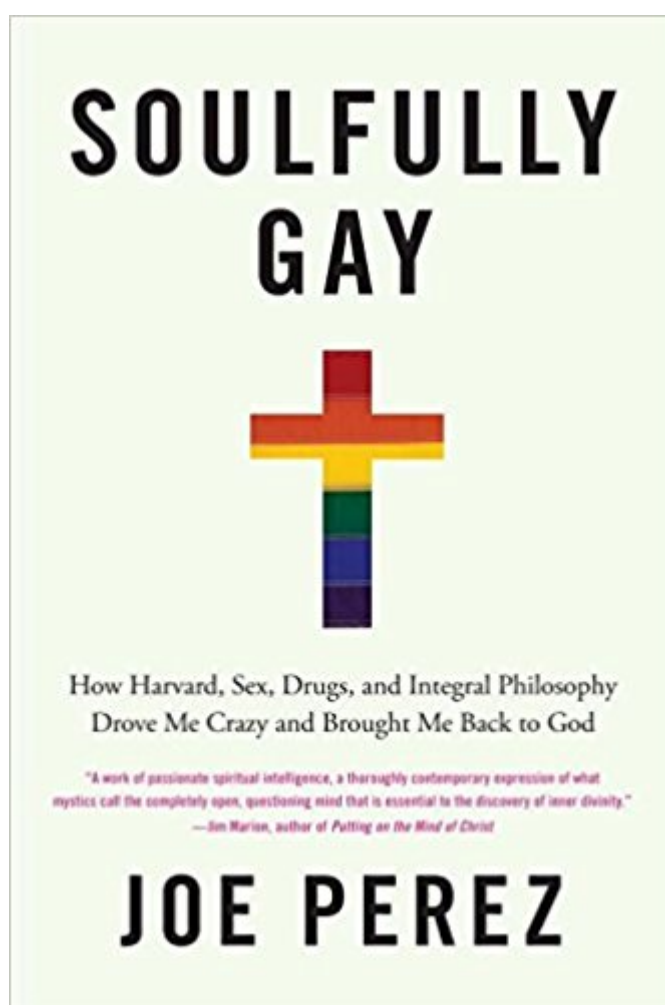


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Soulfully Gay: How Harvard, Sex, Drugs, And Integral Philosophy Drove Me Crazy And Brought Me Back To God



Synopsis

Soulfully Gay is a personal memoir of an intellectually rigorous gay man wrestling with fundamental issues of meaning and self-acceptance. Joe Perez finds himself on a quest to understand what it means to be gay at the intersection of conflicts between homosexuality and Christianity, faith and skepticism, mysticism and madness. His journey unfolds amid challenges to his health as a recovering addict, a survivor of a psychotic episode, and a man living with AIDS. Joe is able to integrate seemingly contradictory elements—his Roman Catholic upbringing versus his openly gay lifestyle, his authentic mystical experiences versus the delusions for which he was hospitalized. With a solid understanding of theology and an ability to see through the veils of political correctness, Joe brings a new level of intellect and understanding to the challenges of being a gay man.

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Customer Reviews

Crystal meth, the Catholic church, leather bars, Jesus, a psychiatric ward, falling T-cell counts, terrifying visions—these are just some of the topics in this collection of blogs, personal journals and newspaper columns from 2003 and 2004. Perez, now 37, came out during his senior year at Harvard, lost his brother to AIDS a year later and tested HIV-positive at age 24. Raised Catholic, he suffered addiction and psychosis as he tried to reconcile his gayness and his hunger for religious experience. Then he discovered the books of Ken Wilber, a leader in the Integral Movement, and for the first time thought he had found a way to reconcile his warring drives; much of the book explains the philosophy of Wilber (who pens the foreword) and that of his follower Jim Marion. Bloglike, Perez's account leaps from memoir to book review to exposition to interview. Perhaps his most

successful entries are his psychedelic descriptions of madness: his breakdown in his late 20s, his mystical experiences in the hospital, his nightmares as psychosis returned. This is an arresting record of a soul in progress, but readers who come for the story may leave during the lectures.
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"Perez's account leaps from memoir to book review to exposition to interview. . . . His most successful entries are his psychedelic descriptions of madness. This is an arresting record of a soul in progress." —Publishers Weekly "Perez is certainly not the first writer to try to find a unique mixture of alternate sexuality and religiosity, but his memoir has the heat and immediacy of the blog from which it developed. As Perez comes to terms with illness, loneliness, and the spirit, he also shows us a part of the future of reading and publishing—the voyeuristic thrills of blog diaries and a continual dialog between print and electronic media." —Library Journal "An author of unstoppable courage, Joe Perez is unafraid to question any and all assumptions about spirituality, sexuality, homosexuality, and himself, writing with probing analysis and common sense. *Soulfully Gay* is a brave act of self-examination and self-revelation as well as a valuable addition to the growing body of literature that explores the spiritual meaning of same-sex love. To read Perez's journal is to accompany him on his spiritual journey." —David Carter, author of *Stonewall: The Riots That Sparked the Gay Revolution* "Joe Perez's book is perhaps the most astonishing, brilliant, and courageous look at the interface between individual belief and cultural values that has been written in our times by a homosexual, or a heterosexual, or any other sexual I am aware of." —Ken Wilber, author of *A Theory of Everything*

This review appeared in *White Crane Journal* #74, Fall 2007. As founder and manager for some four years of the Gay Spirituality & Culture Weblog that originated around the 2004 Gay Spirit Summit, Joe Perez has made himself a significant place in the gay spirituality movement. His blog has offered an ongoing series of comments and reactions to news and media events about our issues. Now in this personal memoir and philosophical autobiography he shares the events that brought him to an intellectually rigorous and psychologically satisfying understanding of homosexuality as a spiritual/philosophical experience. An important part of Perez's story is his discovery of the elaborate philosophical system of synthesizer extraordinaire Ken Wilber. Perez has become an exponent for Wilber's ideas in the gay context. And Wilber, in turn, has provided a Foreword to *Soulfully Gay*. One might quibble with why Wilber begins by emphatically declaring that he himself is not gay, but he ends the Foreword with a wonderful statement about Perez's

process and accomplishment. Wilber says that because Joe has learned through his life experience to feel deeply, deeply okay about himself, he is able to say yes to life and that has made Joe's life into a work of art. What a wonderful thing to be able to say about yourself and, even better, to have one of your heroes and teachers say about you! Soulfully Gay is itself a work of art. It is a sort of diary, organized by date, through which Perez recounts to himself and his readers, of course, the events that have led him from being a devout Catholic youth from a working class background to a Harvard student studying comparative religion to sexual rebel and crystal meth user to AIDS survivor and then AIDS patient himself to mental patient to mystic to philosopher. One of the crucial events in his life was a nervous breakdown during which he imagined his life was being made into a movie called The Seeker. The most skillful, soulful story telling gimmick of the book is the gradual unreeling of this narrative, building up to a final climax that is part Buddhist mystic vision and part Thelma & Louise. Tucked within the autobiography are several very interesting discussions of gay spirituality. Perez's primary insight, he says, and I agree, is what he calls "The Importance of Being Gay." In a series of six short essays he argues that there are four universal, archetypal patterns that necessarily play out in human consciousness. These are masculine, feminine, other-directed and same-directed. Love, he says, is not just an emotion or a sexual dynamic, but rather a manifestation of the soul's desire to be reunited with God and this is how God loves: in love of others (heterophilia) and in love of self (homophilia). It is these archetypal patterns that result in humans being male, female, heterosexual and homosexual. The model very nicely places homosexuality as simply part of the way things are. And that insight eases homophobia and fear. Another layer of his model includes how fear is also other-directed and same-directed. Either way it is assuaged with truth. Developing a systematic approach to determining truth is the main thrust of Ken Wilber's philosophy (which he boldly calls in one of his book titles A Theory of Everything). And Perez is following in his path. Unfortunately, this reviewer thinks, he follows Wilber in the pattern of making up acronyms for wide-ranging concepts. Wilber calls his integral theory of everything AQAL (meaning "all quadrants, all levels" and including all lines, all states, and all types). Perez calls his vision of how gayness fits into the universal patterns T.I.O.B.G. ("the importance of being gay"). I don't care for the acronyms. But I do thoroughly agree with Wilber's and Joe Perez's process of seeking a higher and higher perspective, of being "all-inclusive." Perez rightly argues all through the book that homosexuality has to be understood from the higher perspective (called God) not just from within human prejudice. The Gay Spirit Summit

occurred during the period of this diary, and Joe *blogged* the Summit. Though it doesn't provide specific details, Soulfully Gay does document that event. One of the missions Joe Perez adopted for himself while he was managing the Gay Spiritual & Culture blog was the very practical task of starting up a recognizably gay celebration of the winter solstice and new year. He explains that in 1966 the African-American cultural holiday Kwanzaa was initiated by one man, Dr. Maulana Ron Karenga; now it is celebrated by millions. Couldn't one person, similarly, create a gay equivalent in that same spirit? Perez reports on his dialogues with other gay spiritual leaders about establishing such a parallel gay holiday (I am honored to have been included in that dialogue). He gives an account of a Yuletide/Rainbow New Year/Bridge of Light ritual he designed and conducted. Perhaps his vision will still come about "in part because it's now immortalized in this book. The weblog/diary style creates a sort of disjointed organization. Instead of by topic, ideas are presented by chronology. Thus comments about books he's read or web-articles he's written or insights he's had tend to sound reactive and sometimes argumentative, rather than logical and sequential. But, of course, the reality of all our lives is that we live chronologically and everything's happening to us disjointedly and reactively. So the very characteristic of the book I am faulting is also its strength. By using the diary style, Perez is able to insert his life into his thought and share the events that surround the ideas and gives them reality. His struggle to be a good person and to live life the right way, to cope with his HIV status, to find love comes across vividly. The philosophical stuff is part of his process. It really does matter what you think. And that's the message he brings about gayness, about AIDS and health, about the various issues of gay culture and community: the philosophical, spiritual ideas really matter. That's what being "soulfully gay" is about "finding your gayness in your soul and your soul in its rightful place in the universe AQUAL. And that's T.I.O.B.G. to you! This is a good read. Even when Perez goes off on a tangent, his ideas and insights are interesting, insightful, and appealing. Reviewed by Toby Johnson, author of *Gay Spirituality: Gay Identity and the Transformation of Human Consciousness*, *The Myth of the Great Secret: An Appreciation of Joseph Campbell* and other novels and books

I personally think he's wiggled out. I do not think Joe can call Jesus the Lord of his life. There are so many books like this out there, finding every reason and every condition and every thought for acceptance---and none of them convince me. This book is going in the garbage so nobody else's mind will be tainted by it.

I simply loved this book, and this despite its sometimes chaotic unfolding, its narcissism, its focus on drug experiences and regular psychotic episodes. What is fascinating about Perez's book is the ultra-conscious description of the spiritual journey on which AIDS takes him. It's Perez's ability to use every single dramatic moment of his life to open his heart and his soul even more. The result is unique: the victimization stigma that plagues homosexuals and homosexual identity in general is simply and purely transcended, in other words, it disappears into a much larger awareness about what being homosexual is about. Try searching on .com again, but I can assure you that we will not find another book that conveys a transformative process of such scope and depth. At the end, pride, love, and a deep sense of connection with the universe all emerge from our gay being, effortlessly, beautifully. Perez is describing the true experience of gay-self-love that gay activism has been faking now for decades. This book will open a new era of gay literature.

One way to summarize this book is to say it is a compilation of blog entries written by a very intelligent, articulate gay man over a span of several years. They chronicle his spiritual evolution, as he finds his place on the map of humanity in its psycho-social-spiritual axis. This book is a great gift to all who will read it, particularly gaymen with an awareness of their spirituality. Thanks again, Joe.

A wonderful read, highly recommended for those who wish to see a different perspective.

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