

PHIL DAVIS / 2001 / *EVERY MOTHER'S SON*

[Also Summer Gathering 1997 – Abundance and Gratitude]



My name is Phil Davis. I am a civil rights lawyer and a long time volunteer co-legal director of the American Civil Liberties Union of New Mexico. My practice primarily involves the representation of people who are the victims of governmental abuses of power. My passions outside of work are Lee, my wife of 36 (!) years, and our two children, Rachel (and her new husband Alex) and Nick (and his significant other, Trinity), skiing, baseball, soccer refereeing, reading, cooking, travel and being outdoors, especially anyplace over 9,000 feet.

One hundred and eleven men attended the 17th New Mexico Men's' Wellness Conference in the Fall of 2001. The theme that year was "Every Mother's Son: Nurturing Ourselves, Nurturing Others." I was the facilitator of that conference and my #2 was Steve Feher who would lead a totally unique and amazing conference the following year.

Both the theme of the 2001 Fall Conference and the open hearts of the men who attended – and who were conscious and present – made it a time and a space full of emotions, insights, sharing, caring, grief, releasing of wounds and expressions of love. I chose the theme because every man has or had a mother, because a mother's basic instinct is to nurture and because as men, we often lack the skill or tendency to nurture both ourselves and others in our lives. In addition, in the dozen years I had been attending fall conferences up until then, conference themes had addressed men, manhood, fathers, kings, warriors and more, but significantly absent from any theme of any of those conferences was "Mom," or anything having to do with motherhood or mothers and our relationships to them. It seemed like it was time for us to have a look at our inner demons and wounds arising from our relationships with our mothers – and the gifts we got from them as well. I was certain we all had one or more stories to tell about our mothers and our relationships to them, good or bad.

I first came to a New Mexico Men's' Wellness Conference in the fall of 1989 because Lee asked me to go. At that time, I was shut off from her and my children. I was cold, distant, and angry. I had learned those lessons all too well from my father. I came to that first conference knowing not a soul. I left loving a circle of men. I have since described my experience at that conference as involving not only a fork in the road of my life that I chose to take – rather, it revealed to me that there *was* a fork in the road. And I took it. Hook, line and sinker. When the magical aura of that first conference wore off after a few weeks and my cold and angry self reared its ugly head one evening as the children were being put to bed, my daughter told Lee that it was time for "daddy to go back to that camp again"! And so I have these many years since.

I was privileged to lead the Fall Conference at a time when attendance was at an all time high. I was challenged by some men in the Men's Wellness community to decide, as the conference leader in 2001, to expand the conference to accommodate up to 150 attendees or more. I declined to do so for both spiritual and pragmatic reasons. I was concerned that a substantially larger conference

would detract from the intimacy of the interactions between and among the men attending. A larger conference would also have made it physically impossible to have a single circle of men in the Lower Pavilion at Ghost Ranch who were able to see one another – literally – all the way around the circle. A double ring of men was proposed but I rejected the notion. The loss of intimacy, both literally and figuratively, could not be made up, in my mind, by the idea that more men would have the opportunity to experience the conference. There would always be another conference for other men to attend. There was the summer conference. And the winter [ski weekend] conference. And soon after that the spring conference came into being. Or next year's fall conference. So right or wrong, that was my call as leader. I know that a few men fell away from the community of Men's Wellness because of that decision, but I believed then and I believe now that the men who attended the conference that year had a quality experience and were a small enough group to be able to interact with one another throughout the weekend on a more intimate basis than they could have if a larger number of men had been present. And ironically, in the years since, attendance at the fall conference has diminished somewhat and the general consensus remains that a smaller conference allows men who attend to have a higher quality experience as a result.



Significant experiences I recall from the 2001 Fall Conference include:



– the depth of reflection that went into the letters that men wrote to their mothers early in the conference addressing various issues such as the gifts as well as the wounds they received from their mothers, how their relationships with their mothers had affected other intimate relationships in their lives, how their relationships with their mothers had changed over time and perhaps most important, what men wanted still to change about their relationships with their mothers;

– the rose ceremony in honor of our mothers on Friday afternoon which included the laying down of a long-stemmed red rose from every man to his mother and many, many photos of men's mothers and stories about them, some sweet and some not so sweet, some heart rending and some heart-wrenching, but all authentic, profound and true;

– the meditation dyads on Saturday morning structured around the forgiveness of our mothers, for both the messages we got from them that we did not need and for what we needed from them and did not get, and also the forgiveness of ourselves, for not fully acknowledging the gifts our mothers did give us and for the wounds we caused them;

– the winding string of men engaged in a silent walking meditation in the labyrinth at Ghost Ranch that led finally to an altar at the feet of a statue of Quan Yin, the compassionate earth

mother, where men released their feelings by leaving notes they had written to or about their mothers;

– the playback-psychodrama theatre workshop led by Robert Younger that allowed men freely to nurture and be nurtured by other men;

– Saturday Night Live and the music of Charles Fisher, Barry McIntosh and their assorted partners in crime;

– and as always and most importantly – because our stories are ultimately what we are all about and how we share ourselves with ourselves and our brothers – I witnessed the success of the small talking groups of four or five or six in which men actively engaged one another throughout the weekend and allowed themselves to share their own stories and the open hearted expressions of feelings. The energy in the room from the buzz of men's' stories during the small group sessions was palpable. We were all “working for wholeness, healing and integrity in men, beginning with ourselves.” The unqualified support and the hugs that men gave one another in those small circles reflected then and to this day the common truth that so many men experience in “the safe container” that every New Mexico Men's Wellness Conference strives to be – “You have to do it yourself but you don't have to do it alone.”

It was an honor and a pleasure to facilitate this conference. It was exciting. On a personal note, I grew in so many ways. It expanded my senses of compassion, patience and tolerance. It increased my confidence and flexibility as a leader and a decision maker. It awakened in me a better understanding of my own mother and a greater love for her which had lain dormant for all too long – sparked by a photo of just the two of us at my wedding so long ago. And finally, leading this conference gave me the opportunity to give something back to an incredible, remarkable, unique and loving community of men whose friendship, wisdom and support has been fundamental to my own sense of well being since I first experienced New Mexico Men's Wellness in the Fall of 1989. This last aspect of facilitating the 2001 Fall Conference – giving back – was especially important to me because *“Men's Wellness saved my life!”*