

# **Releasing the Tiger: Queering Spiritual Direction**

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This paper explores some ways in which LGBTQ+ people contribute to our changing experience of God and reveal paths of enriching spiritual transformation. For sexual and gender identities have been at the heart of some significant recent features of both spiritual growth and conflict. From the late 1960s,<sup>1</sup> lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning (LGBTQ)<sup>2</sup>, or queer<sup>3</sup> people have formed increasingly effective social and political movements, transforming many cultural, legal and philosophical norms across the world. For many, this has also involved deliberate or unconscious spiritual expression. Progress has however been uneven, across time and space, and traditional religious formations and spiritual norms have been particular obstacles. Differing, and sometimes conflicting, conceptions of queer people and their gifts are therefore inevitably present within the spiritual direction space. Deeper exploration of these, and the underlying lived spiritual experience of queer people, is thus vital for the further flourishing of all involved. Indeed, whilst aspects may be challenging for some, the authors of this paper affirm that queer spiritual experience and understanding offers gifts which provide renewing insights for spiritual direction practice as a whole. Without unduly entering into wider controversies over sexuality and gender, this paper therefore suggests some life-giving ways to engage. These include exploring aspects of “queer virtues” identified by queer spiritual theologians and the metaphors of “coming out” and “transition” as embodiments of the paschal mystery and healthy, holy, transformation.

## **The Parable of the Tiger Cub**

As a fruitful metaphor for queering spiritual direction, one helpful starting point is the parable

of the tiger-cub. It is similar to the tale of the Ugly Duckling, with some significantly different details. As related by the 19<sup>th</sup> century Hindu mystic Ramakrishnan, and retold by Gerard O'Collins:<sup>4</sup>

There once was an orphaned tiger-cub whose mother was killed by hunters. He was found by a herd of goats and was raised with their young to believe that he too was a goat. One day the goats were out in the jungle, grazing in a clearing, when he was stalked by a great king-tiger. That tiger's roar terrified the goats who all ran off into the surrounding jungle. Suddenly, the tiger cub, who thought he was a goat, found himself all alone in the presence of the king-tiger. At first the tiger cub was afraid and could only bleat and sniff in the green grass. But then he discovered that, though he was afraid, yet he was not afraid – at least not like the others who had run away to hide. The king-tiger looked at the cub and let out a great roar. But all the cub could do in response was to bleat and gambol on the grass. The great tiger, realising then that the cub imagined himself to be a goat, took him by the scruff of the neck and carried him to a pond. On the clear surface of the pond the cub would be able to see that he was like the great tiger. But all the cub did, when he saw their images mirrored side by side, was to bleat, goat-wise, in a questioning and frightened way. So the king-tiger made one last effort to show the cub, who thought he was a goat, what he really was. He put before the cub a piece of meat. At first the cub recoiled from it with horror. Then, coming closer, he tasted it. Suddenly his blood was warmed by it. And the tiger-cub, who thought he was a goat, lifted his head and set the jungle echoing with a mighty roar.

This speaks powerfully to queer experiences of “coming out”. Yet it is also a story for everyone. For each of us is more than we can ever imagine. We are all called to be living transfigurations. This takes us to the heart of queer spirituality, and its potential for renewing spiritual

direction. For queer spirituality calls us to set free the tiger, not only in queer people who have been asked to live as goats, but also, through receiving the gifts of queer spirituality, releasing the tiger more fully in us all.

Vitality, a key difference from the tale of the Ugly Duckling is the experience of eating in the tiger-cub parable. It is not enough for the tiger-cub to see their reflection in water. The truly transforming event is the sacramental act of entering into their being, living into who they truly are. The resonance with the spiritual journey is strong. Like Nicodemus,<sup>5</sup> we may come to the light, to the Christ in and for us. Yet we may remain in the darkness, trapped by our own fears and pre-constructed being. Only when we come out *into* the light, when we feed upon the Christ in and with us, when we enter into our becoming: only then are we set free. This is similar to the typical experience of coming out for queer people. Can we then grasp, and integrate, such queer mystery into spirituality as a whole?

### **Releasing the Tiger**

Among the continuing obstacles of many traditional religious approaches to queer people are “outside-in” trajectories of understanding. Sexually and gender diverse people are still all too often problematised, even demonised. Even among allies, there is also a tendency not to learn from queer experiences themselves but to interpret from outside. Within spiritual direction, it is therefore important not only to seek to create “safe space”. We also need to nurture spiritual accompaniment which allows opportunities of taking queer experiences seriously as integral and revelatory. The tiger metaphor is instructive. It may be uncomfortable to some to have such animals in the human jungle. Yet we/they too, as the Psalmist put it, are “fearfully and wonderfully made”.<sup>6</sup> To much conventional

religion, they/we may seem to present, in Blake's words, as "burning bright, in the forests of the night". However we/they also reveal the "fire" and "framing" of the divine.<sup>7</sup> Sadly, queer people also have to spend excessive time and energy in necessary survival, or simply defending the queer family against continuing attacks. Nonetheless, as part of nurturing a mature human society, queer spiritual insights have much to offer. Like the famous lion metaphor used by C.S.Lewis, in his portrayal of Christ as Aslan, the king (or queen) tiger speaks powerfully into our human spiritual condition. We are called to taste the meat of life, and to live it fully and fiercely, as well as tenderly, in accordance with our particular nature. Out of their own journeys of such life-bearing transformation, queer people would therefore strongly echo the words of Mary Oliver, herself a lesbian, in her poem 'When Death Comes': "When it's over, I want to say all my life/ I was a bride married to amazement... I don't want to end up simply having visited this world."<sup>8</sup>

Whenever queer people are treated as less than tiger-cubs, their/our particularity, their/our full reality is denied. Wherever we/they are viewed as merely goats, or simply sheep like others, we/they, and all of us, are diminished. In 'When Death Comes', Mary Oliver also speaks of how she thinks of "each body" as being "a lion of courage, and something precious to the earth." Is that not core to the vocation of spiritual direction? Sadly, instead of nurturing the roar of the lion and the tiger, conventional spirituality has too often sought to tame, and, still worse, maim and crush God's "fearful symmetry" in queer and other lives. Consequently, queer experiences frequently include suffering spiritual abuse, and being made scapegoats and sacrificial lambs for the sins of others. No wonder then that when queer people find their pride – that word is highly instructive - and share their roar, they meet with opposition from some religious quarters. Yet preventing queer people eating of their experience and using their voices, not only denies the image of God in them/us. It also limits the gifts they/we bear for others, and the wider transfiguration of spirituality and society.

## **Gifts from Queer Spirituality**

To highlight the queer gifts offered to the spiritual direction space, let us then look, briefly, at three particular contributions. These simply illustrate some trajectories within the rich developing fields of queer spirituality and theology. They are presented neither as determinative, nor exclusive to other approaches, whether queer or hetero-cis-normative. Yet they are further fruitful openings to releasing the tiger and their roar.

## **Reframing with the NakedPastor**

Firstly, another artistic voice which speaks empathetically with both queer struggles and gifts is David Hayward. After 30 years in church ministry, David left to use his passion for art, creating the insightful persona of the NakedPastor.<sup>9</sup> His cartoons are powerful in helping frame and reframe spiritual experience, particularly those of queer people and others typically on the margins of churches. As part of how would-be allies can enter into queer spiritual perspectives, they are a valuable visual and reflective resource. Two examples may suffice.

### ***'The Expectation of Others' and Performative Theory***

One cartoon is titled 'The Expectation of Others' and expresses how all human beings are shaped, and can be confined, by the dreams and considerations of others. In part, this illustrates traditional wisdoms about the nature of the self and the dangers of the fragile and/or undeveloped ego. Yet it is also a directly visual way of picturing something of what modern "gender theory" - otherwise

sometimes tricky to grasp - can contribute to human understanding. For, whilst human beings can help create their own lives and realities, they do not do so out of nothing. Rather, as the pioneering gender theorist Judith Butler expressed it, our lives are marked by performativity. Human beings are not so much born *as* a particular identity, caste or gender, but rather learn to behave in particular ways, in the context of circumstances and mores. Rather than being biologically or otherwise determined, we adopt and adapt ways of acting, or performing.<sup>10</sup>

In ‘The Expectation of Others’, a figure is pictured behind bars, taking further bars carried to them by others. The words on the picture tellingly say “the expectations of others are the bars I used for my own cage.” As such, they reflect the experiences of many queer, not least transgender, people, who can continue to feel trapped by the frameworks in which they live. For, as many transgender people would say today, it is not so much that we/they are “born into the wrong bodies” (as has sometimes been asserted), as that we/they have been born into a society whose minds have constructed our bodies, lives and wider “realities” in particular ways. Coming out, as the cartoon implies, thus involves casting off the expectations of others, perhaps bound with ties of love and affection, or at least reconstructing those raw materials. This occurs through new acts of life-affirming courage and performances of love which recognise the true self and God in our own experience, and not simply our neighbours and their understandings of God. However, whilst particular, the dynamic of this very typical queer experience is not unique to sexually and gender diverse people. It is thus one way in which queer spirituality can enlarge and deepen the wider spiritual direction space.<sup>11</sup>

***‘The Jesus Eraser’ and Particularity***

A second cartoon is titled 'the Jesus eraser'. Popular in some liberal church circles, this is a deceptively simple image which actually raises as many questions as it answers. David Hayward himself articulates it this way:

While people try to draw lines and separate and divide us into who's in and who's out, here we see Jesus going against the flow, as usual, and erasing the lines. Wasn't it said that he broke down the dividing wall between us. Don't you love the fat pencils? But I hope you love the fat erasers more!<sup>12</sup>

As such, this might certainly sit, alongside 'The Expectations of Others', as helpful to spiritual direction. Yet is "erasure" the key goal of spiritual development? Does it not seek a wider and deeper transformation? Some aspects of life which impinge destructively on queer people, including conversion therapy and orientation change ideology, certainly need erasing. However, arguably of more lasting importance, is the need for queer expression and mutual encounter.

'The Jesus eraser' cartoon is insufficient in itself as a basis for healthy spiritual direction with, and by, queer people. As with attempts to be "colour-blind", we do not serve spiritual growth well by simply seeking to erase key human differences. Our human particularities of sexuality and gender, race, dis/ability, and other significant characteristics, matter. It may be that they vary in their prominence, between individuals and over time and context. Yet we need to be aware of their importance and, as appropriate, their need for expression. Unfortunately, Christians have not always been good at fully affirming the distinctiveness of God's image in everyone. Instead, too much false self-sacrifice has been required. Indeed, perhaps one vital role that queer and queer aware spiritual directors have is to be possible facilitators of spiritual integration and development for those who have

left traditional faith spaces. Of course, queer people have long developed a range of alternative means of spiritual growth and exploration for themselves. Many church and other faith spaces are also too toxic ever to return. Nonetheless, for some, spiritual direction offers a potential pathway for further growth. For queer people may rightly come to leave their cages and not seek to rehabilitate or reconstruct them in any form. The bars of the cages in which they were confined may nevertheless be important to come to terms with or to draw upon in other ways. Queer people may never want much to do with the world of the goats again, or they may wish to explore new ways of living together through fresh encounter and relationships. Either way, the journey into full spiritual tiger-hood, and one's authentic roar, deserves attention and is assisted by appropriate accompaniment.

### **Insights from Journeys of Gender Affirmation and Prayer**

This leads us more deeply into the rich wells of queer spiritual experience as gifts for all. For a second key strand of queer contributions to the spiritual direction space are the insights of those who live into their authentic selves. One small but telling example are the reflections of transgender women, curated by Ellen Clark-King, in her article 'The Divine Call to Be Myself: Anglican Transgender Women and Prayer'.<sup>13</sup> Reflecting upon how their journeys of gender affirmation affected and was affected by their prayer journeys, those Anglican transgender women who were interviewed each had unique elements to their stories, yet significant common features emerged. Among the key themes were those of honesty, and the deadening effect which secrecy has on a fruitful spiritual life. As Tina, a priest and now prominent transgender chaplain and theologian, expresses it, in terms most suppressed queer people of faith would echo "secrecy—it is the secrecy that's such a problem and leads to so much pain—so much spiritual pain."<sup>14</sup> Despite her years of a regular discipline of prayer, she said that "I wasn't a complete person for a long time, not firing on all



cylinders. Part of me was at home and part of me was away.”<sup>15</sup> As other queer people similarly attest, authenticity is central to the path to true and deepening honesty with God.

Increasingly, queer people are thus finding their lion and tiger courage and offering encouragement to others to find similar honesty and transformation. Some voices are strong, some gentle. All seek greater wholeness of being, in mind, body and soul. As another transgender woman put it, in a prayer poem, out of her spiritual journey through gender affirmation:

My body is now a temple.

My body is now a place of stillness.

My body is now a dwelling place.<sup>16</sup>

The relationship of body to mind and spirit remains a highly contested site of human life. Queer people have rich contributions to make in this for everyone. Indeed, one of the most beautiful queer spiritual autobiographies is that of another transgender woman and Anglican priest, Canon Rachel Mann. Entitled *Dazzling Darkness: Gender, Sexuality, Illness and God*, this articulates a profound sense of the divine, found not simply in pleasant places, but in wrestling with pain of various kinds, including chronic illness and disability, as well as the journey to authentic gender identity.<sup>17</sup>

## **Insights from Queer Theologians on Spiritual Vocation, ‘Queer Virtues’ and ‘Rainbow Themes’**

### ***Gender Identity as Calling***

Thirdly, accompanying the insights of artists like the NakedPastor and the experiences of queer people, there is a growing corpus of well-grounded queer theological and spiritual reflection. One key theme is the renewing, the queering, of ideas of spiritual calling and virtue. The notable transgender theologian Justin Tanis has thus spoken of how gender identity, like other particularities of human experience, can be understood as a calling: “a way of being – a calling to awaken to, realize, and manifest who we are.”<sup>18</sup>

In owning this, he affirms, spiritual growth flourishes:

When we are busy maintaining a mask or avoiding God’s calling within us, we may be busy distracting ourselves with service, but of a different kind. To genuinely fulfil our vocations in the world, we must be true to ourselves and to the still small voice of God calling us home.<sup>19</sup>

### *Seeing with Queer Eyes*

Leaving behind the barren scriptural “debates” over classic “clobber texts” used to suppress queer people, such queer theologians have also moved well beyond apologetics to articulating perspectives which, whilst deeply grounded in queer experiences, can enrich others too. Reading scripture afresh “with queer eyes”, this brings the rich biblical mine of stories, metaphors and images alive in new ways. As highlighted earlier, traditional spiritual themes such as suffering, sacrifice and service are given fresh meaning, typically within rediscovered biblical trajectories of liberation, new creation, and flourishing.

Such “queering” of theology and spirituality is an invitation to all, not least to those in the spiritual direction space. Coming from diverse locations and different queer experiences, this is not a movement in the search of a new orthodoxy, or, as indicated earlier, any simple erasure. Rather, the intention is to break open more fully the mystery of human lives and the divine presence within them, encouraging more pluralistic and multivocal expression, exploration and encounter. Alongside traditional terminology and its wisdom, some queer theologians have thus proposed “queer virtue(s)” to enrich our spiritual journeying.<sup>20</sup> This is to further fresh connection and connectivity with themselves, others, and God. Patrick Cheng, for instance, has proposed seven new “queer deadly sins”: of exploitation, the closet, apathy, conformity, shame, isolation, and singularity. All these emerge from the lived spiritual experience of queer people, who also resonate with Cheng’s seven queer “amazing graces”: of mutuality, coming out, activism, deviance, pride, interdependence, and hybridity.<sup>21</sup> Again, such fresh expressions of spiritual experience are gifts to others too.

## **Rainbow Themes**

Cheng’s work is especially illustrative of how queer spirituality can enable deep encounter for all, rather than simply some necessary erasure, or particular vital expressions of queer identity. For, as in his landmark book *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Sexuality and Spirit*,<sup>22</sup> Cheng opened up intersectional approaches which offer more fruitful pathways than so many of today’s polarising debates over such issues as race, sexuality, gender and religion. None of our identities, after all, are simple. Many are highly complex and interlinked with other features of our lives and world. Part of the spiritual direction task is thus to enable deeper attention and more loving awareness of this mystery and the creative tensions of our experiences and becomings. In addition to what this paper has shared above, Cheng thus offers what he calls three ‘rainbow themes’ which may inform spiritual

direction practice, with, and by, queer people. The first is *multiplicity*. In a world, and many faith traditions, dominated by binary, either-or, monochromatic approaches to diversity, queer spirituality encourages us beyond. As Cheng reminds us, “Jesus Christ’s own question to his disciples – ‘Who do you say that I am?’ shows that Jesus anticipated a multiplicity of responses in our spiritual journeys.”<sup>23</sup>

The second ‘rainbow theme’ is that of *middle spaces*. Queer people, not least those of colour, are frequently caught by the bars of others’ binary constructions of reality. Yet the Christian story speaks of binaries, such as divinity and humanity existing in a queer, or mysterious, transcendent spaciousness, rather than in hard and fast definition. Therefore, even when, like some queer people, we may experience a kind of “metaphorical homelessness”, such removal from our comfort zones can be times and places of growth and help us reach out to those who are different from us. For “rainbow theology”, as Cheng expresses it, “reminds us all that only in God can we find our true homes.”<sup>24</sup>

Finally, a third key “rainbow theme” which may inform spiritual direction practice is that of *mediation*. For, like multiplicity and middle spaces, Cheng rightly proposes that mediation can be a queer “window into the divine”.<sup>25</sup> Reflecting “the divine imperative for reconciliation”, spiritual direction which learns from queer experience can thus enable deeper lives which encompass all kinds of differences and strengthen queer, and other, people to serve more fully as bearers of divine reconciliation themselves.

### **Living as Transfigurations**

In concluding, let us track back to where we began, to the parable of the tiger-cub. This affirms powerfully that, in, and through, our particular experiences, we come to know God's transformations: that we too are living transfigurations. To reaffirm: this is at the heart of queer spirituality, and its potential for renewing spiritual direction. It calls us to set free the tiger, not only in queer people who have too often been asked to live as goats, but, through receiving the gifts of queer spirituality, to release the divine tiger more fully in us all.

## Endnotes

1. The Stonewall Riots of June 1969 in Greenwich Village, New York City is one prominent landmark in this emergence.
2. Terminology has developed over time within movements for the affirmation of sexual and gender identities and continues to be explored. This paper uses the current conventional catch-all acronym LGBTQ, including the additional + to indicate a wider range of associated identities.
3. Queer is another umbrella term which is widely used in connection with sexual and gender minorities who do not identify as heterosexual or cisgender. As it was originally used pejoratively, but later reclaimed as part of queer affirmation, this term is also used here with awareness of a painful history and recognition of those whose lives were taken from them or oppressed.
4. O'Collins, G (1978), 'Second Journey: Spiritual Awareness and the Mid-Life Crisis', New York: Paulist Press, pp.22-23
5. Gospel of John 3.1-21
6. Psalm 139.14
7. See William Blake's poem 'The Tyger', at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43687/the-tyger>
8. 'When Death Comes', originally published in Oliver, M (1992) *New and Selected Poems*, Boston: Beacon Press.
9. See further <https://nakedpastor.com>
10. See further Butler, J (1990) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, Routledge
11. See further David Hayward's reflections at <https://nakedpastor.com/blogs/news/your-cage-is-the-expectations-of-others>
12. <https://nakedpastor.com/products/eraser-poster>
13. Clark-King, E (2016), The Divine Call to Be Myself: Anglican Transgender Women, *Anglican Theological Review* 98.2 pp.331-339
14. *ibid* p.332
15. *ibid*.
16. *ibid* p.338
17. Mann, R (2012), *Dazzling Darkness: Gender, Sexuality, Illness and God* Wild Goose Publications
18. Tanis, J (2018) *Trans-Gender: Theology, Ministry and Communities of Faith*, Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, ch.7, 146-160.
19. *ibid*.

20. cf. notably, Edman, E.M (2016), *Queer Virtue: What LGBTQ People Know About Life and Love and How It Can Revitalize Christianity*, 2016, Boston: Beacon Press.
21. Cheng, P (2012), *From Sin to Amazing Grace: Discovering the Queer Christ*, New York: Seabury Books
22. Cheng, P (2013), *Rainbow Theology: Bridging Race, Theology and Spirit*, New York: Seabury Books
23. ibid p.148
24. ibid p.124
25. ibid p.141

## Endnotes

- ‘The Tyger’ by William Blake, at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/43687/the-tyger>
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