

## Foreword to *Soulfully Gay* by Joe Perez

I am in the awkward situation of writing a Foreword to a book by a gay person. This is an awkward situation not because Joe Perez is gay, but because I have to point it out. I feel the same damn irritation as having to refer to, say, Edmund White as a “gay writer.” Nobody has to point out that I am heterosexual, although now I hear that I am not a heterosexual but a metrosexual, although, in fact, I have never had sex with a metro in my life. But I’m sure it is a wonderful experience.

Nevertheless, because I have to include that information—culture today demands it, from those both for and against homosexuals—then let me say this. 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.

As it happens, this rather extraordinary chronicle unfolds around several conflict-inducing facts, one of which is that Joe is indeed gay; another of which is that Joe was raised Roman (homophobic) Catholic; another is that he often has authentic mystical states; and yet another is that Joe is, but only occasionally, clinically psychotic. It is the jolting collision of those items, held together by Joe’s courage in the face of all of them, that makes this chronicle so extraordinary in so many ways.

The last item—the occasional trip into realms labeled madness—can mean, especially if you are a writer, that you are given to telling the unvarnished, brutal, searing truth, whether society likes it or not. And not the Sylvia Plath look-at-me kinds of truth,

but the spiritual-seer and mad-shaman types of truth, the truths that really hurt, the truths that get into society's craw and stick there, causing festering metaphysical sores indicative of social cancers or worse—but also the types of truth that speak to you deeply, authentically, radiantly, if you have the courage to listen.

As it turns out, Joe is a writer, a rip-roaring wonder of a writer, and he had the courage to tell those truths, to endure them, to have them tear him apart, hospitalize him, brutalize him, kill and reassemble him, in one of the most astonishing tales of death and resurrection you are likely to find in today's literature.

There is one other reason this is an awkward foreword for me, which is that Joe's transformation, or at least its narrative, depends in part on my own writings. For those of you unfamiliar with my work, here's the *Reader's Digest* version, in one short paragraph, I promise.

In a series of over a dozen books, I have attempted to create a comprehensive map of human nature (which is a little less grandiose than it sounds). Everybody knows that you don't want to confuse the map with the territory. But you don't want a totally fucked-up map, either. So in order to make as few mistakes as possible, I basically took over 100 of the best maps of human nature drawn by various cultures—East and West, premodern and modern and postmodern—and attempted to combine the enduring elements of each, along with whatever new insights I might add. The result is called “integral” because it attempts to be widely inclusive, combining the various truths in a way that is as coherent and comprehensive as possible.

What often happens if you study this integral map is that it begins to make room in your psyche, in your being, in your soul, for all the parts of you that were disowned,

whether by society, your parents, your peers, whomever. An integral approach even makes room for those who did the disowning to you. And there, I believe, is part of the key to the extraordinary events that begin to unfold in Joe's awareness, his being, his life. In a remarkably short period chronicled in this book, as Joe takes up a more integral approach, there is a profound resolution and integration of an enormous number of seemingly contradictory items—anti-gay Catholic upbringing, life as a gay man, authentic mystical spirituality, psychotic delusions. I don't want to overplay the role of an integral approach, but it is part of this extraordinary journey of self awakening and self acceptance.

But having a map is one thing; traversing the real territory, quite another, especially if that territory is marked by the occasional straightjacket, brutal homophobia, drug addiction, a plummeting T-cell count, and deserting friends, all nonetheless cut with profound and authentic spiritual experiences, transcendental grace and glory, deep love and friendship where it counts, and insights that even shamans would envy, all in a bottle with a skull and crossbones on it.

Is it possible for a skull to smile, just out of spite? The anti-gay bias in most mainstream religions Joe is able, not to *hate*, but to *integrate*, by understanding that those aspects of religion are developmentally earlier, and, yes, lower, than the mystical elements of those religions, every single one of which agrees that homosexuality is perfectly acceptable to Spirit, which doesn't recognize those distinctions anyway. Such an integral approach acknowledges that all views have a degree of truth, but some views are more true than others, more evolved, more developed, more adequate. And so let's get that part out of the way right now: homophobia in any form, as far as I can tell, stems

from a lower level of human development—but it is a level, it exists, and one has to make room in one’s awareness for those lower levels as well, just as one has to include third grade in any school curriculum. Just don’t, you know, put those people in charge of anything important.

As for the book you now hold in your hands, although this comparison is a cliché, allow me to run with it for a bit: this narrative begs comparison with Antonin Artaud, the critics’ darling, who rescued his life from disaster by turning it into art. But I believe Artaud was poorly understood by both the Beats (who obsessed over his madness) and the professors (who obsessed over his art), because the point was not Artaud’s art but his sincerity in his art—not his truth but his truthfulness. And Joe Perez is as truthful an artist as you are likely to find, certainly in today’s atmosphere, where irony has replaced authenticity and surface veneer valued over depth. Joe has followed his pain as it descends into madness and his ecstasy as it ascends into God, has refined sincerity itself as a way to understand his Christianity, his sexuality, his madness, his mysticism, and bundled them up in an integral embrace, and told the truth about them all.

I would not report the following, if it weren’t for that. As it happens, shortly after Joe had completed the first draft of the manuscript for this book, he had a relatively rare dip into madness—while also having to adjust his latest meds as T-cell count crashed under 100—during which period he sent me a copy of the draft, which was our first real contact. Curious, I began reading this riveting narrative, which reached at times a breathtaking beauty alternating with neuron-melting horror.

And then there it was, in the margin, and right next to a stunningly beautiful paragraph of prose: a series of paranoid scribbles, in magic marker, freshly written by the

hand of someone now briefly mad. Joe had gone through his manuscript, in that state, and written notes to me in the margins, and sometimes across the page itself, in circles, or squeezed between lines. Seeing the first scrawl, I burst into tears, sobbing at the site of it all—exquisite beauty and crayon scribbles, all right there, all at once, the urgent messages splashed across the page like a hit-and-run driver splattering a body across the pavement—it was the *bothness* of those messages that tore my own heart in two, for they marked off the extremes between which Joe’s life oscillates, soaring truths to torturing shadows—and yet some of the messages were so beautiful, touching, alive, yet not really there—still, on the page simultaneously, a screaming exclamation mark to a reality that was both beauty and betrayal, delusion and enlightenment—and only then did I begin to realize what an extraordinary, absolutely extraordinary, accomplishment Joe’s narrative was—or rather, Joe’s *life* was, a life as he has made it, fashioned it, forced it to be, with grace and glory and courage and surrender.

I don’t want you to think Joe does that often—the trips into those states, that is. They are indeed rare. It’s not merely or even especially the madness that makes this narrative, but the mystical states, deeply authentic, and the politics and the outreach and the bridge of light and the determination to see it all through. But how many times do you have to be in a straightjacket in the emergency room (it happened to Joe once) to get the point that reality is here to brutalize you, rape you, toss you on the side of the street and go its merry way? Start as a human being in this culture, then toss in madness, toss in mystical states, toss in being gay, toss in being HIV positive, toss in a religion that assures you God hates you for all of that—and then look me in the eye and tell me you can feel okay about yourself. I dare you, I just dare you.

Well, friends, that is what Joe Perez manages to do. Read this book, and when finished, ask yourself, “I wonder if Joe can look me in the eye and tell me he feels okay about himself—deeply, deeply okay about himself?” And you will know the answer to that question is *yes*, a resounding, joyous, glorious, staggeringly beautiful *yes*.

It is that *yes* that has made Joe’s life itself into a work of art, as beautiful an artwork as can be imagined. And thus, for at least once that I am aware of nowadays, the cliché reveals the grain of truth that keeps clichés alive. The stuff of Joe’s art, the raw materials, can be found in his essays, his blogs, this book, delivered with urgency and lust and luminosity, the best and the worst, the glorious and the degraded—there is room for all of it in that resounding *Yes!*, for the secret is not that all of it is pretty, but that you tell the truth about it, converting even the grotesque into the sublime, if you tell the truth. Joe’s life is being artfully lived in the very fact of its truthfulness, its deep embrace, shadows and warts and worms and all, woven unhesitatingly into the tapestry of a lustrous display, a deep peace, an abiding love... and therein, surely, a lesson for us all, this artwork that is a thing of beauty, this artwork that will never die, even when the frame around it perishes.