

SWEAT LOUNGE

I grew up with five brothers and two sisters. In spite of the abundance of boys, as a child I played mostly with girls. I took great pride in being able to skip double dutch *peppers* (still do). I had boy friends too and I developed crushes on many of them. As a teenager I tried desperately to be interested in cars to justify spending every waking moment with my best friend. I didn't know I was in love with him at the time. I just thought I was feeling what every guy felt for his best buddy. I spent most of my youth feeling like an outsider, on the fringes of a fraternity, of which, by the simple fact that I had a penis, I was a member.

In college I tried to date women. The sex was fun but I could never commit due to that nagging little voice at the back of my mind saying, "you just might enjoy sucking cock." At age twenty-four I had sex with a man for the first time. That simple act changed my relationship with men forever. I was queer. I'd known it deep down since the first time I saw Robert Wagner in a tuxedo when I was nine, but it was now official. Four years later I came out, gay as a picnic basket.

Acknowledging my queer self gave me many things, including a foot in the door into the fraternity of men. Since then I've flirted with Radical Faeries, massaged men into ecstasy with the Body Electric School and for the past twenty-three years, howled, camped (in every sense of the word), celebrated, cried and fiercely loved every member of my men's group, the Coyotes.

A few years ago I participated in a sweat lodge or 'Inipi'. The sweat, led by a Lakota elder, included only men. During the ceremony I said prayers for the men in my life; men who play an important part in my life now as well as men who have gone. Lovers, mentors, fathers, brothers, friends and heroes; I prayed for them all. I said prayers of thanks for their love, wisdom, and inspiration. I said prayers of hope for their strength and well-being. As the ritual unfolded I had a vision. The outer layers of the lodge seemed to dissolve and I felt myself float up into a star-filled sky. Men danced all around, above and below me. I was in a boundless cosmic disco grooving with a multitude of men.

Sweat Lounge is a paean to the male esprit de corps.

*I celebrate myself, and sing myself,
And what I assume you shall assume,
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you.*

from *Song of Myself*, Walt Whitman