, and scattered John's ashes into the restless surf. What impressed me then, and impresses me still, is how consistently John managed true meetings with all creation and all creatures. This, in spite of the fact, that from his birth, until his death, John's journey always seemed to be as a member of a minority, moving among and/or against the majority. To borrow David Tracey's great phrase, "Journeying as one who is different, having to resist the deadening rule of the same."

In our immediate family, John was the artist, born into a cluster of male sports fans--athletes--to eat his breakfast Wheaties surrounded by athletes. And John dared not only to claim but also to share his own special vision. I could walk with him along the beach above Malibu scarcely aware of the cliffs. But as a six-year old, John would pull me over to see the crystals and the crevices of the cliffs. At nine years of age he was diagnosed as a juvenile diabetic. Many of his best friends never knew. He wasn't ashamed of it and he knew he must tell his teachers. When queried by his mother once as to whether he had done that by the second week of school, he replied, "No, she still thinks I'm normal." He was well along in the driving practice sessions for high school driver's education, when he was called into the office to be told he must drop out because he was "a diabetic." He continued, none-the-less as a Uni-High yell leader with soul. His oldest brother said John was the best male dancer he had ever seen in his life, then his brother, by the way, has played with a jazz combos--whatever the update label should be for years and years--but he continued as a yell leader, John did, heartily cheering the others on. His hair was shoulder length during the 6Os. The other church members threatened to sit behind him with sissors some Sunday...did not keep him from his chosen place in the pews.

Fourteen years ago John shared with us about his sexuality, as naturally same sex for him as other sex is for us. John's Christmas card that year was a photo of him leaning against the wall on which had been inscribed the words, "Your spirit is free." Thanks to the spirit that sets free, John's spirit remained free and his ready wit undaunted even upon receiving the heavy news three years ago this month that a biopsy showed milignant melanoma. As we left the surgeon's office along with Jim and John, John said, "He didn't tell me what I need to know." "Am I going to get to see Star Wars III or not?" John told us that he was not afraid to die, he was not afraid of death, but that he did hate pain and goodbyes. He suffered much of both. After an excruciatingly painful lung tap one afternoon, his words to his sister-in-law who was waiting were: "I'm sorry it took so long." One of his most painful goodbyes came a few weeks before he died. On the day he knew he must go to the Montessori school where he had taught for ten years and tell the children that he would not be back any more. One of his little pupils had brought an envelope to school after his first hospitalization, with a dollar and 36 cents in coins taped inside, and a note the mother had written for the child explaining, that the child had been saving the money for a trip to Disneyland but that she wanted Mr. Wheatley to have it for his medical costs. A cousin of his, who also teaches pre-school children wrote: "I would love to have seen John work with children. I'm sure that he was as magical with them as he was with all his young cousins. He could make us laugh until my sides ached. It always gave me a good feeling to be with him. That warm, funny, caring cousin of mine."

On my next to last visit to his school, we were living in Denver then, we did not go for lunch at a nearby restaurant as we sometimes did. John had brought lunch and wanted me to go with him to a

particular spot to eat it. He had something special to show me. It was an unlikely corner for the breaking of bread, I assure you, in West Los Angeles, on Santa Monica Boulevard, at a spot heavy with traffic, bordered by smog, stunted trees, and a piece of wall on which to sit under the trees, and a worn-out strip of sod beneath them. When we arrived at the spot, John rattled the paper bag extracting a sandwich, sparrows fluttered down to the pavement where John was standing. He scattered crumbs from the sandwich among them. After a few moments he whispered to me, "There it is," and pointing at it, "see that sparrow over there with its head cocked to the side, it has to do that to pick up the crumbs. It's beak isn't straight like the others. I move the others away to make sure it gets its share." So I keep remembering, knowing for sure, without John's help, I might never even have noticed the ninety and nine. With John's help, I distinctly saw the one with the crooked beak.

John almost died on Tuesday before his final breath came on Wednesday. We were in his favorite room at Paul and Susan's home on the same piece of property as his and John's home right next door. His lungs were so filled with fluid that to breath at all was an ordeal. Should we order an ambulance and go to emergency for one more lung tap? John asked, would it be all right if he opted not to go? He knew, we knew, what that option meant. And we supported his decision. Breathing became so difficult. Intervals of suffocation came with frightening frequency. We agonized with him. In the midst of this, Jim had rushed out and was returning now with a tank of oxygen, but instead of helping, the mask, when applied, seemed to cut off breathing completely. We were helpless. Suspended animation seemed to be turning into death. Then abruptly, John's inhalation broke through. He opened his beautiful eyes, smiled radiantly, and in a clear voice this is what he said: "There's so much love in this room." And so it happened, in our true I-Thou meeting with death, The Thou was there. But it was John who called The Thou by name. So much love. Shalom and Amen.

# SPIRITUALITY AND HOMOSEXUAL PERSONS

A Dialog Conference

February 28-March 1, 1986

Lincoln, Nebraska

Interchurch Ministries of  
215 Centennial Mall South  
Lincoln, NE 68508

## SPIRITUALITY AND HOMOSEXUAL PERSONS

A Dialog Conference

February 28 - March 1, 1986

### PURPOSE

The spiritual journeys of gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians have dimensions and experiences that can enrich and deepen the church's understanding of faith, sexuality, and being human. It is hoped that this Conference will contribute to an important dialog in a profoundly meaningful way.

This Conference is intended to facilitate exploration of spiritual dimensions of homosexual experience and dialog among:

- gay, lesbian, and bisexual Christians
- other church members and leadership (clergy and lay)
- other spiritual searchers and seekers.

### SPONSORSHIP

Joint Strategy Action Team on Ministry with Homosexual  
Persons and their Families  
Nebraska Conference United Church of Christ Shalom on Earth  
Committee  
Nebraska Conference United Methodist Board of Church and Society  
Community of Grace, Lincoln  
Lutheran Metropolitan Ministries, Omaha  
Ministry in Human Sexuality, Lincoln  
Nebraska Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian/Gay Concerns

### KEYNOTE SPEAKER

Bishop Melvin Wheatley is a retired United Methodist bishop presently living in Laguna Hills, California. He served the Denver Area during 1980-84 and reappointed a gay minister after his coming out in the Boulder church. He has been a sensitive and outspoken witness for gay and lesbian Christians.

LOCATION: Unitarian Church, 6300 A Street, Lincoln, Nebraska

COST: Advance Registration \$20.00 (At the Door \$25.00)  
Students \$10.00

## SCHEDULE

Friday, February 28, 1986

12:45 Early Registration  
1:00 Welcome  
1:15 Workshops

\*Reconciling Congregations: A program of Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian/Gay Concerns, this concept is useful to those who want to encourage local churches to openly welcome gays and lesbians. Leaders: Mark Bowman and Beth Richardson.

\*Biblical/Theological Understandings: Biblical scholarship has increased our understanding of the contexts of the writings. A panel and discussion of Biblical and theological issues. Moderator: Ben Roe.

\*Counseling Issues: Gay and lesbian clients have some unique challenges and needs. A panel of counselors who work with gay and lesbian persons explore these issues.

\*The Church and AIDS: The church is in a unique place to be in ministry. An exploration of ways the church can be involved. Leader: B. J. Stiles.  
(Evening Meal on Your Own)

6:30 Registration, Social Hour and Hospitality  
7:30 Keynote Session, Questions & Discussion  
Bishop Wheatley

9:30 Worship  
10:30 Field Trips

Saturday, March 1, 1986

8:00 Worship  
9:00 Workshops

\*Family Issues: Many more besides the gay/ lesbian person are affected. Parents and friends discuss providing support. Leaders: Lucille Wheatley and Jean Durgin-Clinchard.

\*Coming Out/Going Out?: Does coming out in the church have to mean going out of the church? An exploration of coming out and homophobia in the church. Leader: Morris Floyd.

\*The Church and AIDS

\*Biblical/Theological Understandings

12:00 Lunch & Speaker  
1:30 Workshops

\*Reconciling Congregations

\*Counseling Issues

\*Family Issues

\*Coming Out/Going Out?

4:30 Wrap-up

5:00 Worship--Community of Grace

### OTHER LEADERSHIP:

Lucille Wheatley, along with her husband, has been a consistent supporter of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays.

B. J. Stiles is a free lance writer from Washington, D.C., who works with the AIDS Medical Foundation, and shares concern and hope for churches' involvement in AIDS ministry.

Morris Floyd is a consultant and former director of Lesbian and Gay Community Services of Minneapolis. He is one of United Methodist Affirmation's spokespersons, and is working with churches and other institutions on homophobia.

Beth Richardson, from Nashville, and Mark Bowman, from Washington, D.C., are national coordinators of the "Reconciling Congregations" program of Affirmation: United Methodists for Lesbian/Gay Concerns.

Ben Roe is Executive Director of Ministry in Human Sexuality in Lincoln, and is a United Methodist minister.

Jean Durgin-Clinchard of Lincoln is chair of Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays--Cornhusker.