

At the Kirkridge Retreat
Gay/Lesbian and Christian
June 1995

**Men's Gender Group
Friday Evening**

WISDOM OF OUR SAGES 2
A Ritual to Honor Gay Elders Among Us
Revised and Led by Ken M. White and John Linscheid

Gathering

The ritual space has been prepared by men in the afternoon. Wood has been carefully prepared in the fire ring. Lighter soaked rags form the base of the stacked wood so that the fire will light quickly. Playful signs have been placed along the path that point the way to the ritual space (e.g., Fairy Land, Queer Cathedral This Way, etc.). A threshold has been prepared, through which the men will enter the ritual space.

Just before the ritual the rags under the wood pile are soaked liberally (very liberally) with lighter fluid. Also, a seven-day candle is lit and placed with the items in the lower meadow so that it will be burning when the men gather for the ritual.

In the ritual space near the fire ring, a cloth has been prepared upon which are the following items:

1. *Candles for the passing of the fire*
2. *Cup shields which will be needed if it is windy*
3. *The Cords to be presented to the elders*

In the lower meadow, items which are prepared are as follows:

1. *Standards with gay flags*
2. *A burning seven-day candle*
3. *Assorted drums, bells, rhythm instruments*

The men gather in the lower meadow next to the Farmhouse for instructions. We welcome the men who are new to Kirkridge into our sacred company. We practice the "Veni Sancte Spiritus" sustenuto and the "listen to my heart song" very briefly.

We explain briefly what we did last year—honoring John McNeill and naming elders. We note that we will be doing a few things differently, beginning with a procession and ending with one and focusing on the honoring of elders, but that the basic shape of the ritual will be the same.

Ken White:

We are a gathering of men. Tonight we celebrate the gay wisdom present among us.

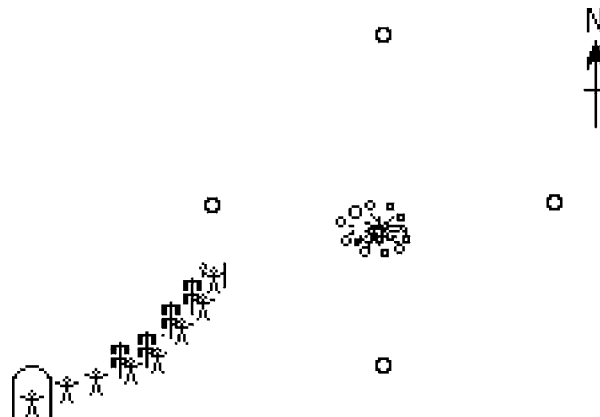
In Ritual, Power, Healing and Community, Malidoma Some says: "A true community begins in the hearts of the people involved. It is not a place of distraction but a place of being. It is not a place where you reform, but a place you go home to. Finding a home is what people in community try and accomplish. In community, it is possible to restore a supportive presence for one

another... The others in community are the reason that one feels the way one feels. The elder cannot be an elder if there is no community to make him an elder. The young boy can not feel secure if there is no elder whose silent presence gives him hope in life. The adult cannot be who he/she is unless there is a strong sense of presence of the other people around. This interdependency is what I call supportive presence. Initiation is about the maintenance of the community. In initiation, roles are defined and redefined. The stories which freight the values and history of the community are retold and learned to be told again, Adults become elders as youth become adults, and the familiar (family) bonds are forged and tempered. Initiation is about finding your home--knowing who you are and where you come from. . . . In a true community, all people evolve active relationships. One's personal cosmology is built on those who have gone before. The experience of the elders and the ancestors has value because it is one's dowry—life tools which have worked for your forebearers and will continue to work for you."

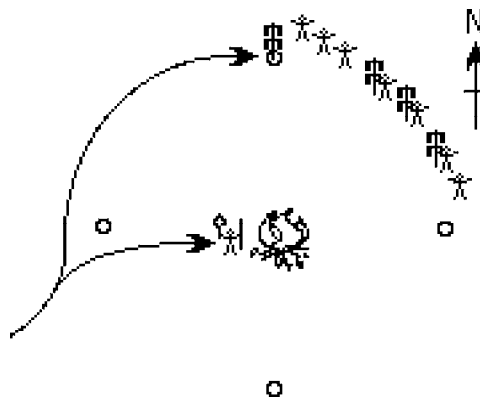
John Linscheid:

So enter this sacred time and space, this faerie land, a place prepared by faeries, and angels and the cloud of witnesses—enter joyfully and with an open heart and leave blessed and changed.

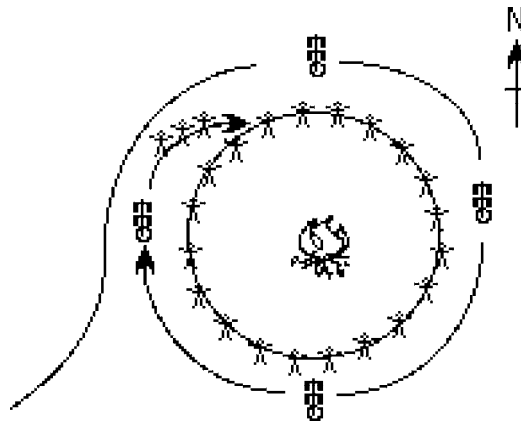
John Linscheid begins the sostenuto chant of "Veni Sancte Spiritus." John McNeill, with his staff in one hand and a lighted seven-day candle in the other hand leads the men in procession. The elders, bearing the flags follow him and then the rest of the company. John McNeill leads the procession through the threshold into the ritual area.



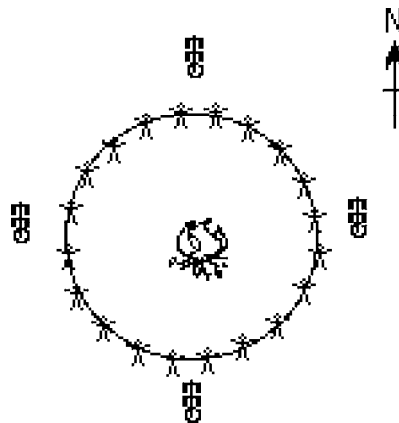
John McNeill proceeds directly to the fire ring and lights a small stick or piece of paper from the seven-day candle and ignites the fire from the candle's fire. When the fire has fully lit, he extinguishes the seven-day candle.



Meanwhile the other elders lead the men in creating a circle and planting the flags, beginning at the North and then proceeding to the East and so forth until a standard has been set at each of the four directions. When the flags have been planted, the elders, now joined by John McNeill, lead the men in making a circle.



The men continue to circle the fire to the chant of "Veni Sancte Spiritus" until John Linscheid brings the chant to a close.



John McNeill:

We give thanks to You, Divine Lover of Our Souls. We come to this holy mountain to be refreshed and to draw nourishment for our journey. Be present with us as we see Your face in the faces of the men gathered here. Shepherd of our journey, we travel from youth to age, from birth to death, moving together in this spiral of wisdom.

Honoring and Naming the Cloud of Witnesses

We gather to honor and celebrate gay wisdom. Gay wisdom does not begin with us. Gay men have been the priests, shamans, spiritual leaders, healers, and artists down through the ages and in many cultures. The fire in our midst is an ancient fire. The Great Cloud of Witnesses—who prepared the way before us—burns in our collective memory as faggots in the fire.

John Linscheid:

We invite you now to name aloud your gay mentors, men who whispered to you the secrets of being gay, who passed along the language, who initiated you into gay culture and taught you about gay sexuality. As you name name you mentors, please take a stick and add to this fire of gay wisdom.

The men name their gay mentors and fuel the fire.

Gay wisdom has been tempered in the fire of bashings, of struggle, of AIDS and HIV. As we journey from youth to age, we remember those who will age no

more. They have fallen in the struggle, but they continue to burn as fiery pillars in our experience.

Ken White: We invite you to take a stick or two, name aloud the gay martyrs, angels, faeries, and saints—those who have fallen or gone before. As you name them, cast their sticks into this fire of gay wisdom.

The men name those who have joined the cloud.

John McNeill: We give thanks to you O Spirit of God, O Pentecostal Fire, for these men, our ancestors, martyrs, lovers, and friends. Their lives now burn in ours, whispering wisdom to us through the elements of earth and fire, of wind and water.

The men join hands as the cantor sings "Swimming to the Other Side." We may circle the fire again if people seem moved to do so, or we may simply stand with joined hands.

Honoring the Wisdom of Mentors

Gay wisdom comes not only from the past. It presents itself to us in the experience of all men gathered here. Tonight we focus on the wisdom that has been passed on to us by our gay mentors, in preparation for recognizing the elders among us.

Our culture has taught us to view older people as irrelevant or to caricature them as saints, as wise sages, or as "dirty old men." Ironically, these stereotypes tap the deepest condition of our life. The saint embodies the aspect of transcendence or spirituality. The sage expresses the mature integration of life and successful living--or wisdom. The "dirty old man," we prefer "sexy old man" captures the importance of carnal self-knowledge and sexuality.

John Linscheid asks the men to gather in age cohorts at the four poles (men in the twenties and thirties gather at the East, men in their forties at the South, men in their fifties at the West, and men in their sixties and above at the North). Members of the groups are asked to identify one or two "reporters" who will report to the larger group. Then the men in each cohort are asked share with their group a significant learning that their gay mentor(s) taught them about spirituality, about sexuality, or about wisdom/successful living. The men will be given about 15 minutes before reporting back to the larger circle.

Following the time of sharing, Ken White invites "reporters" to share with the larger circle, some key experiences shared in each group. Following each report, he leads the entire group in the response:

All: "Blessed are you, Holy Wisdom., You make yourself known through our brothers."

Induction into Elder Status

John Linscheid: Wisdom, sexuality, and transcendence make themselves known to us through our brothers. Tonight we initiate elders into our community. We ask those who have turned sixty in the past year or who are over sixty and were not inducted last year to step forward.

Ken White: The American Heritage Dictionary defines an elder as: (1.) An ancestor, predecessor, forefather; (2.) An older, influential man of a family, tribe, or community; (3.) One of the governing officers of the church, often having pastoral or teaching functions.

Your formal roles and responsibilities as Elders in the gay male community are new and evolving. It will be up to this community and the larger gay male community to define them further. The historical functions of elder

include that of storyteller, spiritual guide, and teacher. We, your gay brothers, look to you to model gay maturity. What you have experienced and learned puts our lives in context. It tells us how our culture grows and changes. It gives young and middle-aged gay men a sense of hope about the future,—an especially important task in this time when we all live in the context of AIDS and HIV.

The virtues of gay maturity point to the figure of the elder. The sage speaks of wisdom. The sexy old man speaks of self-knowledge. And the saint speaks of transcendence. Thus these manifestations embody an archetypal figure.

Though you may still have much to do, your primary task shifts at this stage of life. Your spiritual task will be less the Hero's journey, more the Teacher and Guide. Now the time comes to reflect on and make sense of your own life, and to generously share both your successes and failures with those who are younger than you—to share the benefit of your hard-earned learning by telling your story.

As we honor you this evening as elders we acknowledge our deep sense of gratitude, our love, and our commitment to you as older brothers, fathers, friends, lovers, and spiritual companions on our mutual journey to God as we individually and collectively know God.

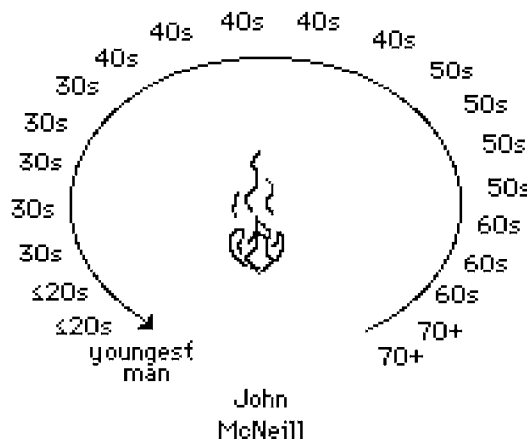
John McNeill: As a symbol of the office of Elder within the gay male community—an office into which we now initiate you—we will present you with purple cords—as a vestment and mantel.

_____ : These purple cords bring together threads, individually weak and easily broken. These threads were turned together in a circular motion to form three larger strands which in turn make the purple cord. Together they are strong, vibrant and useful.

_____ : Your journeys also have woven together multiple aspects of life—the physical, intellectual, spiritual, sexual, and emotional—into one strong, vibrant, and useful whole.

Ken White: As a sign of our gratitude, of our love, and of our commitment, we invest these cords with our collective prayers. We pass the bundle of cords around the circle from the oldest to the youngest, giving each man the opportunity to pray briefly, to speak a word or phrase over these cords, and to do so silently or verbally as you feel appropriate.

The bundle of cord is passed from the elders down the circle of age to the youngest man present, each man investing the cords with his own energy and prayers. When the cords reach the youngest man, he holds them until the time of presentation.



While the cords are being passed, the following elements are read:

Your presence here reminds us that through our celebrations and hardships, we survive and thrive—becoming a little older and a little wiser. We honor your achievements and your struggles, your joy and pain, The victories you have won and the losses you have endured to bring your wisdom to this mountain.

We all grow older
Our bodies grow softer
In your willingness to touch us and to hold us
we come to embrace the changes we experience
in our bodies as we age.

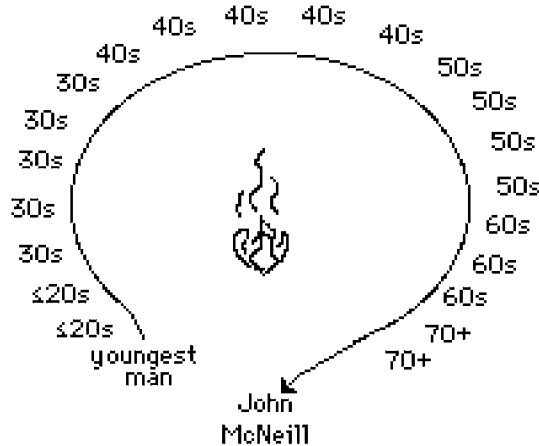
We all grow older
Some aspects of our life grow harder
In your openness to talk about growing older
you help us to age well.

Ken White invites each of the new elders to share a key experience that was formative for his journey as a gay man.

Each elder candidate shares his brief experience. When all candidates have shared their stories, the ritual proceeds.

John Linscheid:

_____ who is the youngest of our company, will bring the blessed cords forward around the circle as we hear a reading from Revelation. In his old age, the evangelist John was exiled on Patmos. There he had a vision of Christ his lover as a wise old man—an old man with white hair. These are his words:



As the youngest man is proceeding around the circle with the cords, a reader reads the following:

[I John,] was in the spirit on the Lord's day, and I heard behind me a loud voice like a trumpet, . . ."

Then I turned to see whose voice it was that spoke to me, and on turning I saw . . . one like the Son of Man, clothed with a long robe and with a golden sash across his chest. His head and his hair were white as white wool, white as snow; his eyes were like a flame of fire, his feet were like burnished bronze, refined as in a furnace, and his voice was like the sound of many waters. In his right hand he held seven stars, and from his mouth came a sharp, two-edged sword, and his face was like the sun shining with full force.

The youngest man now presents the cords to John McNeill.

_____ : These cords bind us to the past, to each other, and to the future. They bind you to your role as elders, as we bless and honor your journey.

Ken White: As we name each individual to be honored, please join in the response: "We call you forth as an Elder for us."

In presenting the cords, John McNeill first loosely drapes the cord around the wrists in a symbolic binding, then removes the cord and places it around the shoulders of each candidate as a stole.

John McNeill: [Name], we bless and honor your journey

All: We call you forth as an Elder for us.

After all have been called forth and when John McNeill has placed the cords individually over each man's shoulders, the following blessing is read.

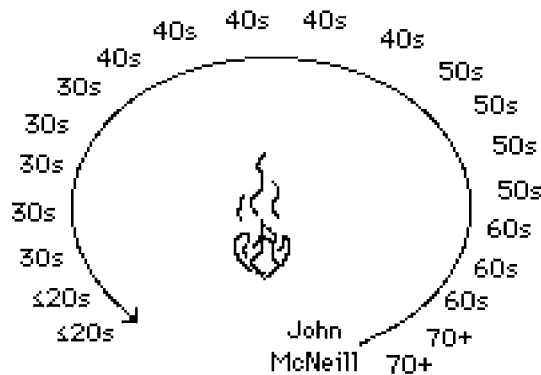
Ken White: Blessed are you, our gay Elders, who have taken a chance on God. May each of you look joyfully over the years behind you. May each of you look forward expectantly to the work God gives you to do in your elder years. May each of you remain strong in your commitment to do justice. May your daily actions be both a strong light to dispel shadows and a comforting darkness to those in need of rest. May you never stand, sit, or lie alone in the struggle. In every posture of life may you find us, your brothers, by your side in body and spirit.

Candles are now distributed to all present

Passing the Wisdom to Following Generations

_____ Our wisdom is not our own. It can heal the past and give growth to future generations. As a sign of the passing of gay wisdom to generations here and to come, we now pass fire, from the older men to the younger men.

John McNeill lights a candle from the fire and lights the candles of the elders who then pass it to the next, so that the fire is passed from older to younger as the reading from Daniel is heard.



John Linscheid: In the book of Daniel, the image of God handing authority to a messianic figure is represented as One of Great Age handing over authority to a young Son of Man who comes on the clouds of heaven.

_____ *Thrones were set in place
and One of Great Age took his seat.
His robe was white as snow,
the hair of his head as pure as wool.
His throne was a blaze of flames,
its wheels were a burning fire.*

*A stream of fire poured out,
issuing from his presence.
A thousand thousand waited on him,
ten thousand times ten thousand stood before him.
A court was held
and the books were opened.*

*I gazed into the visions of the night.
And I saw, coming on the clouds of heaven,
one like a Son of Man.
He came to the One of Great Age
and was led into his presence.
On him was conferred sovereignty, glory, and kingship,
and all peoples, nations and languages became his servants.
His sovereignty is an eternal sovereignty
which shall never pass away,
nor will his empire ever be destroyed.*

All elders: We now bless you who are the youngest among us. We invest you with our passion and our fire. We commit ourselves to share our wisdom with you.

Ken White: But neither is gay wisdom yours to hold fast. We invite you—the youngest of us—to light this seven-day candle, symbolizing gay generations to come, whose future you and all of us hold in the spirit of this community.

Ken hands a new seven-day candle to the young men to light from their candle.

John Linscheid: We commit these coming generations to God, to the protection of Christ and the angels, to the care of their faerie ancestors, pledging our solidarity as you light this candle.

The youngest men light the seven-day candle

Ken White: O youthful Son of Man, O Ancient of Days,
the way of our ancestors—and our way—
is to emerge from hiding places,
to stand up without fear,
and even when unsure of the next steps on the journey
to dance on,
knowing we are not alone.

John Linscheid: Now the young men, bearing the fire of gay wisdom lead us from this sacred space and time, out of this land of faerie energy. As we reach the portal we will each extinguish our individual flames. But the candle the young men bear will remain burning and be borne out of this circle. The fire of the Holy Spirit, the fire of faggot wisdom, this faerie fire will not cease to burn or enflame us with its passion.

John Linscheid begins the following chant.

Listen, listen, listen to my heart song
Listen, listen, listen to my heart song
I will never forget you, I will never forsake you
I will never forget you, I will never forsake you

The youth then lead the gathering out of the threshold, bearing the burning seven-day candle. They are followed by all the men. As they exit through the portal Brad sprinkles each man with a little fairy dust and blesses them while saying; May the fire of gay wisdom now burn in your heart, warming you and

lighting your way. Depart in peace and Joy. The elders, take the flags and bear them out, bringing bring up the rear, with John McNeill shepherding the end of the procession.

The seven-day candle is carried burning out of the ritual area and it will be kept burning throughout the rest of the weekend. The other candles are extinguished as each man crosses the portal out of the ritual space.