

**Barry Cooney**

## **Interactions – 1992 / A Passion for Living – 1993**

### **What Were Other Men Doing Around the Nation?**

COONEY: This is when you have Bly with major articles in *Time* and *Newsweek* and so on, and some of the other Wildman kind of gatherings that were highlighted and grossly misrepresented. So, it was an interesting time. In terms of individuals, men gave me a really interesting perspective of what I would call universal brotherhood where you could go and as a matter of certain kinds of encounters and experiences, really feel closely connected in a very short period of time with people from Washington state, Michigan, Detroit, Texas, New Jersey, you name it, and it was really a wonderful feeling of what kind of potential there is out there performing liaisons and communities beyond your immediate local venue.

### **What Was the Common Theme?**

COONEY: Once again, I think a lot of the men's groups in different parts of the country adopted certain kinds of pseudo-Native American practices and even today, here in New Mexico with the sweat lodges, you know, we try and mimic certain things which I really think is phony-baloney because I never think about the east, west, north, and south any other time except when I get into a sweat lodge. I usually seem to think of it only in terms of taking a plane and heading west or whatever. Not to say that I don't think that in looking at the cosmos or the earth that there aren't a lot symbols that one can attach spiritually—it's just taking these Native-American ritualistic postures and trying to integrate them with a bunch of yuppie white boys seems to me to always have a high level of ridiculousness.



### **How Has Men's Work Helped You?**

COONEY: Early on in my life I felt that nothing could be taken totally in a serious way. That everything—when you step back a bit and look at things from a macro level, it's a bit of a cartoon, whether it's a stuffy board meeting or a funeral or whatever you are dealing with, even the I.R.S.—everything has another side to it, and I think a lot of times, men in their socialization process become so conditioned to respond in ways that they think men should respond that they become caricatures of themselves.



### **First Men's Wellness Conferences Self-Led**

COONEY: We don't invite paid outside people in to do any work and all the conferences are generated by all of the participants. That's been a wonderful thing. Now you can get technical and nitpicky and say as a result of that, some of the facilitations aren't led as professionally as they might be led. Nevertheless, I think the reality of it is that over the years, we developed conferences that have really been heart-felt experiences for all the participants.

### **What Was it Like Leading the Conference?**

COONEY: It was Hank Blackwell that selected me to be his co-director, and then what happened there was that Hank ran into some personal issues and wasn't able to direct that conference, so I was thrown into position my first time round, I was sole director and not a junior to someone. So, I was really cast in that role quite suddenly and it was a real strain for me to do it all myself and it came off, but I remember, it was really emotionally taxing for me.

### **What Can Other Men Gain From Men's Wellness?**

COONEY: The bottom line—to feel comfortable with other men that they don't know. To feel comfortable in terms of beginning the process of sharing things that for them might be very difficult for them to share—things about their personal life, their past history, their wounds, and their ecstasies or their enigmas. I think the main thing that I feel that new men can benefit, you know, the things they can get out of it, are just raising their comfort zone to a point where they feel comfortable about interacting with men.

### **What Areas Haven't Been Addressed?**

COONEY: I think we skirted around the issue of homophobia a lot. That's had various surges of popular interest or no interest. We've had traditionally gay men come to the conference for many years and not really say anything to anybody that they were gay. And, then, of course, for years we have had these Saturday Night Live skits and they were accused of being raunchy and sexist and all that but I think that's the result of the fact that for years, Todd [Tibbals] brought 10 bags of women's clothing to the event so when you dressed up, you had no choice but to put on your girdle and your falsies (giggle) so whatever emerged from that, I think we owe more to the costuming department than we do to any intention to be sexist or whatever.

### **Guidance for Future Conference Leaders?**

COONEY: I think that everything that we do, everything we have done over the years—80% of it if not more—has always turned out fine, regardless of the theme, regardless of how contentious—not so much contentious—how bogged down the planning committee seemed to be in terms of getting things down on paper or whatever. It always turns out to be a marvelous experience.

### **Closing Comments?**

COONEY: Yes, everything I've said is subject to revision (ha-ha-ha).

---

