

# Burning Man, Desire, and the Culture of Empire

BY FENTON JOHNSON

**T**O A CONSCIOUSNESS formed in gentle deciduous lands, the vista is unimaginably bleak: the toxic, colorless void of a Nevada alkali lake bed, a blank white canvas the size of Rhode Island, flat as water and dry as parchment on which there lives nothing visible to the naked eye, remnant of the Pleistocene stretching to a barely visible horizon of tawn and purple mountains. Hot winds blow from all points of the compass and shift direction in an instant, whipping the playa into dust devils that spiral into a cloudless blue sky. At times a steady wind blows for interminable hours, during which dust fine as talc clogs the pores and lungs and reduces the world beyond arm's length to a white blur. We might be inhabitants of one of Calvino's invisible cities except that only mad dogs and white men would occupy such a godforsaken place. God / forsaken: in fact, though the concept and execution are religious at their cores, God is the word least likely to be heard. At this moment of the American Empire's decline, this science fiction setting is home for our premier arts festival, anointed by the *Los Angeles Times* as the "current hot ticket" for academic study—the landscape of Burning Man.

Each year artists and pretenders from around the world camp here in the heat of late August, 150 miles north of Reno, laying out streets, building structures to house basic services (information, medical assistance, security, latrines), and constructing sculptures and installations, bars, restaurants, dance halls, and New Age amusements—e.g., an outdoor roller skating disco, or a giant vagina through which you wiggle to be reborn into friends' waiting hands. The playa is the playground of our most powerful image makers—the software engineers and computer graphic designers of Lucasfilm, DreamWorks, Google, and Pixar who flee the constraints of civilization to play in what amounts to a free-wheeling, unregulated protectorate of California.

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More than 50,000 people gather each year to burn a wooden effigy at this eight-day festival, which describes itself as "part of a solution to our modern malaise."

For the eight-day duration of the festival, a central shade structure sells ice and coffee; all other money exchanges are prohibited. As an aspect of this gift economy, Burners are asked to bring food and drink for ourselves and for others, a policy that inspires 24/7 offerings of free pancakes and open-bar cocktail parties. We are also asked to give something of ourselves in a way that expresses our creative spirit while honoring the festival motto "Leave No Trace"—a visitor at any other time of year should never suspect that for eight days 50,000-plus people called this dustbowl home.

The San Francisco Bay Area has a history of incubating movements that, for better and worse, influenced national and international culture—the Beat Generation and the unrestrained hippies who succeeded it, the Summer of Love and the unrestrained materialism that succeeded it, Silicon Valley and the unrestrained materialism that accompanies it, and now the obsession with sustainability as the politically correct response to the environmental degradation wrought by all that unrestrained materialism.

If we believe what scientists tell us about climate change, our only intellectually respectable option is despair, but there's no future in despair. Whereas Burning Man offers, according to its website, "part of a solution to our modern

malaise,” a claim endorsed by a significant percentage of the hip folks west of the Rockies. I go to Burning Man to discover how it motivates people alienated from church and cynical about government; to find if it may unlock one door to learning and teaching how we may better live in harmony with each other and the planet; and to see if it lives up to its hype.

## Communion at the Feet of the Man

Late August, 2010: On arriving for my first and probably last Burning Man, I join the homesteaders in staking our claim on the “streets,” concentric arcs in the dust some five miles in diameter and having as their focal point a seventy-foot tower topped by a stylized Man. The playa is already dotted with dozens of elaborate, large-scale sculptures and art projects, each more fantastic than the next.

Encountered in this setting, every created object or spectacle is so improbable as to suggest divine intervention: an undulant metal sound sculpture whose speakers range from tiny to huge, under and around and through which I wander; a forty-foot globe that spits methane-fueled flames; a fifty-foot wire mesh woman lit from within at night; a graceful shade structure, rebar trees draped with perforated rubbery scarves, housing a speaker’s corner under which a physicist holds forth on the hoaxes he claims Deepak Chopra perpetrates in the name of string theory. Among these sculptures roam art cars—mobile sculptures constructed over a car or a truck. Most impressively, a life-sized silver Tyrannosaurus Rex turns its head, opens and closes great claws and spouts a roar of flame from distended jaws. The animal kingdom is popular, maybe in homage to how fast we’re depleting it—there are mobile barracudas, praying mantises, butterflies, caterpillars, a snail formed of beaten copper.

Sometime after midnight on the playa: I have been to the Temple of Flux to inscribe the names of the honored dead. Thousands of people are biking or walking from one installation or camp to another, but we might be galaxies in space, so vast are the distances between us. Then the wind picks up and dust swallows the Man, who becomes a smudge of green light in the darkness. Glow lamps and headlights that had been wandering haphazardly turn as one as, in obedience to some atavistic instinct, several thousand people seek shelter—no, not shelter, there is no shelter, but only companionship, *communion* at the feet of the Man.

## Social Movement or Manifest Destiny?

From the Burning Man website:

Burning Man is not confined to the artificial limits of Black Rock City. It is more than an event. It has become a social movement. Very typically, participants found significant new relationships or resolve to undertake

ambitious projects as a result of their experience. Just as often, they end old relationships, deciding to get divorced or quit their jobs. The typical statement one hears sounds like a conversion experience: “Burning Man has changed my life,” and this is manifestly true. Few remain indifferent or return sated.

A fellow Burner tells me she’s following the Diamond Heart path, which draws on “every” religious tradition. “Every?” I ask, and she lists Buddhism, Sufism, Hinduism, transpersonal psychology, and “the somatic connection between the body and the energy fields.”

The great three-cornered stool of Western civilization—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—does not make her list, even as Burning Man’s organizers sit firmly astride that stool. The Man-to-be-burned invites comparison to other, more famous martyrs, but more significant is the participants’ pervasive belief in redemption, enormous changes at the last minute (“Burning Man has changed my life”), American exceptionalism, and progress, our most important product.

A crooked but unbroken line extends from the “city on a hill” of John Winthrop’s 1630 sermon aboard the Puritan ship *Arabella* to this alkali plain in Nevada. Burners are proselytizers, and the light that animates their eyes not unlike what I encounter in the Jehovah’s Witnesses who visit my home Saturday mornings. Instead of seeing Burning Man as “part of a solution to our modern malaise,” I can as easily see it as a late-stage expression of manifest destiny—the absolute need of white men to impose our will on every landscape, even the most remote and forbidding. Its gift economy does not eliminate money but requires that we spend it—a lot of it—before we arrive, in contrast to earlier utopian experiments that presumed frugality. I make myself uncomfortable by pointing



Burners often come seeking companionship and share a belief in the possibility of sudden, profound personal transformation. The festival’s website reports that participants tend to form “significant new relationships or resolve to undertake ambitious projects as a result of their experience.”



Art installations like this “Dust City Diner”—a 1950s-style eatery flawlessly recreated amid the dust devils of the Black Rock Desert—add to the festival’s surreal atmosphere. Installations range from a giant vagina through which one can be “reborn” to architectural structures like the “Temple of Transition” pictured on the cover of this magazine and again on page 19.

out that the drugs fueling the party arrive as the result of untold suffering, and later I make everyone uncomfortable by questioning how an event can describe itself as an experiment in “radical self-reliance” when it requires thousands of gallons of fossil fuels, twelve-volt batteries, generators, and computerized reservations of rental trucks and RVs.

Many of the installations are designed to amaze and stupefy, which isn’t much of a challenge when a significant percentage of your audience is on Ecstasy. Burning Man began in 1986 as a guy event and, though women’s numbers have been creeping up, the 2010 Festival was 60 percent male and overwhelmingly white; 58 percent reported incomes of less than \$50,000/year, while 25 percent made \$80,000/year or more; and 85 percent were under fifty years old, with the overwhelming majority under forty. This, it strikes me, is one of the great lessons of maturity: how hard it is to build something up, how easy to tear it down! Boys are socialized to build, but many of those same boys like to blow things up. There will always be people who refuse to grow up, who take greater pleasure in tearing down—witness our endless wars, watch *Avatar*. If these fiery sculptures leave a lasting impression, it is of awe; and awe, as Edmund Burke pointed out centuries ago, is rooted in fear—fear of what we can do and of our willingness to do it.

Love cannot live in the presence of fear. Yet there is—as there must be—the eternal hope of repair and renewal.

Late in the week, long past midnight, I visit Thunderdome, a dimly lit geodesic dome from which two harnesses are suspended. A dominatrix dressed as Barbarella selects combatants (in this case, dressed as pink rabbits), who are strapped into the harnesses and provided with padded clubs. The harnesses are hung sufficiently far apart to limit serious mayhem, but the flailing is real and the scene is not pretty. Profanity is the dominant idiom. The elegantly dependent clause is nowhere to be heard.

After one bout I leave Thunderdome to seek refuge on the farthest reaches of the playa. I wander far beyond the noise and crowds and lights, and there, in the star-spangled blackness of a moonless Nevada night, I stumble on this apparition: a flawlessly recreated 1950s diner, complete with black-and-white checkered linoleum, stainless steel napkin dispensers, and those metal creamers that spill when used. Forty miles from permanent habitation, I clamber onto a round chrome stool upholstered in black leatherette, to be served coffee and a perfectly grilled cheese sandwich, Velveeta and American on white toast. Waitresses wearing matching baby-blue uniforms sport two-foot blonde beehives and jaw in Brooklyn accents. Later there will be cheesecake. The Milky Way

twinkles overhead. A dust devil whirls by. A waitress leans across the counter and tucks two postcards featuring the Dust City Diner in my vest pocket. “Send one of dese to your muddah,” she says. “And keep duh uddah one, so that tomorrow you’ll know this wudden a acid trip or a dream.”

Except that it *is* a dream, stranger than any acid trip. The events of my waking life usually take years to penetrate my subconscious, but the week after Burning Man I dream of it every night, drifting in and out of sleep, unsure whether I’m encountering hallucinations or memories.

Before the festival opens, crews work together building camps and art. They help one another out, feed one another, care for one another. Then the public arrives and the energy begins to corrupt. By week’s end the playa is taken over by seekers wanting drugs, wanting sex, wanting—they don’t know what they want, they only know the wanting, and it is a powerful force, all that unchanneled desire, all those people confusing it with sex, scratching at it as at an unhealed wound, all that choosing of the apple over paradise.

This is the story of the Fall, some version of which all the old stories teach, if only we will listen.

But we never listen. We dismiss the old stories as quaint tales even as every day we act them out. The playa is the very theater of their acting out.

## Desire for the Divine

Sunrise on the playa. Music drifts from all sides, pop and salsa and under and over all the penetrating bass of techno, but no one plays the great classics (e.g., Beethoven, Bach, Mozart) with which even in the disco era deejays greeted the dawn. Somewhere an art car is playing over and over *I Want to Know What Love Is* and the pop song seems apropos. Burning / Man is QED about desire, but desire for what? Or whom? Desire to live outside time, in the state the great mystics call *perfect prayer*? Desire for God?

In writing the question I realize for the first time which, of chicken or egg, came first: desire preceded God. With its rules of grammar and syntax, human speech must necessarily be the servant of reason, but desire is the antipode of reason; and so we demand—we require—a placeholder, a word to label our longing. And so out of our boundless desire we named God.

Let us cross-examine this logic: by definition, infinity is beyond logic, beyond the capacity of reason to describe or encompass. And yet all the old stories in all the great traditions agree that God is infinite. How then may we know the Unknowable, the Infinite, God, the gods and goddesses? Surely only through that aspect of the human condition that is itself limitless: through our desire, which is not at all the same as sex; maybe a better word is *longing*.

Thus through the infinitude of our desire may we understand the infinitude of God.

Sometimes I think that God *is* desire, and that desire *is* God.

This idea, which strikes our cynical, jaded, prudish, early

twenty-first-century ears as bizarre, was commonplace in the Middle Ages and lay close to the heart of the teachings of some of its most famous preachers and mystics—Bernard of Clairvaux, Abélard, John of the Cross, Theresa of Avila, Meister Eckhart, and Julian of Norwich. Some theologians of the time understood angels as pure desire, an idea that has sadly fallen by the wayside, along with the companion understanding that in the hierarchy of being, angels are inferior to humans, since they are given heaven, whereas we have to earn it.

Every human gesture begins in desire. Our post-Victorian, essentially Protestant culture insists on interpreting “desire” as “sexual desire,” when—at least for *Homo sapiens*—the biological itch is merely its literal manifestation, an objective correlative of a much greater desire—for union, for communion with what many would label God and some would wisely decline to label at all.

Some scholars interpret *YHWH*, the mystical tetragrammaton spoken to Moses out of the wind, as meaning quite literally “I am what is.” What *is*, at least in the human condition, is dissatisfaction, longing, desire. Desire for the good, Plato would say, desire for Beauty, which on the Burning Man website translates into desire for social justice and transformation.

At least that’s the ideal, but in the practical application a lot gets lost. The party-goers, who have not thought through the event with anything like the seriousness of its organizers, arrive wanting a good high, and the festival delivers.

## Nomads in Search of a Personal Revolution

In the end the Burning Man experience is so individual as to defy generalization—I write less about *what it was* than *what I wanted it to be*. It sets out to create a sacred space, which calls forth not doctrine and dogma but the dreams that live in our hearts. In a sacred space we live not in “reality” (the only word, Nabokov wrote, that ought always to be enclosed in quotation marks) but in desire—in longing—in (if one must supply a name) God.

A passage comes to mind from a letter of a Trappist monk, friend of my family:

The return to God must come, but hard shall He have to strike before people will accept the easy and just solution. . . . The real revolution must be a personal one. Each individual must make it himself.

If Burning Man is fifty thousand nomads in search of a personal revolution, where better to seek it than the desert, archetypal landscape of seekers?

We live in a faithless age, when what so many educated people lack is not belief—there’s too much of that, whether belief in the great gray-bearded Guy in the Sky to solve all our problems or belief in the power of technology to solve all our problems. We lack not *belief* but (*continued on page 61*)

one another with wings interlocking. “There I will meet with you,” God says, “and impart to you—from between the two cherubim—all that I will command you.” What a beautiful teaching about the power to be found in the place where people face one another. Not only does it suggest that God “meets with” us there, but that it is from this space that God imparts ongoing commandments—real time instructions regarding our religious obligations. In relationship and in spiritual community, we can discern the right path with a clarity that we could not achieve alone.

In religious literature we also find the ideal of community as a spiritual-political end in itself. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. called it “the Beloved Community”—the community of the Promised Land, radically inclusive and rooted in love. It is a community in which marginalized voices are elevated and its members have a serious investment in one another’s welfare. In “The Role of the Church in Facing the Nation’s Chief Moral Dilemma,” King writes:

The end is reconciliation; the end is redemption; the end is the creation of the beloved community. It

is this type of spirit and this type of love that can transform opposers into friends. . . . It is the love of God working in the lives of people. This is the love that may well be the salvation of our civilization.

This kind of love may indeed be the salvation of our civilization. It is certainly a countercultural love in that it refuses to be instrumentalized in the service of secular ends. It excludes no one; it is impractical, uneconomical, and indiscriminating. A community that can embody this kind of love, even partially, even sometimes, challenges the culture of domination. It destabilizes capitalism’s foundational assumptions of, in the words of legal theorist Peter Gabel, “an inherent antagonism between self and other.” This is why the words “nice” and “polite” do not even begin to describe the urgent work of community. The urgent work of community is to actualize God’s immanence in this world.

This kind of community is hard to come by. It takes spiritual discipline, wise teachers, and the crucible of a live, frustrating collection of flawed humans to practice within. It takes inviting these flawed humans over

for lunch, getting involved in their human problems. It takes the humility of admitting that ancient wisdom traditions as well as contemporary ones may have something to teach you. It takes a willingness to sometimes—even often—set aside one’s private agenda and preferences for the good of the collective.

And what do you get in exchange for these sacrifices and all this hard work? You get to not be alone. Really, deeply, not alone. You get to know that, as you have a stake in your community’s welfare, your community has a stake in your welfare—not just a polite interest, but a real stake. You get to trade in a nice life in which the highest value is freedom for a holy life in which the highest value is love. Most of all, you get the deep sense of purpose that comes from participating in something much, much larger than yourself. Because of course the Beloved Community is a vision larger than any one shul or ashram or church or political party, larger than one election cycle or one lifetime. It is a holy vision of the Promised Land of peace and justice—a time and a place where all of creation is united through love. Sounds nice, doesn’t it? ■

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**JOHNSON** (continued from page 23)

*faith*, rooted in humility before the unknowable mystery in which we live.

“Citizens of modernity, consumers of violence as spectacle, adepts of proximity without risk, are schooled to be cynical about the possibility of sincerity.” That’s Susan Sontag, who as a New Yorker knew whereof she wrote. “Some people will do anything to keep themselves from being moved. How much easier, from one’s chair, far from danger, to claim the position of superiority.”

Whatever one may write or say of the Burners, they, or at least their organizers, are not in their chairs. If at

a time of declining resources, peaceful change is possible, it will manifest itself not, judging from their dismal outcomes, through global climate conferences, but through a new generation teaching itself (they are not learning this from their elders) the many ways that less is or can be more. Is it possible, is it imaginable that Burning Man could be one means to that end?

### Action and Humility

Burning Man’s organizers understand the power of ideas, which are so much stronger than armies. And what is their primary motivating idea? That action

trumps thought. The last and thus most privileged of Burning Man’s guiding principles reads, “Immediate experience is . . . the most important touchstone of value in our culture.”

It is an ancient delusion, rooted more in wishful thinking than in fact, that enlightenment resides in unmediated experience. A creature that does not labor to learn and sustain the discipline of paying attention is soon a dead creature. This fact applies to human beings, however our technology—from the pointed stick used to plant the first seed to the iPhone—enables and encourages us to live oblivious to the facts of life, including most particularly

death. Thus does Burning Man subscribe to and extend the era of flash and dazzle over pause and think.

All the same, the last of the ten principles continues, “We seek to overcome barriers that stand between us and . . . a natural world exceeding human powers,” a phrase that the Burning Man website invokes elsewhere and that reveals a humility not often encountered in the rhetoric of left-wingers or libertarians. What are the implications of this humility? My post-Burning Man dreams feature not flaming globes and Thunderdome but the Dust City Diner and a slow waltz at 2 AM with an old friend wearing a cutaway. The flaming globe and Thunderdome exemplify artists beating our chests; the Dust City Diner and the starlight dance exemplify artists reaching out. It’s the difference between art as narcissism and art as an expression of love.

And art that springs from love just might be one version of a moral equivalent of war, an outlet for all that testosterone that otherwise expresses itself in battle. Love roots itself in desire—not for combat but for communion, in which a grilled cheese sandwich can serve as an entirely adequate Eucharist.

## Subverting the Culture of Empire

We must see the tawdry excess for what it is—bread and circuses—and in that same moment see through it to what lies beyond: the desire to know and be one with each other, in union with what we once had the courage or temerity to name.

I am perforce aware of the resistance evoked by that Name, of the horrors perpetrated ostensibly in its service, the abuses that have been heaped upon it, the cliché it has become. As a younger, angrier man I rejected it—why name the unnameable? In midlife, possessed of experience and memory, I encounter the answer: we do not remember or even perceive the nameless. To name the gods is to seize fire from their hands and, equally



*A double rainbow shines above Black Rock City at Burning Man in 2007.*

important, *to assume responsibility for its use*. To reject the Name was once my greatest act of courage, but these days I find a greater courage in reclaiming the word—one of the infinite names for that aspect of a “natural world exceeding human powers.”

The old myths are sufficient—the patterns are archetypal and repeat because history describes not a line but a circle or, more aptly, a spiral, turning back on itself. The youngest child at the sacred meal must ask the prescribed questions. The Christmas crèche must always have its holy infant, its ox and lamb, its hovering angels and its three Magi. The Yaquis of Arizona must every year strip their elaborate masks and pile them on the burning pyre, after which they must crawl in supplication to the Deer Dancer and the Virgin.

But as powerful and enduring as our need for myth is the need to reinvent it, recutting the old patterns to the cloth of contemporary life; and so every year we build the Man, and every year we put Him to the torch.

And so we arrive at the timeless, essentially religious questions that live at the heart of the “modern malaise” that Burning Man’s organizers seek to solve. Is history linear or round? Must we repeat

our mistakes in different guises and settings? Or can we learn from them and progress? But how do we define progress? Ever fancier gewgaws and gadgets (at least the boys are building art instead of bombs)? Or a deeper and broader understanding and practice of myth and ritual (the Dust City Diner)? Is Burning Man just another means of extending the adolescence of empire, where people who, denied conquest and exploitation, resort to the Nevada desert to play out their fantasies? Or is it a good-faith effort in sagebrush country—heartland of white man’s exploitation—to subvert and transform the culture of empire through “leave no trace”?

## Less Is More: A Gesture of Faith

A year and more has passed since I attended Burning Man, but a visit to the webpage suggests not much has changed. A “sister nonprofit,” the Black Rock Arts Foundation, is continuing its program of small grants (maximum \$1,000) to worldwide projects that in many ways meet the festival’s ideals more closely than does the festival itself, e.g., a Guatemalan school built from recycled plastic bottles. It uses

its website to mobilize volunteers in response to various natural and man-made disasters. Burning Man's latest do-good project is undertaking to revitalize "a depressed San Francisco neighborhood" without displacing its low-income residents—or so organizers claim, though the website is vague on how this is to be accomplished.

Among the fifty thousand, the artists and writers seem best prepared to do the slog labor required to turn the wheel. But Burning Man presents no apparent challenges to transnational corporate rule or wars of aggression aimed at maintaining the economic power of a declining empire. In fact the festival is remarkably apolitical, perhaps because many of its principals

derive their prosperity from corporate institutions at the heart of our empire (Lucasfilm, DreamWorks, Google, Pixar).

Often I find myself wondering if its organizers could take the bold step of declaring "Burning Green" as the theme of a particular year—say, Burning Man 2013. For that one year the festival could ban generator-powered installations and limit RVs to one per site. What would happen if the festival made such an emphatic statement about our need to wean ourselves from fossil fuel-powered spectacle? *That* would be the ultimate gesture of faith in the festival's capacity to transform and adapt the culture of empire.

Until the organizers make such a dramatic gesture, I have a hard time taking their aspirations seriously, even as I have faith that simply declaring those aspirations gives the next generation a goal to which to aspire. In this sense Burning Man could be read as a paradigm for the whole of our energy-hogging society: Anybody can talk the simple life talk. But can we walk the simple life walk?

We may repair our past and redeem our future—if we can—not through education alone but through a disciplined imagination rooted in humility before the "natural world exceeding human powers." ■

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#### WILDSTREAK (continued from page 26)

of a character is affected by the player's unavoidable absence. For a writer like me, that can be very distressing.

Some of the people I've grown the closest to in the games are physically disabled people who describe these fantasy worlds as a wonderful escape. The games, several of them have told me, make their lives better, giving them a way to connect with others that can add great joy to their lives. I am among that group of disabled players now, though I wasn't when I first came into the games. Even when suffering with chronic pain from a condition that, barring a miracle (and I do believe in miracles!), will eventually leave me crippled, in the games I find myself laughing out loud in earnest with my online friends. There have been times in my life when my online friends were the only ones who stuck by me when my real-life friends and family turned their backs. For those of us in this group, I hope the game developers find a way to allow us to submerge even more deeply in these created worlds so that the pain of our bodies can be forgotten for a while.

#### Elves, Paladins, and Spiritual Healing

One of my most interesting characters was a blood elf death knight who was also a priest in an alternate universe. His name was Zaraek Starstriker.

A fundamentalist Christian man was behind the female elf who played my male elfin character's girlfriend. He also played her elfin guardian. A good writer and a good soul, he made a point to reach out to people and bring a little light into their lives. I still keep in touch with him through Facebook and Yahoo chat.

I was hesitant about creating a death knight character. Previously I had mainly played priestess characters, but I was finding that approach to ministry too obvious. I tried to be subtle, creating my own scavenger hunt and trivia games in the general chat channels to draw the players into spiritual discussion. This worked to a degree, but I thought that offering parables and allowing my readers to discover new truths as my characters did would be more effective. I needed to leave a bread-crumbs trail rather than wallop

the players with Christmas fruitcake to make them see stars.

One of my companions was a Wiccan woman, another great writer who played the leader of an evil guild, a female elf who threw my paladin death knight off the back of her skeletal dreadmount while in air and left him for dead. She was a lot of fun!

The role-play with her also allowed for exploration of some profound spiritual concepts. She told me once that my character revealed the most Christlike personality she had ever encountered. Through our role-play, her perception of the true nature of Christ was enriched and deepened. It was very satisfying to be that bridge for her from Tammuz to Christ.

During that time, unfortunately, she was also being judged and harassed by a fundamentalist Christian player. After standing up for her, I started getting threatening messages from people I barely knew. I left "World of Warcraft" because of this and went to "EverQuest" to continue the online ministry.

On "EverQuest," I played a dark elf who was raised away from the evil home city in a seaside shack. Because of that