



THE
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FIRST FRIDAY
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First Friday

News & Views

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PROGRESSIVES REVISIT PAUL REVERE

by Jonathan Wilson

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CALENDAR

- ▼ The next FFBC meeting is
7:00 A.M., Friday, August
3, 2012, at Hoyt Sherman
Place, 15th & Woodland,
Des Moines, IA.
- ▼ R.S.V.P. by August 1 to
[JonathanWilson@
davisbrownlaw.com](mailto:JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com) or
288-2500 by phone.

Organizationally, progressive groups, with diverse but often overlapping missions, tend to be fairly independent. Understandably, such groups don't want to share the names of contributors or their membership mailing lists. And they shouldn't. They like not to offend, and they like the *idea* of collaboration. They don't tend to march in lock-step like our detractors have been more successful doing. They have preferred to strive for unanimity before taking collective action, or go it alone. That, obviously, stifles collaboration among natural allies and minimizes their political effectiveness.

The organizational solution is the Paul Revere Project being sponsored by Progress Iowa. The Paul Revere Project provides progressive organizations with a mechanism for more effective advocacy and collaborative actions. It is a purely voluntary initiative organized around a Steering Committee made up of one representative from each participating organization. The Steering Committee convenes on-call, usually telephonically, for the purpose of: (1) identifying and prioritizing issues confronting progressives and progressive causes and, selectively, (2) identifying a strategic response. Both are determined by a majority vote of participating Steering Committee members. The Steering Committee will not endorse candidates for elective office. Issues to be considered by the Steering Committee will be suggested by member organizations and selected by the Progress Iowa Director and an Agenda Advisory Panel established by the Progress Iowa Board of Directors.

A member organization is not bound by decisions of the Steering Committee; is not bound by the vote of their representative on the Steering Committee; and each organization, using its customary decision-making processes, will make an independent decision about whether or not to participate in the recommended strategy. If the decision is made to do so, each participating organization will relay to its members and supporters both the issue and the Steering Committee's recommended response.

This approach enables the prioritization of issues challenging progressives and progressive causes; facilitates a thoughtful collaborative response; and, ultimately, generates more focus and more participation among like-minded citizens than has been possible in the past.

We all recall that, having determined the British plans thanks to a signal from a church steeple, Paul Revere made his ride, warned the colonists, and called to arms those willing and able. "We're taking on our oppressors at Lexington and Concord. If you're with us, be there, and come willing to fight," was Revere's call to arms. Not everyone responded supportively who heard Paul Revere's warning about what the British were planning, and what was proposed to be done about it. Some may not have agreed with the Revolution; some may have thought it would have been preferable to fight the British closer to Pittsburgh; some may not have been able to find a musket; and some may have been too cowardly. But, because of his ride, his cry of alarm, and his

(Continued on page 2)

Progressives (cont.)

call to form up at Lexington and Concord, more like-minded folks showed up than otherwise would have and the rest, as they say, is history.

And so it will be also for the Paul Revere Project. Many progressive organizations have already signed on, including the First Friday Breakfast Club. We're in this together and, together, we can impact the political debate and contribute to positive outcomes for everyone.

For more information or a membership sign-up form, contact the Paul Revere Project of Progress Iowa, PO Box 548, Des Moines, Iowa 50302 (515-423-0530) (matt@progressiowa.org).

Food for Thought From Matt Russell

By Bruce Carr



Our guest speaker on Friday morning, July 6, was Matt Russell, who is State Food Policy Project coordinator at Drake University's Agricultural Law Center and who, with his husband Patrick Standley, owns Coyote Run Farm <<http://www.coyote-run-farm.com/>>, a 110-

acre market farm in southwest Marion County, east of Lacona.

Coyote Run Farm grows chemical-free seasonal produce, offers eggs from hens on pasture, raises heritage breed turkeys for Thanksgiving, sells beef from the family herd -- both grain and grass finished -- and trains their own mules for sale. Matt and Patrick can be found at the Des Moines Downtown Farmers Market on Saturday mornings May through October.

"The two forces driving our farm are stewardship of the land and quality for our customers," Matt said. His talk was fascinating, and extended from the global to the personal. He emphasized his pleasure in the diversity of Iowa, drawing a parallel between the wide variety of agricultural production in the state and the wide variety of gay life styles. "Food production runs the gamut from

industrial factory-farms to the tomato-pots on the patio," he noted, "and all are valuable and necessary."

Both he and Patrick had grown up in supportive communities (Matt in Cass County and Patrick in Des Moines), Matt said. Neither of them had been notably subject to bullying as teenagers, and neither felt the need to be politically activist about their sexuality. Nor did they work at being closeted; when they bought their farm and began to make it work, they referred to each other as "my partner" in front of their rural Iowa neighbors -- and let the neighbors think what they wanted to, or needed to.

That changed a bit, Matt explained, after three Supreme Court justices were recalled for affirming the constitutionality of same-gender marriage in Iowa. Since then Matt and Patrick have made it their practice always to refer to each other as "my husband," since they are indeed married in the eyes of the state as well as the church. The political has indeed become personal.

From the Coyote Run Farm web site (but read the whole thing!): <<http://www.coyote-run-farm.com/>>

"Coyote Run Farm came into being in January 2005.... We believed people would buy high quality, sustainably-raised foods and products from a small family farm, especially if they could connect with that farm on an ongoing basis.... Conventional wisdom would have been to bulldoze the buildings and add this small farm to existing farms for commodity agricultural production. We had a different plan. We bet the farm that with a commitment to sustainable agriculture and a desire to build relationships with customers buying directly from the farm, we could transition this dying farm into a modern and profitable agricultural enterprise. During our first



year, we both continued to work in Des Moines and spent our time getting to know the land....

"In year two, Pat left his job as zookeeper to farm full-time. We took the Grow Your Small Market Farm class and started selling at the Downtown Farmers Market. ... 2007 was the year we bought our hay equipment, hit the accelerator on fruit and vegetable production, and signed up for the Environmental Quality Improvement Program (EQIP--a federal conservation program) to transition all but a few acres of our farm into a rotational grazing system.... In 2008 we started our EQIP projects by building two

(Continued on page 5)



Quality education is the on-going process of learning things you didn't know you didn't know.

It takes about 10 years to get used to how old you are.

Back from Broadway with Money Left in My Pockets

By Bruce McCabe

This June was my third trip to New York to enjoy Broadway Theater. I have discovered a way to do this more cheaply. In 2010 and 2011 I stayed in Manhattan Hotels. Handy to the theaters, but expensive. This year I stayed in Brooklyn and saved 75% on lodging. I had eight days in a fully equipped apartment – bedroom, living room, fully equipped kitchen, air conditioned AND cable TV for a hundred dollars a night. Clean and secure. Near Prospect Park with a retail area only two blocks away with a small restaurant where I could sample the local fare. The subway stop was a block away and it only took about forty minutes to get into Manhattan on the Q Train. I found this bargain through *Air Bed and Breakfast* (www.airb&b.com). They have locations all over the world and I plan to use them when I visit Italy next year.

The money I saved on a hotel enabled me to see eight Broadway shows: **AVENUE Q**, **OTHER DESERT CITIES**, **GODSPELL**, **NEWSIES**, **PORGY AND BESS**, **THE BEST MAN**, **COCK**, and **THE LYONS**, plus an evening at *The Apollo* and a second evening at *The Cotton Club*. All those shows left me worn out but happy.



THE BEST MAN was a revival of a Gore Vidal play with James Earl Jones, Angela Lansbury, Candice Bergen, John Larroquette, and Eric McCormack. I couldn't believe I was seeing all of those stars on the same stage. It wasn't my favorite show however. My favorite was **THE LYONS**, with Linda Lavin. She was nominated for a Tony and, after seeing her performance, I still question why she didn't win the award.

Her character, Rita, is preoccupied with redecorating her house. She sits in her husband's hospital room leafing through *House Beautiful* magazine looking for decorating

Everyone is born ignorant; that affliction is the human condition at birth. Education cures it. Unfortunately, education doesn't manage to reach everyone.

tips. She complains that the “*chairs are the color of disgust and the carpet is matted down with resignation.*” Finally, her husband, played by Dick Latessa, blurts out “*What the f*** are you talking about? I'm laying here dying of cancer!*” To which she responds, “*I know, but try to be positive.*”

COCK was an emotional offering about a young man who can't decide if he wants to stay with his male lover or be with a woman he has just met. I'm hoping it is brought to Des Moines soon by one of our theater groups.

True affluence is not needing anything. True loneliness is not needing anyone.

BRIEFS & SHORTS

Be sure to RSVP for the August 3 meeting no later than August 1. Email JonathanWilson@davisbrownlaw.com or call him at 288-2500. Our speaker will be Donna Red Wing, the new Executive Director of One Iowa .



The RED HOT PARTY honoring David Hurd and Trudy Holman Hurd and raising money to support the AIDS Project of Central Iowa will be at 6:30 pm on August 3 at the Iowa State Bar Association offices , 625 E. Court Avenue. Suggested donation of \$50.



Thanks to Doug Aupperle for his introduction of our July speaker, Matt Russell of Coyote Run Farms .



Out Networking meets the second Wednesday of every month at 5:30 p.m. at the Kirkwood Lounge (the new home of The Des Moines Social Club), 400 Walnut Street. It is the social, business, and philanthropic networking organization for anyone who is gay, bisexual, transgendered, questioning, or supportive.



Be sure to peruse the front table for a book you might like to read. Book donations are always welcome. Thanks to **Fred Mount** and **Barry McGriff** for coordinating the book exchange.



A Voice From Our Past

By Gary Moore

In his **From the Pastor's Pen** article in the last issue of the newsletter, Jonathan Page made the plea that our LGBT community should conscientiously capture and share our common heritage. He rightly claimed that old and young among us will be enriched by doing so. He's right. What follows is one attempt to do that. **It is an adaptation of a speech given in 1992 by Alex Cooke at the 6th annual All Iowa AIDS Benefit.**

"Like most of you, I have lost many of my friends to this disease. Not long ago I was sitting in the kitchen with my roommate going through my address book, and I came to the realization that over half of the people listed in it are no longer living. I have lost over thirty of my friends to AIDS; that is more than one friend for every year that I have been alive. This is not supposed to happen. People my age shouldn't be able to count one dead friend for every year of their life. I have asked myself many times, 'What's wrong with this world? What is wrong with people? Where is the caring? Why can't they reach out and stop the suffering?'

"Slowly, I have seen the level of caring, the response of the community, the outpouring of funds and support, and the general level of awareness, grow. Now at the 6th annual All Iowa AIDS Benefit, I can look out and see the size of crowd that I never dreamed would come together in support of those of us that have AIDS, and those of us that will, regrettably, at some time in the future contract this disease.

"I've been doing AIDS education for three years, speaking mostly to small groups of nurses and college students. The most frequent question I've been asked is, 'What is it like to have AIDS?' The only way I can answer this is with another question, 'What is it like to be well?' People usually tell me that what I have asked is a hard question to answer.

"Having AIDS is hard – and having AIDS is easy. It changes everything in your life and keeps surprising you. Just when you are feeling in control of yourself; just when you feel things are getting back to normal (or as close to that state as you are now allowed to get), AIDS jumps back into your life and makes you take twenty trips to the bathroom in a ten hour period. It's as if something in your body shouts 'two exits, not waiting!' Having AIDS is having to find more and more room in the medicine cabinet; or having the hospital admitting nurse get writer's cramp writing down all the medications that you're currently taking -- just to stay well. Having AIDS is like be-

longing to a Book-of-the-Month club created by a psychopathic doctor. Instead of getting reading material every month, you are treated to a new and exciting infection.

"Having AIDS is like being the world's worst hypochondriac, worrying about each new spot on your body -- every pain -- rushing to the doctor when you develop a cough. Having AIDS is constantly wondering which part of your body is going to be affected next; what part of life is going to be limited next; and constantly having to give up activities that are considered unhealthy for you -- things that will put you at too much risk.

"Being a PWA is not something that you can stop doing. It becomes a way of life; everything in your life changes. You have to change your dietary habits because some things that you love are no longer safe for you to eat, or some things your body just won't digest anymore. No hollandaise sauce or Caesar salad because you can't risk eating raw eggs; and no more rare steaks or fresh fruits. Vegetables only in moderation due to the damage that has been done to your digestive tract by various infections. Being a PWA is learning to change your way of life -- shopping during slow periods of the day because being in a crowd tires you out and puts you at risk of infections that strangers might be carrying.

"Three years ago when I first came down with an opportunistic infection, I went through a period of depression that lasted over three months. When it was over, I thought that I was glad I was done with that and now I could get on with my life. How wrong I was. For the last three years my emotions have been like a roller coaster ride, sometimes feeling so up that it is almost euphoric and then taking a plunge down that is so quick and unexpected that you feel like you surely must have left your stomach somewhere up near the top of a hill. It is like being the happiest person one day and having the worst case of P.M.S. the next.

"For many years AIDS has been something that was other people's problem -- something that affected "THEM." There are no "other people." AIDS affects us all, each and every one of us. AIDS touches all of us in different ways. For some of us it has a more direct influence in our lives. For a person to sit back and say that this is not something that they have to deal with, is wrong. Each of us has been affected by AIDS, not just me, because I have the disease; not just the person who is sitting next to you because his lover died recently; not just the woman across the room from you because she lost a son to AIDS last year. AIDS is a problem for us all; every man, woman, and child on this planet. AIDS is a disease, not a punishment. AIDS is no different than

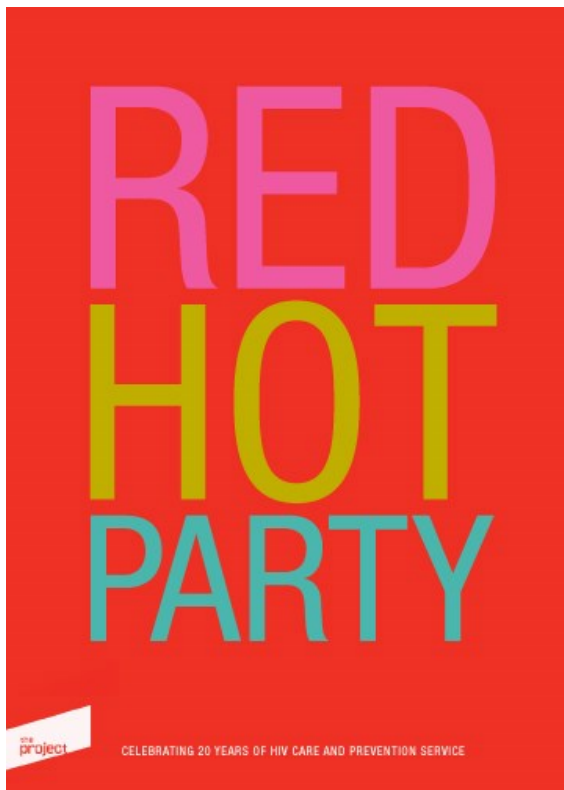
(Continued on page 5)

any other disease – it is not a crime to have AIDS. The true crime is the way that so many of us are treated – treated by people that we used to think of as friends – people that we don’t even know, people who pass moral judgment on us merely for having a disease.

“I didn’t intend to lecture you, and I’m sorry if I sound as if I am. The thing that I am here to do is thank you for being here; for reaching out to those of us who have AIDS; and, most importantly, for reaching into your pockets for the money we need in so many ways. The money that is raised will be used to benefit those of us who are in need. It will help to provide funds for programs like the Buddy Program, which supplies support for PWAs and a friendly face for us to turn to when we need help. The funds will be used through agencies like Aid Greater Des Moines to help pay the rent of a PWA’s apartment so they won’t be kicked out to live in the street. It will buy food so we won’t go hungry. It will even take us out to a movie so that we don’t have to sit at home by ourselves all the time – so that we can feel normal again – even if it’s only for a few short hours.

“Again, thank you for all your support. Thank you for all the money that you will raise tonight -- and most of all, thank you for being here.”

[Editor’s note: Alex Cooke died before the 7th annual All Iowa AIDS Benefit. His words were captured for history thanks to FFBC member Gary Moore. The next fund-raising benefit for the Project is the Red Hot Party on August 3, 2012. See Briefs and Shorts for details.]



Matt Russell (cont.)

ponds for wildlife, soil conservation, and most importantly as a water source for our livestock expansions. We also used the Conservation Reserve Program (CRP--another federal conservation program) to protect a deep ravine running through the farm from livestock.... In 2010, we started rehabilitating the house and continued to hire occasional help from neighbor kids and friends-between-jobs, as well as hosting work parties for friends, family, and customers. Work parties include a few hours of work such as planting garlic, butchering chickens, making hay, or pulling weeds, followed by a big farm meal....

“As we pursue our goals, we’ve found tremendous encouragement from our friends and supporters, which include our neighbors, family members, and customers. Coyote Run Farm allows Matt to celebrate being a fifth-generation Iowa farmer and challenges Pat to continuously expand his animal care and gardening skills. In developing our farm, we’re investing in rural Iowa. We continue to bet that it’s possible to own and operate a profitable small family farm that also sustains natural resources. And the most important characters in this evolving story are our customers who continue to purchase our products and support us in countless ways.”

Prime Timers of Central Iowa

By Dr Loren Olson

Life after 30, 40, and beyond is different and sometimes challenging, but it doesn’t have to be limited to Internet chat rooms. Healthy aging demands that we continue to grow, change, and engage life. Older men are more likely to live alone; some feel lonely and isolated because of limited opportunities for socializing with other gay men. A group of men has decided to form Prime Timers of Central Iowa (PTCI) for mature gay and bisexual men. PTCI is a way of introducing men who share similar interests.

Monthly meetings will be held and smaller groups will meet during the month based on the interests of the chapter’s membership. PTCI activities are unlimited and tailored to members’ interests.

Prime Timers of Central Iowa will become an affiliate chapter of Prime Timers Worldwide that now has 73 chapters in many urban areas in the U. S. as well as internationally. PTCI will become the 74th chapter, and members in one chapter are welcome to attend activities in other chapters. Healthy aging demands that we continue to grow, change, and engage life. Central Iowa Prime Timers will give mature gay/bi men an opportunity to embrace life wholeheartedly. As one Prime Timer said, “I’m 82 and this is the best time of my life.”

To find out more, follow us on Facebook at “Prime Timers of Central Iowa,” or send an email to PrimeTimer-slowa@gmail.com.

Irony of Priorities

By Tony E Hansen

www.tigersndragons.com

There is nothing more telling about political priorities than seeing a new stadium being built for a professional sports team. When Major League Baseball began its season this year, another team opened with a brand new ball park in Miami. The new stadiums, or renovations, are dazzling displays and bring the "experience" of the game to a whole new dimension. There is an awful, if not uncanny, irony in the priorities that have been considered around the new stadiums. Actually, multiple ironies. This grand experience comes with a rise in ticket prices, and this comes while critical public services are being defunded.

One irony is, in the particular example of Miami, how the city is still facing major foreclosure problems and unemployment. Consider the massive investments that private and public institutions made in the new ball park while public schools are facing budgetary shortfalls. Consider that billion dollar investment while roads go unrepaired, cops cannot get equipment for law enforcement, or teachers get salaries cut. This was a point made by former Minnesota Governor Jesse Ventura when reporters asked if he would support new stadiums for the Twin Cities professional teams. The logic of the question seemed consistent with the fact that Mr. Ventura was a professional athlete before being governor, but Mr. Ventura had the good sense to realize that there are more critical things to consider in the budget than entertainment venues.

Another irony is that the price of tickets does not go down after this major investment in a larger venue (despite having more available seating). Instead, the price to watch these games goes up (both the ticket as well as the concessions). A family of four can easily wind up spending over \$200 per game and still have to use binoculars to watch it. If you want to watch at field level, the price rises exponentially (New York Yankees price some of these seats around \$2000 each). If you are a family of means, this may not be an issue, but with a game that is supposedly considered the "national pastime," it is clear that many Americans are not able to afford the experience. This may reveal that the owners of the teams are completely disconnected from what is available to many Americans. Maybe this reflects an interest, by the wealthier among us, to segregate society between those who have and those who do not.

We see yet another irony in these cases where the investment for ballparks involves the limited time of the sports season where supposed tourism will be concentrated. For NFL football, there are 10 home games (MLB has 81 home games not including any playoffs), and we are to justify the civic expense because of the estimated tourism and revenues brought in because of these few games. Thus,

commercial interests can plan on having business related to the games at least 10 to 81 days out of 365 days. There must be some serious profit accumulated during those days if the facility can lie fallow and unproductive for the rest of the year.

In parallel, we see significant donations from private donors to political campaigns that waste considerable money on a limited time political campaign in order to keep these same people from paying their fair share in taxes that would benefit the whole of society (far beyond the campaign season). Interestingly though, people are willing to approve tax supported measures to improve these big arenas or build new ones while they reject tax measures for schools, prisons, or revitalization projects. For example, Jackson County Missouri approved beautiful upgrades to Kansas City's stadiums but balked at a sales tax increase to improve Kansas City public schools. All the while, the owners still need the masses in order to profit from the tickets and concessions at the stadiums, regardless of how smart the masses are.

In these cases, the wealthy owners are looking for financial support from the community to off-load some of the costs. This is little different than Wal-Mart getting a city to provide new infrastructure to be built in order for a new store to be opened. However, Wal-Mart will be open more than 10 or 81 days. Here, the wealthy put some money forward, receive public assistance, and then pocket the profits. This shows why, when people like Mitt Romney put money in non-taxable offshore accounts, that method of profit should not be a surprise to people. He was able to profit from his communities here, reduced his tax burden, and still pocket the profits. As one reporter suggested, if you have the means to avoid paying taxes and yet reap the rewards, why would you not? Of course, one has to have the means to set up these ventures, and then convince the public to accept the arrangement. All the while, that person can still whine about the taxes (even if the taxed amount is only a small fraction of the whole).

As someone who has enjoyed going to sports games, I am being hypocritical in arguing against these public arenas due to the personal benefit I have had. Yet, one has to consider that Roman emperors would build large coliseums, hold brutal games, and stage massive orgies, in order to appease the masses and help the citizens forget that food supplies were short. Thus, this type of investment gives what the public wants instead of what the public needs. The most logical aim of such priorities suggests that those with means are all too willing to help appease the masses in order to hide that they are actually taking more from them. Perhaps Karl Marx was wrong that the working class will stop being appeased by the scraps from the bourgeois and realize the worth of labor is powerful.

The difference between theism and nontheism is not whether one does or does not believe in God. . . Theism is a deep-seated conviction that there's some hand to hold: if we just do the right things, someone will appreciate us and take care of us. . . Nontheism is relaxing with the ambiguity and uncertainty of the present moment without reaching for anything to protect ourselves."
~Pema Chödrön

From the Pastor's Pen

By Rev. Jonathan Page

This month I made a pilgrimage to Provincetown, Massachusetts, definitely one of the gayest towns in the United States. It is one of the few places where straight people can be mocked as “breeders” by gays sipping their evening cocktail on the veranda of a bed and breakfast. Walking down Commercial Street, the main drag in Provincetown, you feel as though you have entered an alternative universe. You pass a string quartet playing Mozart...topless with chiseled abs and waxed chests. A few steps later scantily clad boys hand out advertisements for a local cabaret show, appropriately titled “Naked Boys Singing.” Literally, it includes guys in their early 20’s singing show tunes while completely naked. Then there are the names of the shops: Seaman’s Bank, Board Stiff, The Cock and Bull, and my favorite, the Provincetown Fudge Factory. While I was admiring art in a gallery window, a trans woman glided by on roller-skates singing into a microphone attached to a speaker on a cart that she pulled behind her. Ahh P-town.

Prominently situated on Commercial Street is the local Unitarian-Universalist Church, a beautiful example of an early 19th century New England church. Being the type of tourist who loves visiting churches, I could not help but wander into the old building and admire its space. The congregation had worked hard to maintain the integrity of the old building, but you could see that they were slowly losing the battle against time. Old church buildings, while beautiful, are a nightmare to maintain, even more so when the salty ocean air speeds the erosion process. Looking around I saw other signs of a church in decline. I could not help but wonder, “Is this church bound to die? Can a gay summer community support its own congregation?” Lost in thought, I passed their marquee on the front lawn that advertised the time for Sunday service along with the next Sunday’s sermon title, “PT Barnum – UU Saint.”

Now, I don’t want to take anything away from PT Barnum. He was an American original who in his later life contributed to many good causes. I am sure the sermon that Sunday was insightful and edifying. What struck me was how irrelevant the title was to the passers-by on the street. Would a sermon about a 19th century Universalist, even one as colorful as Barnum, really interest the average gay? After all, what role does religion have in a summer resort like Provincetown where gays have full acceptance and most people are there for a fun vacation?

Later that day I was lounging on the beach admiring the scenery. I reflected on how Provincetown has a lot of bars, restaurants, shops, beaches, and boats, but it has only one church. How sad would it be if that one spiritual oasis closed? The Unitarian theologian James Luther Adams wrote eloquently about the need for community, both personally and as agents of change. Faith communities bring people together who would not normally associate with one another. They strive to lift our vision beyond ourselves and to focus us on other people and on that which is eternal. All of us have a deep hunger for connection, honesty, and a spiritual grounded-ness that can be missing in a place like Provincetown. What might be needed for folks in P-town is a break from the fun, a quiet space to center ourselves, a place without any judgment, and an environment to let down our guard. The more I thought about it, the more I realized how many opportunities there were for a church in Provincetown. What if the church offered an early evening meditative service or a spirited morning worship for the early risers? What if they organized a running club where you could just show up for a communal jog? They could host a contest to make the best summer salad or clam chowder. The opportunities are endless, and I let my mind wander among the options.

We are living in a period in which the shape of gay life and of spiritual communities is changing rapidly. Old churches shut down. Fewer and fewer gay bars open as more people find intimacy through online connections. Is there a way for places of faith to serve gay populations better? I would think so. It is so easy to remain grounded in our old ways, ways that are familiar and comfortable. Are we missing out as we do so? Just then a group of gays passed in front of me on the beach and I was happily shaken from my reveries. One of them turned around and smiled. Thank God for vacation, I thought to myself, a time for reflection as well as a time for fun.

Jonathan Page is senior pastor of the Ames United Church of Christ, 217 6th Street, Ames, Iowa. Sunday service at 9:30. He can be reached at jon@Amesucc.org.

Live you life in such a way that the Westboro Baptist Church will want to picket your funeral.

Do cats near Fukushima have 18 half-lives?

What’s another word for thesaurus?



FFBC

*First Friday
News & Views*

Des Moines, Iowa

AUGUST 2012

**First Friday
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My M.O. (Monthly Observations)

The Fall of Rome and the End of Civilization

By Steve Person

Bryan Ward-Perkins, a Fellow at Trinity College, Oxford, produced a compact and succinct book that examines the decline of the Roman Empire in the West from the fourth through eighth centuries A.D. I remember in high school world history and later college courses in western civilization that the fall of the Roman Empire was pinpointed to 476 when the last Roman emperor in the West (Romulus Augustulus) was deposed and sent into retirement. I always pictured this event as a sort of clearing of the board similar to the swearing in of a new administration in January after a November election. Nothing could be further from the truth.

The Western Roman Empire experienced Barbarian invasion as much as a hundred years before the exit of Romulus Augustulus. In the ensuing century, various invasions succeeded or were repelled, and the empire began its gradual shrinkage. According to Ward-Perkins, modern historians write of the “accommodation” of the invaders of the empire in the West and paint it as a quasi-peaceful alternative to the more violent interpretations that the word “invasion” connotes. Using ancient texts as his basis in fact, Ward-Perkins says, “The **Life of Severinus** makes it clear that the process of invasion was highly unpleasant for the people who had to live through it...”

Further, the author submits that the Barbarian invasions contributed to Rome’s decline because they undermined the tax base of the empire. “...the key internal element in Rome’s success or failure was the economic well-being of its taxpayers. This was because the empire relied for its security on a professional army, which in turn relied on adequate funding. The fourth-century Roman army contained perhaps as many as 600,000 soldiers, all of whom had to be salaried, equipped, and supplied.”

Continuing his measured argument that the invasions set civilization back by a thousand years, Ward-Perkins provides as evidence the mundane but very practical example of mass-produced and very good quality pottery during the Roman Empire as opposed to the local, low quality utensils of the invaders that replaced what was once empire-wide pottery for all levels of society. Further proof of the decline of the West lies with something as simple as roofing tiles. By the time the first invasion began, tiled roofs were everywhere seen in the vast Roman Empire. A few centuries later, tiles were no longer manufactured, and the inferior products of wood and thatch replaced them.

The author agrees with current historians that the terms “Dark Ages” and “Medieval Europe” are no longer fashionable and he prefers the term, “Late Antiquity.” His scholarly investigations about the rise and fall of empires can be easily applied to other civilizations, including our own. The infestation of monotheism, particularly Christianity in our case and Islam, that eventually replaced the Eastern Roman Empire with the Ottoman Empire and subsequent countries from within its borders, harbor the seeds for our own eventual destruction. Ward-Perkins says more in 184 pages than any historian I have read so far. It is a fine interpretation.