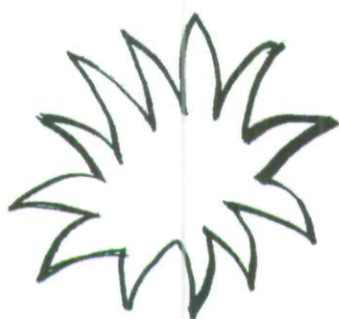


SOCIAL WORKER, THERAPIST, BURNER: THE JOURNEY OF THE WOUNDED HEALER

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This narrative explores the author's experiences as a professional social worker and a member of a local "Burning Man" community. The author's experiences in becoming a wounded healer are summarized. The "Burning Man" festival and subculture are briefly explained. The intersection of these two facets of identity generates benefits and challenges. Benefits include closure on the journey of the wounded healer, congruent aspects of Burner culture and social work values, and increased therapeutic efficacy. Particular challenges include potential unintended overexposure of clients to therapist's personal material and discrimination against members of a somewhat controversial subculture. Potential ethical resolutions of the inherent dilemmas are explored.



An Introduction: Beginnings, Background, and Burning

The year is 1982. I skulk into the corner of the junior high girls' locker room. Not only am I the only one there without the adorable 1980's "preppy" look, but I am also the only girl who doesn't wear makeup. My efforts to hide are unsuccessful: the torment begins again. It widens the gulf between me and my peers, increasing my certainty that I will never be accepted anywhere.

It's 26 years later. I am still wide awake at 4:30 a.m. The cold air of the Nevada desert is mercifully still—for the moment. We leave a 700-mile journey behind us as our truck finally rolls off the pavement and onto the parched prehistoric lake bed known as the playa. Several hours later, intense winds will kick up, causing total whiteout conditions as the air saturates with the tan-white dust that most of us regard as sacred. For now, at the main gate and again at the greeter's station, happy enthusiastic people bound towards us. They are garbed in goggles, colorful fake fur, and bright neon lights (EL wire). They swallow us up in huge loving hugs and they exclaim,

"Welcome Home!" In the distance, The Man stands silent, a benevolent guard over the blossoming city, his neon-lit outline in contrast with the deep darkness of the desert sky.

As a child I was tormented and ostracized by my peers, from second or third grade through high school graduation. I grew up in a conservative, conformist town, which had little tolerance for interpersonal difference. I know first-hand what it feels like to be deeply lonely, uncertain of myself and of ever finding a place in society. Although I excelled in academics and athletics, I went home nearly every day feeling badly about myself. I believe my story is one of millions of examples of the isolation and damage unintentionally perpetrated by generally well-intentioned people and the norms of mainstream society.

One high school friendship afforded me the blessed relief of learning about interpersonal connection and "emotional nutrients." As graduation approached, I realized that I could receive a regular paycheck for creating healing relationships with other human beings through the helping professions. Then, there was no looking back. Of course, I was quite rough around the edges; and, despite my good intentions, I was unprepared to be a professional helper. Regardless of this predicament, the opportunity was offered to me at the age of 19 at the first of many "counseling" agencies without licensed supervision. Many of my rough edges smoothed over with the passage of time, extensive therapy, professional training, and ongoing personal effort. Still, as I started to

enter the discipline of psychotherapy, the remnants of my childhood social challenges became more apparent. Overall, I was doing well, but I was dismissed from an MSW internship (despite, by my supervisor's report, good clinical work) for not fitting in well with the rest of the staff. Mr. Spock, my childhood hero from *Star Trek*, once said, "The needs of the many outweigh the needs of the few...or the one." I understood the need for social norms. But, like so many others I would meet later in life, I had run smack into the aspects that (arguably) benefitted the many at the expense of one. I was a wannabe healer whose own healing from this collision was missing some key components.

Today, however, at the age of 40, I am a proud and enthusiastic social worker. I'm a clinical psychotherapist in private practice, and a professor of social work at CSULB. I am also a Burner, that is, someone who has internalized and practices the tenets of the Burning Man subculture. This article interweaves conventional expository and narrative formats. It explores the rich benefits and challenges inherent in the intersections of these two co-existing facets of my identity as therapist and Burner. One benefit is the subculture's inherent potential for healing, which I illustrate using stories from my own narrative as a "wounded healer." Two particularly salient challenges are the potential for unintentional overexposure of my clients to material from my personal life; and the potential for being judged negatively as a member of a controversial subculture. As such, this article represents the most concrete and wide-ranging step I've taken in my own "coming out" process as a member of this vibrant, if often misunderstood community.

What is Burning Man?

"Trying to explain what Burning Man is to someone who has never been to the event is a bit like trying to explain what a particular color is to someone who is blind [from birth]" (Burning Man, 2008a,b).

Imagine you are put upon a desert plain, a space which is so vast and blank that only your initiative can make of it a place. Imagine it is swept by fearsome winds and scorching

temperatures, and only by your effort can you make of it a home. Imagine you're surrounded by thousands of other people, that together you form a city, and that within this teeming city there is nothing that's for sale (Harvey, 2000).

Burning Man is an annual festival of art, music, culture, community, and self-expression. It's also a city: Black Rock City, Nevada, U.S.A. An experiment in temporary community, it is the only full-fledged city in the United States that exists for only one week out of each year. The city has its own post office, mayor, Department of Public Works, radio station, Rangers, and two daily newspapers. On another level, it encompasses a year-round subculture present around the world, with regional representatives on five continents (Burning Man, 2008a,b). The Burners I've befriended here in Los Angeles are, essentially, my chosen family.

Participation in Burning Man tends to encourage internalization of new norms, values, and worldviews. Returning home from the festival "...you'll take the world you built with you. When you drive back down the dusty roads toward home, you slowly reintegrate to the world you came from. You feel in tune with the other dust-covered vehicles that shared the same community. Over time, vivid images still dance in your brain, floating back to you when the weather changes. The Burning Man community, whether your friends, your new acquaintances, or the Burning Man project, embraces you. At the end, though your journey to and from Burning Man are finished, you embark on a different journey — forever." (Steenson, 2008).

Burner Subculture and Clinical Work Converge

Having stayed awake well past dawn both Friday and Saturday nights, participating enthusiastically in local Burner parties, I fear that Monday is going to be a real challenge. Five clients, office hours, my two-hour class, and my biweekly peer supervision-case consult group loom over me as my alarm clock sounds—altogether too early! As consciousness returns reluctantly, my mind flashes back to images of the weekend: long heart-to-heart conversations, group "cuddle

puddles," and dancing to beautiful music. Every time I participate in various Burner events with my chosen family, I feel the healing of my old wounds of exclusion. It's a physical sensation in my chest: almost like the "good pain" of a sore muscle being massaged. As I stretch my weary legs this Monday morning, I notice that, inexplicably, my body feels really good. I sail through the day on a magic carpet of very good, positive energy. My work with clients, students and colleagues feels at least as effective as usual, if not more so. I may be physically tired; but my batteries are completely charged.

I walk to work, strolling through some of the beautiful parkland between my home and office. My mind is trying to sift through my counter transference to one particular family with whom I just started working. They seem very constrained and I sense that they keep looking at me strangely! By this point in my career, I am familiar with the potential for this particular counter transference spiral: When interacting with people I see as conservative or judgmental, I start my internal "outsider" thinking: "I am weird, no good and everything is my fault."

Then, I think of my Burner friends: undoing the poisonous early programming that "strange" or "unusual" inherently equals "defective." I think of Christian, my tall friend with sparkling blue eyes who's frequently clad in a kilt. His creativity and infectious sense of fun has manifested itself in a long and successful career as a toymaker and creator of Hollywood props. I think of my friend Scott, whose playa name, Open Heart, is so very descriptive of his general approach to life. His customary manner of dress, indescribable due to spatial constraints, defies all conventions, even those of cross-dressing. Although his default world experience sometimes involves being dismissed at first glance due to his appearance, this man is a brilliant writer, a highly skilled parent and a sharp and loyal friend. I think of his girlfriend, a married woman in an openly polyamorous relationship. She's a practicing witch, a musician in a rock band, a mother of two, and one of the most brilliant and compassionate organizers I've ever met.

With this inside-reflection, my counter transference spiral is halted. My insider life experience brings me back to my social work values of celebrating diversity. I regain my self-confidence and have a successful session with my new clients.

Later, my client, 23 years old, athletic, and depressed, slinks into my office, looking completely defeated. Twenty-five minutes of the usual ventilation, analysis and problem-solving get us nowhere. Her energy is low and she can't get out of her head: inside her self-defeat. "C'mon," I say, grabbing a few hula hoops from my wall. "Let's go to the park." Outside, birds are singing and the scent of native plants fills the air. Within ten minutes, I have taught my client how to hoop (a skill I learned through Burner subculture). My client is hooping and laughing. There's color in her face. Her energy is flowing and she's grounded in her body again. Inside and outside emerge.

Burning: Inside and Outside Benefits

Participation in the year-round culture of Burning Man has acted as a midwife, helping me externalize and practice multiple potentials that may not have otherwise surfaced. My personal growth and participation have made me into a much better social worker, therapist, and human being.

Increase in my personal support network: My many Burner friendships tend to be extremely nourishing, since the subculture attracts society's "cultural creatives," most of whom I have found to be unusually warm, open, and accepting. I have found this experience to be the perfect antidote for the girl who never fit in, giving me what I need in order to support my clients. My research for my Master's thesis indicated that social workers who don't maintain a strong network of support are more vulnerable to burnout (Bell, 2000). From experience, I teach my students that self-care is a prerequisite for effective social work practice; and that positive life experience greatly enhances professional functioning.

Understanding substance use: Although I'm sometimes loathe to admit it, I grew up a "good little girl." I have yet to smoke a



cigarette, taste alcohol, or indulge in any other recreational drugs aside from caffeine (and I don't plan to do so). In 1993, I was certified in Substance Abuse Counseling. The focus on the pathological use of substances intensified my untested beliefs from childhood. Needless to say, this worldview didn't exactly match those of many of my clients. As a Burner, I have come to know many functional, even brilliant, people who use various substances recreationally (as well as some who have had problems with it). I've learned that substance use does not always equal substance abuse. This understanding was a huge surprise, conditioned as I was to equate drinking/drug use with emotional unavailability, irresponsibility, physical ruin, and other sorry consequences. I've learned that many people seek, and receive, deep spiritual experiences through their use of illicit substances. I think the overall picture and practice of substance use is as complex and varied as human diversity itself. I have never, and will never, indulge in such usage myself, and I certainly don't promote it. However, I now have a much more experienced ear for listening to the details of a client's substance usage.

Positive effects of self-disclosure to clients: Since therapy is about the client and not about me, I am quite careful about when and to whom I disclose my participation in Burning Man. But, doing so can have beneficial effects. For example, a 65-year-old woman ventilated to me about her anxiety related to her adult daughter going to the playa for the first time. To her astonishment, I pulled out my necklace (a charm of The Man) from underneath my shirt and disclosed my own participation and general experience. My client was able to process some of her fears and receive new information; her new understanding ultimately brought her closer to her daughter. Another of my clients is a 37-year-old, rather fearsome looking punk rocker with severe issues of social anxiety, alienation, and being misunderstood. My first-hand knowledge of what it's like to be a member of a subculture, look upon the world with different eyes, and at times experience prejudice has greatly improved my understanding of this client and others. This fellow's understanding

that I have been to Burning Man, and that he may run into me at an underground dance club one day, has helped him relax his defenses and engage in more authentic therapy with me. At the same time, I model that, although I am a member of an underground subculture, I am professional and competent at work. I should also note that having my hair in tight braids, a Burner tradition described below, has helped me build common experience and rapport with some of my African American clients.

Some of my growth is best explored in conjunction with some of the ten Principles of Burning Man. Space constraints prevent me from exploring each principle in depth, so I have chosen the most salient. A complete list and explanation of the Ten Principles can be found at: http://www.burningman.com/whatisburningman/about_burningman/principles.html.

Radical Self-Expression: As someone who grew up "different" from most of the other kids and took a daily emotional beating for it, I entered Burner culture with a lot of learned inhibitions. On playa, I've received permission to be silly, uninhibited, loving, spontaneous, and joyful. At Burning Man, I see people suddenly bounding into cartwheels on the playa. Some people become green and blue by dipping themselves in dye-filled kiddie pools like giant Easter eggs. I see giant "art cars" painstakingly fashioned into fire-breathing dragons, covered wagons, birthday cakes, dead cows, grinning Cheshire cats, and even the Golden Gate Bridge. I've ridden a floating magic carpet and (dressed as a bear) been "caught" by the Black Rock City Animal Control. (They caged me for a while, tagged me, and then released me.) I've experienced light saber battles, Monkey Chants, and Million Bunny Marches. (Did you ever see thousands of people stampeding about dressed as bunny rabbits? I highly recommend it!) Now, I watch other people model joyful emotional freedom—contrary to contemporary standard practice—and that gives me permission to start gently dipping my own foot into those waters. My "inner child" has joyfully come out to play. I've integrated pockets of myself long walled off and greatly reduced my childhood tendency to dissociate under stress. My own growth process continues. In

the meantime, I've integrated this intuitive understanding into my therapy practice *every day*. In my experience, a person's ability to access and experience the deep joy of the inner child, is the very best buffer against depression. This experience enables me to facilitate my clients' journeys home to their own sense of wonder and joy.

Radical Inclusion: "Anyone may be a part of Burning Man. We welcome and respect the stranger. No prerequisites exist for participation in our community" (Burning Man, 2008b). I avoid cliques, particularly after my rather rough experiences perpetually being on the outside of them. But we all have the seeds of exclusion within us. Now that I've internalized a subculture where everyone is welcome, I have a constant reminder to relax my judgments and be more loving and inclusive towards people, especially strangers. I am reminded to take everyone seriously rather than retreating behind that wall of separation and judgment.

Gifting: Burner culture places a high value on gifting. Larry Harvey, the founder of Burning Man, explains: "When you give a gift or receive a gift from someone, it creates an immediate moral bond with them, this feeling of human connection. In some sense, their life energy enters into you, and that, of course, is where community begins" (Harvey, 2000). Gifting has helped me move out of a mentality of scarcity and into my internal generosity. It's built my sense of community and joy in sharing. I have a favorite kind of toy, small rubber balls of various bright colors, with rubber "hair" and smiley faces. A blinky light inside activates when it's shaken. (Burners are fascinated with blinky lights.) I call them "Happy Blinky Things," and giving them to my clients (they cost only about 50 cents each). They provide a transitional object and also immediate access to their inner child, as evidenced by the huge happy smiles on their faces!

Self-sufficiency and Leave No Trace: When you head out to the playa, you have to bring *everything* you will need for a week. The desert is a harsh mistress; she will teach you very quickly if your shelter or supplies are insufficient. Through these preparations and journeys, I have learned that really, the buck

stops with me. I am responsible for my own outcomes, in a way that's far more concrete and direct than we can usually observe in everyday society. Items I have forgotten are usually gifted, freely and cheerfully—but that isn't the point. It was my responsibility, darn it, and I should have brought it! Furthermore, I do not look to other people to clean up my mess for me. Such experiences have given me a sharp clarity about individual responsibility that I pass on to my clients in a myriad of ways, not the least of which is being much less likely to unquestioningly buy into sad tales of (sometimes self-created) woe.

Immediacy: How much time do you spend "in your head" on any given day? Well, wake up! What (and who) is around you, *right now*? What is happening inside of you? Being at Burning Man takes me out of my head and into the immediate moment. So often, we let so many precious moments of our lives just slip by. In a culture that's pathologically avoidant of our mortality, we suffer from the illusion that we have the luxury of letting time slip by unsavored.

In my social work practice, this awareness has reawakened the deep, wonderful work of existential psychotherapy as conveyed by Irvin Yalom (1998, 2002). This learning has allowed me to help clients access clinical material that wouldn't have otherwise been available. It also translates to a strong interest in experiential therapy. Through my own experiences, I've come to believe that traditional talk therapy, while crucial, is not sufficient. I want to be able to address multiple levels of my client's brain and mind, not just the neocortex—which is rarely the root of the problem anyway. By the time this article is published, I will be receiving training in Somatic Experiencing Therapy™, which helps the client attune to immediate somatic sensations to access and clear repressed emotions. Before Burning Man, I wouldn't have considered or understood the need for these interventions.

Decommodification: Isn't this a core value of social work? Today's intense materialism can be very challenging. Through peer pressure and advertising, consumerism has worked its way into the very core of the

family, as children and adolescents desire to fit in, and parents feel compelled to buy more than they can afford. Advertisers are shockingly pervasive, sophisticated, and slick; worse, "cool is socially exclusive," not available to everyone (Schor, 2005). Schwimme (2005) argues that consumerism has become more important than religion or cosmology in forming the worldview of children. Larry Harvey (2000) asserts that such materialistic pressures directly erode mood, mental health, and human relations:

All around us and within us a feeling of lurking anomie persists....Symptoms of this deep unease pervade our society. The spread of materialistic values has contributed to a moral coarsening and a growing cynicism in our country. Within a manipulative world all motives seem venal, all efforts illusory. But at a deeper level, it is the commodifying of imagination itself, the moral passivity, the social isolation, the angst that is generated by living in a solipsistic world of fraudulent satisfactions that is producing the greatest evil.

I find it refreshing and re-grounding to step into a space, however temporary and imperfect, that tries to stand squarely against thoughtless, automatic consumption. No money exchanges hands (with two exceptions, ice and coffee sales). Participants are strongly encouraged to cover up any corporate logos on their vehicles or possessions. Reusing, recycling, and creating art from salvaged materials is all greatly encouraged. Most importantly, people are "cool" because of who they are, not because of income or possessions. I liken the experience to the clear vision from cleaning my eyeglasses after leaving them dirty for a while.



Challenges: Potential Negative Impacts for a Therapist in the Burner Subculture

Being a helping professional and a Burner presents with some challenges, some of which are rather unique. I welcome a client back into my office and settle down in my chair as she begins to recount her week's adventures. We have a strong therapeutic bond; and it's been wonderful to watch her shake off the shackles of her depression and engage in serious growth. Now I hear that her best friend, a long-time Burner, plans to move to our city. I maintain active listening and my outer façade, even as my thoughts form some dawning realizations: this friend is sure to dive into our local Burn community. Oh, God! She'll probably bring this client to some of our parties.

Okay. Radical Inclusion: welcome the stranger. I think we can negotiate that, with some discussion of boundaries. But what about an ex-boyfriend of mine who has transformed into quite the charmer, racking up notches on his bedpost at an amazing rate. What if my emotionally vulnerable client has sex with my ex-boyfriend? That's really too close for comfort. How am I going to help her process the issues when he inevitably moves on to the next woman? And furthermore, what sort of distorted information about me might thus find its way back to my client? How could that compromise the therapeutic relationship and my client's journey to wholeness?

Potential for unwanted intimate social contacts with clients: As noted in the above vignette, several of my clients are now saying they want to go to Burning Man, having discovered the festival through other sources. In most cases, I want them to have the experience: the joy, the freedom, the permission to be fully themselves. As master therapist Yalom (1998) puts it, "Anything that challenges the patient's permanent view of the world can serve as a fulcrum with which the therapist can wedge open the patient's defenses and permit him a view of life's existential innards" (p. 241). At the same time, this experience is a new exercise for me in negotiating therapeutic boundaries. It is axiomatic in the helping professions that conditions of boundary enmeshment, such as client overexposure to therapist material, or dual relationships

between helper and client, create a high risk of emotional damage to the client (Reamer, 2001). However, participation in a small subculture has several overlaps with boundary issues of social work in small rural towns—where in some ways, close contact is unavoidable, and practitioners proceed with extreme caution and careful monitoring. Yalom (2002) noted that “All comments must pass one test: Is this disclosure in the best interests of the patient?” (p. 87).

What if my clients see me running around naked? Or in a workshop that explores some aspect of sacred sexuality? Or sobbing at the Temple, grieving my losses? Or, if they become involved in my radically inclusive chosen family? On the other hand, I suspect that my familiarity with the more hedonistic aspects of the culture (e.g., pockets of unrestrained drug use and sexual activity) put me in a unique position to help a client with weak ego strength, as well as understand and avoid aspects of the subculture that could trigger uncontained and detrimental behaviors. Indeed, I recently engaged a young raver client in a nonpathologizing rehearsal of self-protective strategies.

Fortunately, I have not yet actually encountered any of the abovementioned troublesome issues. I have given these matters much thought, however, and have come to several conclusions. First, being a therapist, or any type of public servant, does not negate one's birthright to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness,” as our Founding Fathers would say. Not only am I unwilling to engage in the high level of self-sacrifice to give up my Burner culture, but I shouldn't have to do so. Second, I conclude that a reasoned push through my own barriers (not in the presence of clients!) is personally beneficial and also helps me understand more aspects of the human condition. We all know that the best therapy we can offer utilizes all levels of our own experience and understanding: it's top down and bottom up, inside and outside simultaneously. That's the essence of “use of self.” Third, I draw upon the existential component of my theoretical orientation. Existential psychotherapy emphasizes universality in the concerns of navigating

human existence. We are all “fellow travelers” (Yalom, 2002, p. 6) on the road of life. Staying grounded in the commonality of human experience, without negating proper clinical boundaries, helps me to disarm the internal sting or drama of a breach of my personal life and to move towards simply dealing with it in the most effective manner that I can.

And so, after much careful consideration, and consultation with other Burner helping professionals, I have composed the following general guidelines to deal with potential boundary breach. In some respects they are similar to the ethical guidelines offered by Munke and Fulmer (2004) regarding coping with boundary issues in rural social work:

(1) Upon hearing of a client's impending participation in Burner culture, disclose my own participation and attempt to negotiate specific interactional boundaries that would protect the client from exposure to my personal material, to the greatest extent possible, with minimal compromise to the client's experience. This session would include exploring the possibility of an ethically mandated termination (and referral) in case the client's world begins to overlap mine more than incidentally. Maximal attention would be paid to the client's needs, including his/her emotional reactions to my disclosure and to the possibility of termination. In this way, clear expectations would be established as well as a mechanism for coping with pitfalls that may occur despite best intentions.

(2) Given the specifics of the situation, explore within myself, and in peer consultation, what kinds of overlap could be ignored, what could be processed safely and effectively in session, and what would mandate the abovementioned termination and referral. Obviously, any substantial client involvement in my closer relationships, such as sexual contact with an ex-boyfriend, would most likely mandate termination and referral, as would persistent client initiation of one-on-one social involvement with the therapist.

(3) In the case of unforewarned client appearance in my Burner social life: follow client's lead regarding whether to greet him or her; maintain client confidentiality even if

client chooses to disclose the nature of our relationship; withdraw from the particular situation as soon as (nondisruptively) possible; and process the issue with client in session as soon as possible; use my existential orientation to refrain from “freaking out;” stay calm and grounded; and attend to the client’s needs (as well as mine, albeit internally!) in processing whatever issues arise.

(4) Seek consultation and peer support as frequently as warranted to address my own emotional needs, to maintain grounding and clarity, and to avoid the distortions of counter transference.

Prejudice and judgment: The realities of the default world mandate that I use discretion in my self-disclosures or “coming out.” Mainstream culture harbors considerable prejudice against the party scene, which in actuality is composed of multiple subcultures. We Burners are joined by ravers, Goths, Deadheads, Renaissance Faire folks, the fetish crowd, various drug subcultures, and I don’t know what else. The boundaries are blurred, not distinct, but there are indeed boundaries, albeit unseen by many in the mainstream. The assumption is usually that “Burning Man” is shorthand for unchecked hedonism, writhing orgies, and reckless adultery and drug abuse to the point of oblivion. While I know that pockets of such abandon do exist at Burning Man—that’s *not* me!

Personally, I think the most essential elements of Burning Man are embodied in the abovementioned Ten Principles. Still, the minds of many are already closed, particularly when such assumptions trigger backlash from cultural or religious mandates against hedonistic activities. Before writing this article, I had tended to keep my Burner identity as underground as possible, due to fear of scorn and, especially, fear of being discredited as a professional. More recently, I have decided that the prejudice of others is a reality that I have to live with; and that compromising myself to such pressures isn’t a sacrifice I am willing to make. Furthermore, I’ve concluded that I can effectively advocate for diversity in demonstrating competent professionalism without “closeting” this aspect of myself.

My physical appearance: Many Burner women (and some men) follow a tradition of hair braiding before “going home” each August. Tight braids make hair care much easier on playa. At Burning Man, everything is art; and so most braided Burners show up with a beautiful array of color and texture braided into their hair. For me, it’s part of pushing my traditional boundaries of appearance, beauty, and femininity. I was excited to have the chance to participate in this tradition. That is, until I notified the owner of the group practice in which I work and he said, “It just has to be professional.” By which he meant, no hippie-dippie colors and textures! I was furious towards Matt for imposing some restrictions on my braiding, my experience. And I was flustered about being suddenly reduced to a rebellious teenager, asserting my preferences for personal appearance against an oppressive parent. Then I began to worry: The braids were such a departure from my usual “look,” and they are not generally worn by Caucasians. Would he freak out about that, too? In the end, I went with long, waist-length braids of my own natural blonde, without any color woven in. My pulse was racing in the moments before he first saw my new braids. “Here goes,” I said to myself. “My personal integrity versus my livelihood.” As it turned out, he barely broke stride. “Cool!” he said, and continued heading to the bathroom. I did a little collapse in my therapy chair.

Conclusions, Continuations, and Community

“Welcome Home,” they say to all new arrivals at the Greeters’ Station. The first time I heard that, I didn’t get it. This immense, intimidating place wasn’t my home! Well ... now it is. And now I “get” it. The most important thing Burning Man has done for me is that it has brought me home to myself, within myself: huge progress in my archetypical journey of the wounded healer. Since our profession draws so heavily upon the personal resources of the practitioner, this process has unquestionably made me into a better therapist and social worker. True, my new lifestyle is fraught with challenges, some of which are rather unique. Also, the social environment in

practice definitely has its flaws; it doesn't always live up to the ideals I've enthusiastically promoted. But all in all, my participation in the subculture of Burning Man has provided me with an entirely new perspective on social norms and on myself. Despite the hazards, I wouldn't trade the personal and professional growth for anything.

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