

HOMELESS IN PARADISE

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Column #160

In Their Own Words - Part I



Jaime Olin Voltaire (right) and his mother Elfega Ramos

COME, LET US WORSHIP: TEAR DOWN THE WALLS!

By Wanda Sue Parrott

REALIZING he was the son of a maverick inspired Jaime Olin Voltaire to share his painful struggle as the only American-born son of a Mexican mother who helped undocumented immigrants enter the U.S.

If I'd known Jaime's recent worship associate address at the Unitarian Universalist Church would be so touching, I'd have publicized his appearance. Instead, I asked Jaime--once a homeless teenager in Monterey--to share highlights in this new "In Their Own Words" series.

Come, Let Us Worship

By Jaime Olin Voltaire

My mother, Elfega Ramos, was quite a maverick when it came to welcoming the stranger. People were always welcome in our home.

She saved children from prisons and raised them as her own.

We housed immigrants and complete strangers off the street.

So much was given to them and, it seemed, very little to me. She was too busy to know what to do with me. I was too anxious, too rebellious, thought too grandiose, and I was gay.

At 15, I boarded a bus and left my home in San Diego. I returned to my birth town, Monterey.

Shamed The Family By Coming Out As Gay

I survived cold nights, hunger, loneliness and abandonment, but I pulled through.

As soon as I started making ends meet, I began sending Mom part of my paycheck.

Our relationship would remain loving, though distant. I admired her work.

In March of this year I flew to Guadalajara, Mexico with the important task of burying my mother.

She had herself recently travelled there, so that she could die amongst her family. I buried her in style.

I was heartbroken, yet honored, to be given a task customarily given to an older sibling.

I had never felt part of, or welcomed by, this clan, by my family, nor by my Mom.

I had shamed them by being the first ever to come out as gay.

Too Mexican To Be American. . .

People always find it o.k. to ask me what part of Mexico I was born in, an unwelcome assumption.

Being brown does not mean I was born outside of the U.S.

So here I was, walking in front of my mom's casket, in silence. I had been a stranger to these people, a stranger to my mother.

Now I walked, knowing I had been a stranger to myself.

I had clearly and completely missed something, and I was lost.

Back home I began to hear from people close and dear to mom. Most gave me the same message. She had told most of them the same thing. "That son of mine is difficult, but he is precious, because he knows how to love others. He carries my passion and my compassion."

I realized my mother knew how to welcome the stranger on her own terms; she helped the world out by giving of herself in what she knew best. Her pain and troubles had guided her life.

She had allowed me to discover my own demons, my own pains. . .

So that I could learn the true capacity of my own humanity. . .

So that I could learn how to welcome the stranger within me.

I got the message.

Walls Should Not Hold Anyone Back

I decided to go on a long road trip and collect my thoughts. I dedicated this trip to my mom.

I headed north to Canada, where I was always spoken to and not through.

I felt loved, respected and truly honored.

I felt free and completely safe, like never before.

Back in America I greeted this lady. She personified my mother's vision that walls should not hold anyone back from safety.

In South Carolina, I was saved after a bad car accident by some of the most beautiful angels who. . . got out of their cars and helped me. True human compassion. . .

At the Rio Grande bridge I was greeted by a beautiful soul. We hit it off right away. Love at first sight? Perhaps. Yes!

In Monument Valley I was greeted by Willie, a Navajo elder, who. . . by just looking at me, said," Why do you keep searching? Do you not realize that you are home?"

Indeed, I am home. I have learned that I must make peace and welcome the stranger within me. I must also keep pace with his elusiveness in order to fully prepare myself to greet his brothers and sisters with true compassion.

“Stop and listen,” says St. Benedict.

“Namaste,” says the Buddhist.

“Tear down the walls,” says my mother.

Go out and look for more Jaimes, says I.

Come, let us worship.

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