

AN END TO THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

Part One.

I was one of the thousands of Americans stranded in various parts of the globe in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11. On September 11, 2001, my partner and I were wrapping up a Grecian holiday on the board walk in Skala Eressos, on the Greek Isle of Lesbos in the Aegean sea, and just a short hop from the Middle East.

The events of September 11th were beyond the moral pale: religious fundamentalists launched attacks in New York and Washington, D.C. on a scale previously unknown to Americans, and our world as we knew it was irretrievably changed. The United States has been intimidated to the point of allowing the Bush administration to eviscerate the constitution in the name of patriotism. Of course, irrational hatred is no stranger to us in the gay and lesbian community. In the wake of the tragic events of September 11th, as the nation moved into battle position and then to war, we here in South Florida's gay community, and in gay communities across America, the battle to preserve the most basic of human rights: the right to work, and the right to find housing, and have access to public accommodations, the right to marry, continued then, and continues now, without pause. Our homegrown religious fundamentalists and Fort Lauderdale's crackpot Mayor Naugle, never miss an opportunity to bash the LGBT community. Back in 2001, the gay community was fighting a petition referendum to repeal the Broward County Human Rights Ordinance as it pertains to sexual orientation, and the bigots didn't miss a beat in their assault on our rights in the wake of the attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

After eight months at the helm of Americans for Equality's Decline to Sign Campaign (fighting the petition drive to legalize discrimination against gays in Broward County) I left the

campaign in the capable hands of my vice-chairs and board to take a short working holiday in Greece with my partner, who had an international bariatric surgery conference on Crete. I planned to be home for the final days of the campaign as the deadline for turning in the petitions was September 17th.

In Crete, we kicked off our island hopping with a visit to the archeological ruins of a cultural and religious center of the Minoan civilization, the Palace of Knossos, circa twentieth century B.C. Our “official” guide, trained by the state (Greece) initially neglected to mention that the Minoan civilization had been a matriarchal civilization, that is, governed by a succession of queens who also served as the religious figureheads for the culture. As we moved through the sacred groves and into the palace proper, etched into the marble on either side of us we saw the international symbol of lesbianism, the double headed ax, or labrys. Just then, interrupting a perfect Kodak moment, our guide referred to the “king” and the priests heading the sacred procession through the grove. My irrepressible lover, piped up with “Wasn’t the Minoan civilization a matriarchal civilization?” To which the guide replied, both to our delight and our consternation: “Actually, all evidence indicates that there were no kings here, only queens, but, we say “kings” for political reasons.”

She then explained to our group that the labrys was a spiritual symbol, used in a similar manner as the cross or Star of David is today. Later, she would tell us that some of the other guides shun her for talking about the matriarchal nature of the Minoan civilization. Where big breasted knock-offs of Minoan goddess figures bring in tourist bucks they don’t deny that the Minoans worshipped a female deity. But, the matriarchy thing is actively repressed - purposely deluding the multitudes of visitors to the archeological sites and to the museum in Irakalion that

Knossos is just another “kingdom”. Almost obscenely, a Greek guidebook on the Palace of Knossos describes a fresco depicting a religious ceremony as “a crowd of men enjoying dancing girls”, when the only reasonable interpretation when one takes into account what is known of the hierarchy and religious practices of the culture is that the fresco depicts priestesses performing religious rites in the presence of a mixed crowd of worshipers.

Given the comparative level of evils I have experienced in the world, I must admit that I was only slightly galled, and not surprised at the purposeful suppression of the fact that women were the political and spiritual leaders of the Minoan civilization which produced the first written language, remarkable sophistication in architecture, art, and the famous Minoca Pax - fifteen hundred years of peace (an event we have yet to replicate). The two distinct types of written language etched on round clay tablets and named Linear A and Linear B have remained largely untranslated to date. Having witnessed first hand the purposeful dissembling of the Greeks with regard to the matriarchal nature of the Minoan civilization I have a feeling that even if they ever decipher the content on the tablets, if they don't like what they say, we'll never hear about it...

After Crete, we were stoked and on a quest for the Goddess in the “cradle of Western civilization”, as Greece likes to call herself. Next stop, the isle of Lesbos. Yes, Lesbos, birthplace and home of the famous Greek poet(ess) Sappho, and the root of the modern word, lesbian, which outside of Greece means, well, we all *know* what a lesbian is. But, in Greece, a “Lesbian” is someone from Lesbos, or in Greek, Lesvos. The “v” is pronounced like a “b”. It is a sad fact that many Lesbians, when asked where they hail from, report that they are from Mytilene, the capital city of Lesbos. Travel agencies often refer to Lesbos as Mytilene, rather

than the truth, in order to avoid the stigma associated with the proper name. Gentle reader, I ask you: Are we surprised?

So, on Lesbos, we headed straight - or should I say “gayly forward” - post haste, without delay or hesitation for Skala Eressos, the birthplace of Sappho, and lesbian Mecca since the 1950s. Most gay travelers know that Mykonos is the preeminent travel destination for the gay and lesbian traveler in search of hordes of their own on a relatively hospitable and exotic Greek isle. Less well known is the fact that on Lesbos a sizable population of international lesbians live year round, and the tiny beach town where Sappho was born on the remote western end of the island is dominated by lesbian visitors during the most hospitable months of the year, from late March through October. For the locals, the hordes of women, that is, lesbians with a small “l”, were initially tolerated in the 1950s when they began to converge on the beach to camp out and commune with the tenth muse, i.e., Sappho. In the 1960s, what with the generation of love, and the rebirth of feminism, the beaded, feathered, painted, besotted, and likely pot-head bands of women, also known as “womyn”, women dancing and drumming and chanting and generally carrying on, carrying on in and on the beach, in the caves, on the road, (some of us remember the song lyrics, “why don’t we do it in the road...”) - let us just say that in the 1960s on Lesbos, there was a clash of cultures. The locals attempted to route the invasion of strange acolytes of Sappho. But, inevitably, the tourist dollar prevailed, and now the visitor will find a remarkable co-existence in Skala Eressos where traditional Greek culture moves implacably forward at a snail’s pace in the midst of an international lesbian playground.

Granted, the level of acceptance is extremely localized. On a foray into the next town on the “highway” (a euphemism for the two lane black top that, without a moment’s notice or a

sign, turns into a one lane wooden bridge, or winds through the narrow cobbled stones of a village, and serves not only as a route for automobiles, but also for flocks of sheep), I looked in vain for the “Sappho’s Cave” described in my guidebook. When I inquired at the Petrified Forest Museum, the woman at the counter told me, with “attitude”, that they didn’t have anything like that around there, and, she added with a sniff, maybe they had such a thing at Skala Eressos. Her disdain for me, and my inquiry was palpable. I can tell you that my regard for her only slightly picturesque but mostly ragtag little town in “bum_____” Greece plummeted, and I retreated to Skala Eressos, my curiosity about the surrounding environs sated for the time being.

And it was there that I spent my last days of innocence before the The attacks (if I can so loosely characterize my state of mind prior to September 11th), or my last days of whatever state of mind we all had before the world changed. No matter how jaded we thought we were: We are all somehow, irrevocably different now, aren’t we? But then, before, I was at the beach, on the boardwalk, at Sappho’s Restaurant, The Tenth Muse Café and Bar, with the women walking, biking, dining, drinking, singing, nude sunbathing, or in tie dyes, tattooed, pierced and bedecked, wildly dissimilar, yet somehow homogeneous: the multinational lesbian visitors in Skala Eressos at any given time, notwithstanding their origin, appear to the locals as members of the same tribe. After the events of September 11th, we packed our stuff and drove our little rental car hell bent for the airport at Mytilini. We careened down the mountains, while hairpin turns, scenic views, golden olive groves (where Sappho danced with her students and her lovers) zipped by largely unnoted as we hotly debated the appropriate U.S. military response to the attacks. Little did we know we hurried to just to wait, about to embark on an eight day saga of “stranded in Greece and trying to get home.”

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Part Two: END OF THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

September 12, 2001 - Flight to Nowhere

On September 11th, my partner and I were wrapping up a Grecian holiday on the board walk in Skala Eressos, on the Greek Isle of Lesbos in the Aegean sea, and just a short hop from the Middle East. So it was that on the morning after the attacks we found ourselves careening around steep mountain curves on the road to Mytilini, in Lesvos, Greece, hellbent for the plane to Athens and then on to Zurich and home. It was September 12, 2001, in the year of “our Lord”, as is so commonly said without thought as to the fact that “our Lord” is not, in fact, everybody’s Lord, and most especially not the lord of those Muslims who took out the World Trade Center, not the lord of the Jews, persecuted by Christians and Muslims alike for thousands of years, not the lord of the ancient Greeks, not the lord of the “pagans” (those who worship gods and goddesses very similar to those of the ancient Greeks), not the lord of the Japanese, the

Chinese, the Buddhists, and on and on. Curious how, in our ethnocentrism, we fail to recognize that the measurement of the millennia - to which so much hype is attached - is purely a construct based upon a largely political decision to count the days beginning with death of one man/god/Christ to whom most of the world does not pray, and to whom He and His followers have been and continue to be, a thorn in their collective sides (pun intended). As I was saying, it was on the day after the Horror - but, then again, it seems I should begin at the beginning.

It was late afternoon in Skala Eressos, on Lesbos. My lover and I were strolling the narrow cobblestone street off the beach, American island hoppers desultorily shopping for souvenirs. Rounding the corner we saw that a small TV perched precariously on the woven straw bottom of a kitchen chair had been dragged out onto the boardwalk. A group of Greek men were gathered around the set, the volume was maxed out, blaring enigmatically in Greek. Curious, we strolled over and looked through their shoulders to see the second plane crash into the second tower. The waves crashed on the beach not twenty feet away. A small group of older men standing apart laughed among themselves. My mind seemed to move very slowly because it felt like minutes before I realized that English subtitles crawled across the bottom of the screen spelling out the reality of the pictures. Later I cried with a stranger, the only other American (besides my partner) that I met on the island, her name was Kim and we wept together holding hands sitting on the curb on the street in front of the Internet Café watching the wide screen TV that had been placed outside on a card table. Her husband was a green beret. They were on vacation. The last time I saw her she was running down the narrow cobblestone street weeping and calling out her husband's name.

So the next day we left Lesvos, aka the isle of Lesbos, home of Sappho, international playground for women loving women, f_____ paradise! for god's sake, to try to get home. Patriotism, a concept I had learned to loath as a hippie chick in the seventies, now coursed through my blood and I longed to be among my own kind. How ironic is that? My own kind. It seems to me that a lesson is here screaming to be heard, but I can't quite put my finger on the message yet. In Fort Lauderdale, the home I had left two weeks before, my own kind included a group of right wing fundamentalist Christians bent on the destruction of the gay and lesbian community and the few pitiful "rights" we had struggled so long and so hard to acquire - namely the right to be free of discrimination at work, in housing and in public places. When I left it was with some guilt because as chair of Americans for Equality, the group fighting to preserve gay rights, I was leaving my group in the lurch to fight the last crucial weeks without me. I could not wait to leave town. I was so over it. Now, I could not wait to get home.

On the morning of the twelfth we woke early and uncharacteristically were packed and ready to hit the road, just waiting for the breakfast buffet to open at 7 a.m. at our hotel, the Aeolian Village. Normally, we ate at Sappho's, the women's restaurant in town, but we figured the girls wouldn't be up at that hour, and besides, in the wake of 9-11 the lure of an all lesbian environment had lost its glamour. The Aeolian Village, the townies call it the "alien village" due to the fact that as the new and sole resort in the Western end of the island it has brought an influx of heterosexual tourists to the village. The web page touts Skala Eressos as an ideal "family" destination. A sprawling modern full service resort at the end of dirt road off of the "main" road (a treacherous two lane mostly blacktop) hours from the nearest tourist destination, the Aeolian Village attracts hundreds of couples and families who come to Skala Eressos knowing only that

it is remote, isolated, beautiful and steps from the brilliant Aegean Sea, but oblivious to the fact that it is a popular vacation destination to one type of visitor in particular- those of us euphemistically known as acolytes of Sappho, and for whom the isle of Lesbos is the origin of the label by which we are known throughout the English speaking world (in Greek the “v” is pronounced like our “b”.... As a result, one finds few of the “regular” types of tourists in town. One visit is usually enough, and they retreat in confusion to the Aeolian, where the staff work from morning to night providing entertainment, from tennis, water-robics, afternoon movies by the pool, to archery for god sakes. Summer camp for the captives.

“See the sunset in Eressos and die”, said the philosopher Theophrastos, according to the Aeolian brochure. Aeolian visitors can sit on the “private” beach and watch the sun slide into the Aegean past cliffs where Sappho herself once danced, the bells of the herds of sheep returning to their corrals compete only with the pounding of the surf and the ever present wind (Aeolos being the Greek god of wind after whose grandson, Lesbos, the island is named.) Of course, only a couple of hundred feet away on any given day dozens of Sappho’s acolytes enjoy the same events, often lying sublimely and un-self-consciously entwined, almost universally topless and commonly nude, weather permitting, of course, which it does from at least May through September.

But, all that was behind us now, and we looked only forward. Rush to the TV, any further news? Rush to the airport. Extra security. Luckily we had befriended the guy who ran the Hertz rent-a-car station (his mother had left her father’s sheep farm in Australia to immigrate to Lesbos with his father, a Greek farmer - a romantic or grisly tale, depending upon your point of view) and he walked us through, moving things along so that we made the plane in plenty of time. A

short jaunt to Athens, where we thought we'd spend only one night and then be on our way home. Didn't everybody just want to be at home when it looked like god knows what might happen next? Now I can almost laugh, and I picture Dorothy Gale saying "There's no place like home, there's no place like home," while she clicks the heels of her ruby slippers... I could have had those ruby slippers, you know. During the first week following my move to Los Angeles in 1978, Judy's third husband, Sid Luft, held an auction of Judy's things and the slippers were among them. I stayed away because I thought it was in terrible taste. But, of course, in those days I was an idealist. Well, I shore could of used them ruby slippers once we got to Athens! Our hotel sent a driver to pick us up. Thank god we had arranged for that courtesy. Dimetrious could not have done better if he were an angel sent to sooth the frazzled nerves of two distressed Americans. He was handsome, charming, young, strong - he manhandled our very large and overstuffed bags onto a cart and pampered us all the way to the car, including waiting graciously while I used the ladies room. Did I say charming? He commiserated with us, and he distracted us with folklore while we sat in the bumper to bumper traffic Athens is famous for. And then, after channel surfing the radio produced no new news, he called his sister who is a newscaster for a television station and she read us the latest right off the Reuters tape.

As one day turned into eight days, the time we spent in Athens now seems like a blur of CNN and BBC Grisly Images and Horrific Commentary. And then a window opens and I remember that I stayed at the Grand Bretagne, hotel to kings and rulers (amid much pomp and circumstance the Prime Minister of New Zealand arrived during our stay to attend meetings on the Olympic Games 2004, and the hotel had been Hitler's headquarters in Greece during WWII - did I mention that my stay in Athens often seemed surreal?) I was at the Parthenon, and the

Roman Forum, and the Olympic Stadium, and the museums, the shops, the Park, the shops, the intensity of the overwhelming press of people, the hustled and the hustlers. The first night we went to sleep at 9 p.m. (thank you, Restoril) expecting to leave for the Airport at 4 am the next morning to take the seven o'clock flight to Zurich. We woke at 3 am and called the Airport, they said, "Call Zurich". Zurich said, "Don't come! There are no flights to the U.S. and no hotels, if you come you will be sleeping at the airport." And this scenario repeated itself for the next two days when no one seemed to know what would happen next, until it was "confirmed" more or less that we'd leave on the eighteenth.

And it was three days before we were able to reach the states by telephone. We moved through the days in a strange limbo, climbed the Acropolis to the Parthenon, found a guide, a surgeon's wife named Agnes. (During our acquaintance she let us know that she was indignant that the social medicine system in Greece does not allow her, as a surgeon's wife, the status and money she would have in the States.) Irritable and anxious, I regarded her with skepticism and little sympathy. She was a large, but feminine woman who would not have looked out of place in Berkeley, kind of an earth mother type, and despite her material yearnings, exceptionally spiritual and "into" new age spirituality. Her English was not too good, and she explained that, in her head, she translated from the Greek to French and then to English as she spoke. My smattering of college French stood me in good stead, that and a dose of intuition, helped me fill in the gaps and finish her sentences despite the language gap. And so, despite ourselves and her limitations, we were swept up in her story of the gods and goddesses of ancient Greece. Agnes seated us under an olive tree as she began to weave her spell on the captive and anxious American ladies. (Under the tree, because Agnes has an allergy to the sun, an unfortunate

malady for a guide in sunny Greece.) As she told it, Athena was locked in battle with Poseidon over who would be the patron god/ruler of the city, as yet unnamed. They chose to allow the citizens to hold an election to decide. And, in accord with the “3/1 rule” - I never did quite understand exactly what she meant - except that there were three women to every man in the city and because Athena promised the women that if they voted for her she would provide them with the olive tree to provide food, oil for lamps (and salad), and wood to build with and to burn for warmth in the winter, the women elected Athena, and thus Athens was born- or in Greek - “Athena”. What Agnes failed to mention the guidebook filled in. Subsequently, the men, angry about the defeat of their candidate, deliberately disenfranchised the women for their vote, stripping them of any rights of citizenship, no vote, no right to testify in the newly formed courts, no legal rights to inherit, zip, zero and nada. And all this in the context of a culture where it was openly acknowledged that adult married men would have sexual liaisons with adolescent boys whom they “mentored”. (Although the guidebook was quick to point out that anal intercourse was frowned upon and those who indulged in it were known as “loose butts”.) No explanation was offered as to why Athena did not step in to alleviate the fate of her female electorate - although, if politicians have remained the same, we as gays need no explanation - we remember DOMA. It is interesting to note that the fortunes of women had fallen so precipitously from the seemingly benevolent matriarchy in Crete just a few centuries before. And, just an island hop away Sappho was frolicking at her school for girls in Mitilini, and writing passionate poems to her same-sex lovers that still warm our hearts and other places after all these years.

It seems that perhaps the world has not changed so much over the past few thousand years, more technology, but the same passions course through our hearts and minds, and the same mind-boggling injustices and inhumanity thrive in the midst of our best intentions.

In Athens we met other stranded Americans. We had dinner with a lesbian couple and a gay couple from California one night, and one night when Mel stayed at the hotel, I ended up spending the evening with a group of British ex-patriates ('ex-pats') at a local café. I caught a ride back to the hotel with a New York City limo driver named Louie. He was a big guy with a quick smile, and a way with the girls. I came out to him within minutes of meeting him, and he said, throwing a big arm around my shoulders, "I'm fine wid it - whadkinda guy do ya tink I am?" He was a great guy, Greek American, stranded on his way home after visiting with his parents who returned to Greece in their retirement after raising their kids in Brooklyn. He wore a Saint Christopher, or saint something on a ring and he'd given his mother the same saint, so that when he was away in the States and he kissed his ring, he felt like it was a connection to his "Ma," who was in a coma in a Greek nursing home. What are the odds that I would spend time with a guy like this in the states? Slim to none. I love Louie. Next time he comes to Fort Lauderdale, I hope he looks me up. I know more about Louie and his vulnerabilities than I do about guys I've worked with for years. What is that about? There is a lesson here, I just can't quite seem to grasp it.

The more things change, the more they stay the same. As immediate horror of 9/11 no longer presses upon the consciousness in a way that prevents logical, dispassionate thought, a pattern is to be discerned. You know how the holocaust museums have sprung up over the past

several years? A lot of people ask, “Why? Why dwell on that Horror?” And, the proponents of the museums have answered, “So that it shouldn’t happen again.”

Despite our best intentions, religious fanatics have destroyed the World Trade Center, and killed thousands of innocent people, shattered the serenity of a nation and rocked the center of gravity of our world. And, potentially more destructive, opened a crack in Democracy, a democracy that has been on the brink of bringing a modicum of sanity and autonomy to citizens in many countries that have long suffered under misguided, if not purposely evil tyrannies. Through the crack created by Muslim fundamentalists, in the name of fighting terrorism, have emerged right-wing American fundamentalists who have long-hungered for the ultimate power and control, the Orwellian nightmare of the police state. And it is when we are most afraid that we are most vulnerable. It was in an atmosphere of fear that Hitler rose to power, promising to defeat the communists and restore national pride to the Germanic people. It was only after he and the Nazi Party came to power that Germans and Austrians realized that they had nurtured a viper to their breast, and it was too late to object. “So that it shouldn’t happen again...”

A patriotism that turns a blind eye to the dismantling of rights and protections which have distinguished America as the land of the free is a crippling emotion. America is not an absolute. Returning from Greece, the “cradle of Western Civilization”, it is clear that we are just a flash in the pan, in terms of time. Before us, civilizations have risen, only to disappear almost completely. In spite of our best intentions if we allow the insidious destruction of our rights the most horrible of injustices and inhumanity may become entrenched as the “new” American way. And then, how shall we be different from “them?” And who shall have “won?”

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