

SIBYLS CHRISTIAN SPIRITUALITY TRANSGENDER SUPPORT GROUP

21st ANNIVERSARY DINNER 18 March 2018

At St Katharine's Foundation London

It was a delight to return to the Sibyls' original home to celebrate its 21st Anniversary. The Dinner was held on the 18th March 2018 at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine. The invitation to attend was extended to all members of the Sibyls, all former members, and everyone who has helped or supported the Sibyls at any time during the years of its existence. The event began with afternoon tea/coffee in the lounge at St Katharine's, followed by a communion service in the Chapel and then the dinner.

Malcolm Johnson presided at the Communion Service: It was Malcolm, then Master of the Royal Foundation of St Katherine who suggested forming a support group and then gave help and encouragement to Jay Walmsley when she founded the Sibyls in 1996.



The Sermon preached by the Revd Dr Christina Beardsley during the Communion Service
The address given by Susan Gilchrist during the dinner is also available on this link, and a letter of thanks from Jay Walmsley follows

Susan Gilchrist

SERMON FOR THE SIBYLS' ANNIVERSARY DINNER

Royal Foundation of St Katherine's, London

Lent 5

10th March 2018

Tina Beardsley

There was a whole section of material that didn't make it into the Sibyls' book due to constraints of space – the dreaded number count: jokes and humour. Amongst the papers Helen Savage handed over to me and to Michelle O'Brien we were surprised to discover this cache of funny stories that had been sent in by Sibyls' members. This was my favourite. A Sibyl is standing in a department store lift and a woman turns to her and asks, 'Is that a wig.' The Sibyl responds, 'It is, actually'; and the woman replies, 'You'd never guess.'

You'd never guess! I'm sure that when Malcolm advised Jay to found the group for trans Christians that was to become the Sibyls, neither could have guessed the story that would unfold nor the gratitude that we and many others feel today on its 21st plus birthday. Directees don't always follow their spiritual directors' advice, but we can be truly glad that Jay did, and for all that God has done, in and through the Sibyls in the past two decades and more. Neither Malcolm nor Jay, nor the small group that gathered for the first meeting Jay's house in August 1996, could guess what lay ahead, but they embraced this initiative with a faith, hope and love that set a tone continued by their successors.

Looking back now those were difficult times for us as trans people. Who could have guessed in 1996 – unless you were involved in trans activism – that just three years later the government would introduce employment protections for trans people? Prior to that we could be dismissed just for coming out and signalling our intention to transition. Again, given that legal cases in which trans people – like Mark Rees – campaigned for their basic human rights (privacy; marriage), seemed to make little progress in international courts: who could have guessed, in 1996, that just 8 years later the Gender Recognition Act would be passed, and 9 years after that, the Marriage Couples (Same Sex Couples) Act, which, although it included spousal consent, simplified matters for married trans people who transition?

In 1996 there was just one 'out' trans clergy person in the Church of England – albeit Sibyls' chaplain, the Revd David, Horton was in touch with several more. Today of course there are 9 'out and proud' trans Church of England clergy, several more in training, and some in other churches. Back then though, being trans was not just hard for clergy, it was hard for laity too, many of whom were unable to worship as themselves in their local church, some having been excluded or cold-shouldered for being trans. Which is why every Sibyls' meeting, whether it was a weekend, or the Epiphany party, or the summer garden party at Jay's, included a celebration of Holy Communion, that central act of Christian worship in which we're united with God through Christ in the Holy Spirit, and with one another. In our gospel this evening, Jesus sends two of the disciples to prepare the Upper Room for that meal at which he will take the bread and the cup into his hands. And for Sibyls, as a spirituality group, prayer has always been important; prayer and food; and in the Eucharist of course the two combine.

The Alpha Course didn't invent the faith and food format. As Jay notes in the Sibyls' book: 'The successful basis for future meetings would be a safe place with a sharing of both religious experience and food and drink, preferably with a degree of comfort. Jesus is frequently reported eating with others; his lead often makes sense.' The need for safety was important, but who could have guessed in 1996, the freedom of expression that the internet would bring to trans people, through its access to knowledge and the enhanced possibilities

of networking. As the recently published collection *Trans Britain: our journey from the shadows* illustrates, it took two decades more to reach the so-called tipping point of trans visibility in 2015, but throughout those years, and prior to that, trans people were there, sometimes visible, sometimes not, playing their role in society.

And that's another aspect that none of us could have guessed in 1996, the way in which both gender itself – think of the growing numbers who identify as genderqueer or as non-binary – and especially the ways in which the power dynamics of gender, are increasingly questioned and deconstructed: recent renewed awareness of the shocking intractability of the pay gap between men and women, four decades after the Sex Discrimination Act; the thinly veiled misogyny that lurks in various professions, my own included; and the recent 'Me too' campaign, which has revealed appalling attitudes and behaviours towards women. These are features of the bigger picture around sex and gender that form the background to our lives, both then and now.

It's interesting that the Church of England tried to address the big picture in the 2003 volume, *Some issues in human sexuality: a guide to the debate* which does consider gender identity as well as sexuality. We're quite hard on it in the Sibyls' book, because of its very inadequate chapter about trans people, but it contains this interesting quote from feminist theorist Lucy Irigaray from her book *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, and it highlights this global perspective in relation to gender, "Sexual difference" she writes, "is one of the major philosophical issues, if not the issue, of our day. According to Heidegger [& it's great to have mentioned Heidegger in a sermon!], each age has one issue to think through, and only one. Sexual difference is probably the issue in our time which could be our "salvation" if we thought it through.' I bought Irigaray's book seeking enlightenment on how to do that, but like many feminist theorists her text proved impenetrable.

No matter. It's up to us, each one of us, to think this through, and our own particular experience counts in this process. When a friend at work asked about the subject of the book I was working on – at that point the Sibyls' book – and I said it was about transgender Christians, he replied, 'Mmm, that's a niche subject.' True, but it's a very significant niche. As someone said in the Sibyls' 'gender, sexuality and spirituality' workshop, being trans can involve serving God in specific ways, and may be a unique or particular calling'. That particularity comes across, both in the Sibyls' book and in the extracts from Chris Dowd's interviews with 12 trans Christians in *Transfaith* (which is hot from the press and on sale today).

Where we're often undermined in our particularity is by mishandling of the Bible that focuses on gender differences, especially Genesis 1 & 2. So I was delighted with tonight's readings, which not only highlight Jesus' Passion, and hence the season, but use inclusive language. In our first reading from Romans, the one man – whether the old Adam or the new Adam, Christ – is 'human being' not 'male person' – in the Greek text. This is big picture stuff about human frailty and God's salvation through the divine humanity of Christ. The Bible is far less interested in gender than some people seem to think. Sadly, linguistics also work against particularising tonight's gospel as a trans narrative, for in the Greek it's not a 'man' 'carrying a jar of water – women's work in Jesus' day – but a human being. But the trans reading isn't ruled out: 'human' does include the male, after all. A man carrying a water jar would have stood out and so helped the disciples to find the Upper Room. As trans people we often worry that we stand out, but if, by the same token, we're leading others into loving companionship with Christ, and each other, maybe that's a price worth paying.

However self-conscious we might be about our gender history, it's probably not such a big deal for other people. Think of that Sibyl in the lift: did the other woman know that she was a Sibyl, know that she was trans? Presumably she did. But it didn't matter. As the lady said, 'You'd never guess.'

Address to the 21st Anniversary Dinner of the Sibyls Christian Spirituality Transgender Support Group.

Susan Gilchrist

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18 March 2018

It was Malcolm Johnson, then Master of the Royal Foundation of St Katherine who suggested forming a support group, and then gave support and encouragement to Jay Walmsley when she founded the Sibyls, a Christian Spirituality Group for Transgender People in 1996. The first meeting was held on the 3rd August 1996 in Jay's house. The second meeting was held at the Royal Foundation of St Katharine in October 1996. The Sibyls prospered for many years under Jay's leadership and it is a delight to return to the Sibyls' original home of St Katharine's today, the 18th March 2018 to celebrate its 21st Anniversary. Many things have happened since those first meetings. Those who remember those early meetings will remember the need for confidentiality and secrecy that then applied

We have all been on a journey, not just across the divisions of gender but in terms of public roles. Today transgender people have a much more unrestricted profile, but for some the need for confidentiality and privacy remains just as great, and this is also a time when certain conservative elements in the Christian Churches are placing us under increasing attack.

The support that Sibyls gives for this invisible in society is, and must always be fundamental to our role: we must NEVER do anything that changes that. If we are on our own journeys, there are others who travel with us. The journeys that our spouses make are not of their own volition and the challenges they face are often greater if not just as great. For that reason I want to welcome all our spouses, partners and friends that are with us this evening. I would ask you to join me in a toast to *"To all our partners, spouses and friends for all your love, care and support"*

Currently the membership of the Sibyls is just under 100. The fundamental aim of the Sibyls was and is very simple, it is to provide safes spaces where transgender people could meet, gain mutual support, create friendships, find the esteem of valuing who we are, banish loneliness by coming to know each other, and to take part in worship and communion together. All of this in the roles that we know are true to ourselves. We continue to run events and provide resources where members of Sibyls can meet each other in confidence. We give help care and support wherever we can. We offer events which are open to all transgender people, friends, partners and others that support us. We engage with other groups including One Body One Faith, GIREs, and Inclusive Church. We are also the only transgender group who is a member of the European Forum for LGBT Christians. I would particular to extend our thanks to all of these groups through Bernard, Terry, Fiona and Elaine who are present this evening, and Tracey who has sent us a very kind message of support, but whose efforts to get here were defeated by the snow.

Through these groups, and also on our own, we work for advocacy and greater understanding of transgender people and the issues we face. We do this through our partnerships with these and other groups, membership of other organisations, through our representations to the Churches, presentations by members, and not least through the publication of the Sibyls books. (Later that evening a gift of appreciation for her work on the

first Sibyls Book was made to Tina Beardsley. A parallel gift is being made to Michelle O'Brien)

I am reminded of how Jay set out our aims. She said: The Sibyls is a UK-based confidential Christian spirituality group for transgender people, their partners and supporters which seeks to fulfil the two great commandments of Jesus: To love God and love one another.

In all of our activities we must remain true to this role and to this mission as a Christian Confidential Support Group in a changing world.

In the societies we have lived in most of us have conformed to the male or female binary roles. Today with the increasing openness of society many people are no longer seeking to conform to these binary roles. The internet and social media have become the main means of communication between younger transgender people and the need for confidentiality is not as great. Although "*TransChristianUK*" is not an integral part of the Sibyls it has been set up under the sponsorship and initiative of the Sibyls to cater for these needs.

Currently "*TransChristianUK*" has a membership of just under 150 people. It has its own website but it runs primarily through the medium of an open forum facebook group. The majority of those who contribute to it are not members of the Sibyls. Each of these elements provides a complement to the other and the offer of joining the Sibyls is made open to its members. In that way Sibyls can broaden its mission and keep to the role of the confidential support group that it has always sought to be.

I want to speak now to those founding members of the Sibyls who are with us this evening and to thank you for all you have done, for without your efforts and vision none of this could have taken place. Jay we want to thank you in particular for your own vision and your steadfast guidance over many years. Not just on behalf of the Sibyls but, at a personal level for many of us. Your help encouragement and support has been enormous. Our words cannot thank you enough for this and we would like you to accept this gift on behalf of the Sibyls for all you have done and given to us over the years.

PRESENTATION and toast to "*the Sibyls*"

Susan Gilchrist. Sgen4144@gmail.com

Sibyls Website www.sibyls.co.uk

TransChristianUK Website www.transchristian.gndr.org.uk

Sibyls Books

"This is my body: Hearing the theology of transgender Christians" by Christina Beardsley (Author), Michelle O'Brien (Author) Publisher: Darton Longman & Todd (26 May 2016) ISBN-10: 0232532060 ISBN-13: 978-0232532067

"Transfaith: A Transgender Pastoral Resource" by Chris Dowd (Author), Christina Beardsley (Author), Justin Tanis (Author) Publisher: Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd (22 Feb. 2018): ISBN-10: 0232533113: ISBN-13: 978-0232533118

A third book is under preparation

A Big Thank You to the Sibyls

Jay

When I read in the newsletter that the committee was to hold a 21st Anniversary Dinner at St Katharine's, I was very pleased and was determined to be present. Then the committee in their kindness invited me as the guest of honour, which was quite unexpected, but there was no hesitation in saying yes.

I thought the day was excellent. It was a good choice to hold it at St Katharine's which was where the first arranged meeting was held in October 1996. It was an inspired touch to invite Malcolm Johnson to take the communion service as he took the first ever Sibyls communion service at that October meeting. Since then he has given enormous support to the Sibyls (it was his idea) and in getting the group off the ground; the Sibyls owe him much.



There was plenty of time to chat with friends old and new; the lounge in the modernised St Katharine's was just the right size for people to meet, sit and circulate. The communion service got us on our feet and the spirited rendering of Cwm Rhonnda at the end was exactly right. Group photos too were very reminiscent.

The dinner was a very pleasant occasion. I had been asked to say a few words but before I could say anything, Susan stepped forward and presented me with an inscribed glass bowl in appreciation of my work with the Sibyls. I had no idea that it was coming but was very touched and grateful; that bowl has a proud place in my living room.

More was to follow. Peter gave me a big bag of cards which individual Sibyls had been kind enough to send. There wasn't time at the dinner to open them and so I put them safely to one side.

After dinner there was more chat but no one stayed up until two in the morning. I took my cards with me to my bedroom. Due to a chest infection I had been carrying for a few weeks, I was exhausted and fit only for bed.

In the morning I started reading them. The love and care shown reduced me to tears in no time flat and I couldn't continue. I eventually read them when I got home and again was moved to tears by the appreciation. The last envelope of all enclosed a cheque for all the donations over and above the cost of the bowl. I just wept, so kind. Thank you all very much.

Working with Sibyls was a pleasure. I have often thought that my role was to provide good places and ideas and opportunities for things to happen. The Sibyls brought their sincerity and love. With that mixture, things could and did happen.

I will always be grateful for my time with the Sibyls, which has given me so much, and I'll not forget your kindness and love. Thank you. God bless you all.