

# *Each of Us Inevitable*

SOME KEYNOTE ADDRESSES,  
GIVEN AT  
FRIENDS FOR LESBIAN AND GAY CONCERNS AND  
FRIENDS GENERAL CONFERENCE GATHERINGS,  
1977–1993,  
REVISED, EXPANDED EDITION

Becky Birtha, Thomas Bodine, Elise Boulding,  
John Calvi, Stephen Finn, Ellen Hodge,  
Janet Hoffman,  
Arlene Kelly, William Kreidler, George Lakey,  
Ahavia Lavana, Muriel Bishop Summers,  
Elizabeth Watson,  
David Wertheimer, and Dwight Wilson

EDITED BY ROBERT LEUZE

Published by  
Friends for Lesbian, Gay,  
Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns

Published by  
Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns

FLGBTQC website: <http://flgbtqc.quaker.org>

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Elise Boulding’s “The Challenge of Nonconformity” first appeared in the October 1987 *Friends Journal*.

“Laying Down the Weapons ’Round Our Hearts” © 1990 John Calvi. Songs: “A Little Gracefulness,” “Carry and Burn,” “Maria,” “Hello Sun” © John Calvi.

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“EACH OF US INEVITABLE,  
EACH OF US LIMITLESS—EACH OF US WITH HIS  
OR HER RIGHT UPON THE EARTH,  
EACH OF US ALLOW’D THE ETERNAL PURPORTS  
OF THE EARTH,  
EACH OF US HERE AS DIVINELY AS ANY IS HERE.”  
—Walt Whitman: “Salut au Monde,” II, *Leaves of Grass*

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Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns (FLGBTQC), until recently known as Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (FLGC), is a North American Quaker faith community within the Religious Society of Friends that affirms that of God in all persons—lesbian, gay, bisexual, heterosexual, transgender, and transsexual. It gathers twice yearly: Midwinter Gathering is held over the long weekend surrounding U.S. President's Day in February and Summer Gathering is held with the larger Friends General Conference Gathering the first week in July. Once known as Friends Committee for Gay Concerns, the group has met since the early 1970s for worship and play, its members drawing sustenance from each other and from the Spirit for their work and life in the world—in the faith that radical inclusion and radical love bring further light to Quaker testimony and life.

## Preface to the Internet Edition

The new, revised and expanded edition of *Each of Us Inevitable*—the printed compilation of keynote addresses given by beloved Friends at prior Gatherings of Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns (FLGC) and Friends General Conference (FGC)—includes all the talks in the original edition and eight additional keynotes, bringing the total to 19. The added talks were given between 1979 and 1993.

In February 2003, the community united on changing its name to Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns (FLGBTQC). The talks are available as separate Adobe Acrobat PDF files for each author on the FLGBTQC website, <<http://flgbtqc.quaker.org>>.

It is hoped that keynotes given after 1993 also will be published someday; however, the richness of content in these additional already-edited talks suggested moving ahead in the present when the possibility of publication exists.



It may be helpful for some readers browsing on the internet if I offer here at least brief hints, however inadequate, of that “richness” that lies in specific talks.

Elizabeth Watson (1977: “Each of Us Inevitable”) came to help us accept ourselves. Her message is not “love the sinner, not the sin,” but, “I love you, and I love you *for* your givenness, not in spite of it.” She offers an account of the life story and the healing words of Walt Whitman.

Arlene Kelly (1979: “Estrangement and Reconciliation”) brought answers in the form of difficult questions: How can we remain engaged with people who are different? From what do we feel estranged? What has caused hurt and anger within us? Do we see that we come to Gathering both as oppressor and oppressed? Can we find ways to step into the shoes of the other person? What is involved in being “reconciled”?

Janet Hoffman (1982: “Eros and the Life of the Spirit”) spoke on themes of exploring and wrestling with new insights; fiery passion; relinquishing our need; and transformation. Eros, she believes, drives us toward God and gives our life its basic meaning. Love demands a complete inner transformation. Love (not guilt) leads to social change.

Dwight Wilson (1984: “Nurturing Our Relationships within an Often Hostile Community”) spoke from his personal experience as a black man. His message was concerned with trusting one’s own perceptions and understanding—not society’s mainstream view, not scripture, not the internalized hatred that society may try to induce in us. He spoke of the sometimes negative role of the institutional church for blacks, women, pacifism, gays, and lesbians.

Arlene Kelly (1984: “Nurturing Friendship and Lover Relationships”) sees “coming out” as a step toward taking responsibility for ourselves as individuals. In our friendship and lover relationships, are we feeling defective, she questions; have we relinquished some of our power? She discusses ten factors essential to building relationships that are whole.

Elizabeth Watson (1985: “On Wholeness”) recognizes our patriarchal, hierarchal, and homophobic civilization and religious heritage. She discusses the Christian church and Jesus; the power of the human community; “dwelling in possibility,” and her personal odyssey into wholeness. Can we take charge of life and healing by imaging a desired outcome?

Elise Boulding (1986: “The Challenge of Nonconformity”) acknowledges the need to bond across differences—because we need others to make us whole—and the fact that it’s more difficult for those called to “nonconforming witnesses.” For “publicly gay” persons, special strengths are needed; they are the social change activists. The “gay witness,” she says, includes equality, nonviolence, community, and simplicity; gays should be viewed not as embattled victims but as co-workers in reweaving the social web for us all.

Thomas R. Bodine (1987: “Caring Matters Most”), drawing on his own experience, began with a description of the wide diversity of Friends throughout the world. How to change people? How to bridge the differences? he wondered. What happens if we seriously try to practice Christian “gifts of the spirit” in those parts of the Quaker world that hate homosexuality?

Janet Hoffman (Friends General Conference, 1987: “To Listen, To Minister, To Witness”). Her wide-ranging talk includes: living “without seatbelts”; following a corporate leading, not censoring it; “dis-illusionment”—a good thing (“Offend me!” she declares); to minister—sometimes just by being oneself; to love someone—to become in some sense the person we love; to witness—to be faithful to the spirit. She touches on personal growth, the true evangelist, continuing revelation, seeking, stages of development in pacifism, and committed unions.

David Wertheimer (1988: “Bias-Related Violence, Gay Marriage, and a Journey Out of the Society of Friends”) shares some personal, Quaker-related experiences: seeking marriage with his (male) partner under the care of his meeting; studying and later teaching at Quaker schools; enrolling as a Quaker in divinity school. He asks whether Quakerism works well only when it can function one step removed from the harsh realities that it contemplates. He sees FLGC as a committee on sufferings, a critical group to helping Quakerism discover how to survive. Death threats led him to question his Quaker belief in nonviolence. His talk includes input from those present at Gathering.

Ahavia Lavana (1988: “Helping and Healing”). When Ahavia’s son Hunter had AIDS and later died of it, what helped and what did not help? What was healing and what was not? She speaks on accepting what is beyond our control.

Bill Kreidler’s address (1989: “Tending the Fire”) is his intensely personal but often humorous account of learning to tend his spiritual flame following an addictive, abusive relationship—by being honest, by being open, by practicing, and by being easy with himself. He talks of the ministry of our community and of how it helped him reach the goal he had envisioned (“old Quaker ladies” tap dancing).

Ellen Hodge (1989: “Tending the Fire”) offers differing images of fire: Kristallnacht, persecution of “witches,” a 1963 bomb in a Birmingham church, Vietnam and Cambodian napalm; candlelight vigils for the slain Harvey Milk; the Japanese *Bon* festival. She retells, in modern vernacular, the Biblical story of Moses for its relevance to our situation.

Stephen Finn (1990: “Celebrating *All Our Being*”) describes a personal journey, illustrating reasons some people have trouble celebrating their being. He asks, does one feel shameful rather than worthy of experiencing “heaven on earth”? Does one adopt compensatory mechanisms to get through a life without heaven? Does FLGC sometimes serve to shield us from the need to be open about our shame?

Muriel Bishop Summers (1990: “On Living in Integrity”) spoke of living with integrity—the quality of one’s relationship with all of creation—and with oneself: a process. She discusses the balance between integrity and safety; the need of being whole, not fragmented; some essentials for wholeness; and the Divine Presence as ultimate reality, whose nature is love and whose character is truth.

John Calvi (Friends General Conference, 1990: “Laying Down the Weapons ‘Round Our Hearts”) offers steps to healing: surrendering; inviting one’s angels; receiving, with honesty and tenderness, the messages that are sent; entering upon the dance between hope and fear.

Becky Birtha (1991: “Accept It Gracefully’— Keeping Our Creative Gifts Alive”) shares her personal experiences with healing, growing, dealing with pain, and loving herself—often as expressed in her poems.

George Lakey (1991: “Our Bodies, Our Elves”) sought a vision of the new creation. He emphasizes, in six general areas, gifts that lesbians, gays, and bi’s can give to the Society of Friends and the larger world; the areas are embodiment (in a human body); the erotic (as a bridge to spiritual experience); vulnerability (seen as a doorway); facing pain; reaffirming difference; and love (moving beyond judgmentalism).

Elizabeth Watson (1993: “Night and Day”) relates how the titles of some Cole Porter songs evoke reflections from her own life. “Night and Day”—falsely dividing the world (a continuum) into opposites. (Are we the “good guys?”) “Down in the Depths”—unlearning the shame and guilt inspired by our Judeo-Christian tradition. (If there is sin, it is in not caring.) “In the Still of the Night”—embracing the darkness; finding it full of possibility, a time for gestation, for creation, for rest.

—ROBERT LEUZE



EDITOR ROBERT LEUZE has been involved with gay Quaker groups since 1973, first in New York City where he attended Morningside Meeting and subsequently with the group that evolved to become the present-day Friends for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Concerns. He grew up in rural Northern New York near the eastern end of Lake Ontario, amid the extreme homophobia of the McCarthy period. During his college years at Yale University no one he knew (or knew of) was openly gay. He came out (to himself and two or three others) his senior year and, a year after graduation, moved to New York City. He and his present wife Sarah fell in love in the late 1960s and were married in 1969, believing that psychoanalysis had changed his orientation. He came out for the second time in the mid-1970s, but he and Sarah remain very happily married after 34 years. He pursued a career as an opera singer in the 1970s and 1980s and continues to perform in solo concerts—concerts that usually include songs relevant to the gay experience. He is a longtime member of the Yale Gay and Lesbian Alumni/ae Association (Yale GALA), and of Outmusic, a GLBT organization for singers and songwriters.



Kim Hanson

Robert Leuze



# “Accept It Gracefully” — Keeping Our Creative Gifts Alive

BECKY BIRTHA

*Keynote Address, Midwinter Gathering  
Friends for Lesbian and Gay Concerns  
February 1991  
Washington, District of Columbia*

I am going to begin with some words that come from a little book of daily meditations I've been using.

What if we see God as a process. The process of the universe. What if we begin to understand that we are a part of the process of the universe. What if we realize that it is only when we live who we are that we have the option of being one with that process. Trying to be someone else, who we think we should be, or who others think we should be, ruptures our oneness with that process. If God is a process, and I am a process, then we have something in common to begin with.\*

The concept of 'God as a process' really appealed to me. A process is something that is active and alive and changing. What that concept made me think about was my creativity and my writing, each of which is also a process. I

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\* Anne Wilson Schaeff: *Meditations for Women Who Do Too Much* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990).

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essentially see all such processes as made of the same stuff. So I am going to be talking this afternoon about my writing, and I am going to be sharing some of my poems with you, because the poems often convey best what I want to say. I will also be talking about healing, growing, dealing with pain, and loving myself, which is essentially the same as talking about my writing.

Many of the poems are from my new book, *The Forbidden Poems*. I saw it for the first time last night, so I'm excited about that.\*

Several poems were written as part of the process of recovering from the breakup of a 10-year lesbian relationship, of trying to find a way to deal with the feelings that the breakup produced in me. So I am going to start with a series of healing poems. The first of these I titled, "The Healing Poem"—rather naively thinking that this could all be accomplished by writing one poem.

### The Healing Poem

There is a healing power in the sky.

For times when you cannot weep—  
travel on foot

a morning's measure; find  
a vast unbounded field of sky  
then, spend the whole of a day  
beneath it.

In your house  
keep one window free  
panes shining full with blue or gray—  
you must never stray far  
from the sky.

There is a healing power in the land.

When what you would change  
you cannot change,  
take tool to hand and  
work the earth:  
spade deep and turn it over,  
let it crumble, sift out every stone.

Near your home,  
set off a stretch of ground;  
feed it, keep it  
growing.

If you must leave the land,  
do not leave for long.

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\* Becky Birtha: *The Forbidden Poems* (Seattle: The Seal Press, 1991).

There is a healing power in you  
when reason fails—  
you cannot overcome the problem  
with your mind.  
It is in your fingers  
that lace and mend  
in the bend of your back when you  
swing the axe,  
shovel coal or snow.  
It is in your voice  
singing, released  
when your feet pick up  
the pound of a beat, leap and whirl—  
turn full around:  
return to yourself.  
Do not forget to  
keep your powers alive.

The healing is in these words—  
When you want very much  
something you cannot have  
You must begin again

But then what happened to me was a physical injury. I think that often happens when you are going through some sort of an emotional crisis and not dealing with it very well. That fall I entered the hospital and had surgery; I was on crutches and in a leg brace for much of the winter. Of course it snowed more that winter than any time in history. I realized that I couldn't do any of the things that I had suggested in the previous poem, so I had to write another poem. This one is shorter.

### A Deeper Healing

This is a healing poem  
for when you cannot dance  
and cannot work  
and cannot walk.  
Concentrate on  
the things you still can do.  
    Breathe.  
    Dream.  
    Love.  
    Change.

I subsequently wrote an even shorter poem that belongs with these others. This poem came from a different place. It is called, “Accept It Gracefully,” the title of my talk. An earlier poem began with “When you want very much/something you cannot have/you must begin again.”

### Accept It Gracefully

When you want very much  
something that you *can* have  
consider it a gift;  
accept it gracefully.

I think that for too much of my life I have wanted things that I *could* have but wasn't able to accept gracefully; I wasn't able to give those gifts to myself. I've been the kind of person who always was looking for what's wrong in a situation, or focusing on what I don't do well enough: on the things that I haven't accomplished instead of the things that I have accomplished. It's been a real turning point for me to try to look at things the other way and realize that there really are things that I can have, that they are gifts, that they are available to me, and that I can accept them.

My message this afternoon has to do with gifts that we can be giving ourselves, or more accurately, accepting gracefully, since I don't believe that the gifts really come from ourselves. They are from a deeper source; it is our part simply to be able to accept them. But gifts—even wonderful, positive, exciting ones that we want—are not always easy to accept. The poems that I will read are about different things in my life that I see as gifts. I'm talking from personal experience, but I'm sure that other people's experiences, while different, may be similar.

I see my writing as a gift in my life that I can accept. Yet that's not always been easy for me. Working on my book, *The Forbidden Poems*, was a long, hard struggle. I had received a grant and actually had a year away from working at a job—a year I thought would be this wonderful time when I could do whatever I wanted. In fact, it was very, very difficult. Many days I was depressed. If anyone said anything about my writing, they could say a whole paragraph of wonderful things but make maybe one suggestion of what needed improvement, and all I would hear was that it didn't quite measure up yet.

I really had to work to change that. Sometimes when I talked to my editor on the telephone, I would write down what she said. Later, on computer paper, I

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I WILL ALSO BE  
TALKING ABOUT  
HEALING, GROWING,  
DEALING WITH PAIN,  
AND LOVING  
MYSELF, WHICH IS  
ESSENTIALLY THE  
SAME AS TALKING  
ABOUT MY WRITING.

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would write down, in big bright letters, some of her positive statements; then I'd tape the paper all around the walls of my study. Later, when I looked up from my typewriter, I would see her words—for example: “We really think *The Forbidden Poems* is a fine book, and we want to publish it”—instead of the kind of thoughts that go on in my mind all the time, things like “No one will ever want to read this stuff.”

I realize that what made writing so hard for me then was my own internalized oppression. I think that some of my internalized oppression is racism. Internal-

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IN SOME WAYS, HOW I  
BECAME A LESBIAN IS  
SIMILAR TO HOW I  
BECAME A QUAKER. IT  
WAS AN EXPERIENCE  
OF DISCOVERING  
THAT THE MORE I  
FIND OUT ABOUT  
THESE PEOPLE, THE  
MORE I REALIZE I  
ALREADY AM ONE OF  
THESE PEOPLE.

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ized racism is a very subtle thing; you usually don't realize it is operating. I think it has gone on all my life, keeping me from doing what I wanted to do because of my concept of myself. For instance, my self-concept once was that I was not capable of being a published author. Some of the internalized oppression is homophobia. As I'm sitting there writing poems about being a lesbian, some subtle nagging thing at the bottom of my mind is saying, “You cannot do this, this is not acceptable to put these poems out in public.”

I really had to work to change that concept of myself and to accept that it is OK for me to be successful in doing what I wanted to do, what felt important for me to do, and what I felt led to do. Certainly I think that being an African-American woman is a gift, and also that being gay or being a lesbian is a gift. I want to read one poem about that particular gift. This poem came from a friend of mine who is not a lesbian. We were talking about someone that we both knew, and she said, “He used to be married, and he had a couple of kids, and then he became gay.” That struck me as an interesting way to put it, and I was thinking, How does one become gay? So I wrote this poem; I'm not sure of its title.

**How It Happened or How I Became A Lesbian**

It's not that you become this way  
So much as it is something you always were.  
Someone you one day realize you are.  
Like the discovery that you would have always loved  
Star fruit  
kiwis  
or mangoes

only, you never knew they existed  
until you were half way through your life.

Maybe you remember the day you discovered mangoes  
When you and a friend fed thick, pulpy slices  
into each other  
mouths open in astonishment  
maybe you remember your first taste  
and the startling comprehension of the possibilities  
of life in a world that included  
this incredible sweet reality. *[Laughter, applause]*

In some ways, how I became a lesbian is similar to how I became a Quaker. It was an experience of discovering that the more I find out about these people, the more I realize I already am one of these people. It wasn't something that I had to become; it was just something that I was and had been most of my life. I didn't have to ask, "Do I really believe what they believe?" Most of what I encountered affirmed who I was. It was, "Hey, there's this whole group of people who are trying to live the way I'm trying to live, and it really makes sense to align myself with them."

I've only written one poem about my meeting. My meeting has been a wonderful gift to me—a gift that I had to decide to accept. Every year at New Year's my meeting has a little gathering, a meeting for worship, in a room with a fireplace and comfortable chairs.

New Year's Eve,  
Race Street Meeting of Friends

Imagine! You are traveling along  
on the journey through your life.  
It's a winter night  
in the heart of a great city  
when you come to an immense brick building  
where you expected to make a stop  
but the windows are all dark, and the doors locked.  
Still, you notice that there is a light within  
and, yes. One door has been left open  
for you. Once inside, you see that more light  
comes from somewhere above, and you climb stairs  
and at the top of the staircase find  
a large bright empty room  
where a fire has been laid and lit  
and is burning effortlessly,

where bread and cakes are arranged on a table  
and a circle of comfortable chairs  
is drawn up around the fire. You take a seat  
and fall into grateful silence.  
Then, one by one  
others come into the room, smile at you,  
seat themselves before the fire, too,  
and take up your silence.  
And all of them are friends!

The newest gift has been being a mother—finally becoming a mother at the age of 42. To adopt a child, or children, is something that I have wanted to do all my life. When I was a child there were many children who were orphaned as a result of the Korean War, and I would find ads in magazines encouraging people not just to sponsor children but actually to adopt the children from Korea. As a little girl I used to write away to these people. I guess they didn't know it was a little girl who was writing. They would send me many pictures of Korean children. On the back of each little photo would be a description of the child, what the child was like, and what his or her circumstances were. I would lay them all out on the kitchen table and try to get my mother engaged in the conversation over which of these children should become my new little sister. She never went for it.

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THEN I ALSO REALIZED THAT I  
NEEDED TO SEE THE BREAKUP  
AS A GIFT IN MY LIFE AND NOT  
JUST AS A BETRAYAL.

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It wasn't until recently that I actually acted to adopt a child. The question that I ask myself is, “Why did it take me so long to do this thing that I knew I wanted to do my whole life?” Once again, the answer seems to be internalized oppression. Particularly as a lesbian, I found it very hard to convince myself that it was OK, that it was a gift I could accept. I had to convince myself that I deserved it. Until I did that, I couldn't really move on adoption. Internalized oppression has kept me from doing things all my life. But we as gay and lesbian people do deserve to be who we are, to do what we want to do, and to have the things that we are meant to have and are led to have.

I have only written one poem to my daughter. Of course I imagined that I would write lots of poems to her but . . . the Truth about motherhood! Maybe I will someday, when she is 25 years old!

**A Letter to My Daughter at Sixteen Months**

What do they call you, little one  
 What does your voice sound like?  
 Do you sleep with your thumb in your mouth  
 kick the covers off?  
 Do you hug a teddy bear?  
 Who gave it to you?  
 Do you wake up smiling, little girl,  
 laughing and crowing loud?  
 and then do you play in your crib for a while  
 or do you want someone to come right away?  
 How long will it be  
 before I become the one you want?  
 There's no way of your knowing, child,  
 how your whole life is about to change.  
 How everything you thought you had in the world  
 will be lost to you.  
 Everything that mattered exchanged overnight  
 for someone  
 who will have to earn your trust  
 your love  
 your forgiveness  
 your mother

Forgiveness is also a gift that I've done some thinking about—especially in terms of going through the breakup and loss of a relationship. I felt that forgiveness was needed in two places. One was to forgive my ex-lover; this has been taking me a long time to do. I can see that forgiving is a gift, and that life will be easier when I resolve this. But it hasn't been easy for me. The other place was to forgive myself. At first I didn't really realize I needed to do this, but I began to see that that was called for as well.

I want to read two poems about the breakup.

**Poem for the Loss of the Relationship**

Someone has given you a rare antique  
 pottery bowl  
 hand-crafted by a highly skilled artisan  
 long ago.  
 Its shape and its color delight you.  
 You love the feel of it in your hands,  
 its thickness and weight.



It is one of a kind—  
no other exactly like it exists in the world.  
You want to take excellent care of it  
to appreciate it every day  
to keep it forever.

As the years go by you grow  
increasingly interested in ancient pottery  
for the sake of this single vessel.  
You begin to read voraciously,  
learn to identify different styles and periods  
types of glazes and clay.  
You attend lectures at universities,  
showings at museums. You become  
a resource to others.  
Your life revolves around this work  
and you love it.  
The exquisite hand-crafted bowl remains  
most precious to you in all the world.

One morning when you pick up the bowl  
it slips from your fingers  
and tumbles to the concrete floor  
where it smashes into a thousand pieces.

It was very hard for me was to see the old relationship as a gift. After I finished with denial I moved on to anger. That lasted for a long time. It was hard to look back and remember good things about the relationship: that it added to my life and that I was loved in that relationship. Then I also realized that I needed to see the breakup as a gift in my life and not just as a betrayal. Sometimes to get through a day I would take all the different pieces of my life and sort of chant out loud to myself: “The breakup is a gift, the pain that I am feeling is a gift, the anger that I am feeling is a gift.” I think that it is true—that there are ways to use even the really painful things that we are sent in our lives.

My lover and I lived in a house in the city that had a backyard where I had a flower garden. I was trying to plant some flowers that would bloom every year and some that would take years to bloom. Across the street was a community garden, where I had a little plot; from the third floor window of the house I could actually look across the street and see my plot in the corner. I even could see if there was a really ripe red tomato that I needed to run down and run across the street and pick. I really loved that, and the garden became kind of a metaphor for the relationship; losing the garden was one of the hardest parts.

## Counting My Losses

If I begin with the crocuses  
 snowdrops, then clusters of yellow  
 daffodils against the wooden fence  
 heavy-scented hyacinth and bleeding heart  
 each in the order that it appears  
 year after year—

if I begin again and stop  
 and cry for every open-throated crocus,  
 how many days  
 weeks    seasons    years  
 before I'd reach the hollyhocks—  
 the last of all I planted there?

If I could reach the hollyhocks  
 I would be halfway through  
 one summer  
 but I gave ten years of my life to this  
 and how many summers  
 until I recover?

Perennial.  
 I thought that meant predictable  
 dependable, lasting  
 what you can come to count on  
 year after year anew,  
 what you've planted being returned to you.

In this garden I grew flowers  
 and what never flowered:  
 the lilac sapling a yard high,  
 a gift from my mother I had to leave behind  
 and wisteria I started  
 earliest of all

knowing how long it would take to spill  
 those first loose falls of lavender.

Counting my losses,  
 is this where I begin?

Or end—  
 three more years to first flowering—

I couldn't stay.

In the next step in the story (I’m telescoping and leaving out the three-year interval before this happened) a new relationship came into my life. Surprisingly, this also was a gift that seemed hard to accept: I didn’t feel ready to trust someone new. So I had many questions about, “Is this OK? Is this person OK? Does this person measure up to my standards?” Or whatever. I began to realize that these questions were not about my lover but about me and how ready I was to accept something new, a new love in my life. One poem had the new relationship as its source; then, after I wrote it, I realized that its subject was much larger.

**Everything**

One morning the person who has nothing  
will arrive at your door.  
She will have none of those things that others own:  
houses, money, husbands, and wives;  
she will not come empty-handed.  
She will sit at your table with you  
and eat whatever you offer:  
greens, grains, or bread  
whatever you prepare she will be grateful for.  
She will drink your milk.  
Neither of you will go hungry.

The person who has nothing  
will make herself at home  
in the rooms where you live.  
She will draw water to wash herself,  
she will watch the sky from your windows.  
She will be still  
to listen to your music.  
While you are away  
she will sleep among your things  
and be there for you to come home to.  
She will follow you up the stairs  
and lie down beside you in your bed.  
In the darkness she will see into you.  
She will open her lips to your longing;  
she will touch you everywhere.  
The person who has nothing  
will ask for nothing  
and take nothing from you.  
She will carry nothing on her journey.  
Her blessing will fall on your house

your bed  
 your table  
 she will not leave you wanting.

When I was searching for a preschool for my daughter, I asked directors and caregivers what their educational philosophy was. Often I would get a response like, "Well, in our preschool program we are trying to get them ready for school and to learn the things that they'll need to know to do OK in school." And then I would ask, "Well, what about the infant and toddler group?" And they would say, "Well, in the infant and toddler group we are really trying to get them ready for the preschool program so they will be prepared to do well in the preschool program." I wanted to find a program for my daughter where they were saying, "Well, in the toddler group we are letting them be toddlers and do the things that you need to do when you are 18 months old. There's time enough for all that other stuff later."

"Just to accept them where they are." I realized that that is the kind of acceptance I need to be able to extend to the relationship and also to myself. Though its actual title is "Eleven Months," I also call this poem "If Our Relationship Was a Baby."

### Eleven Months

If our relationship was a baby  
 we would be counting its age this way.  
 It might be walking by now,  
 pulling itself to an awesome twenty-seven inches,  
 maybe tottering halfway across a room  
 before collapsing on its bottom.

There would be plenty of time for mistakes.  
 It would always manage to get back on its feet again.

If our relationship was a baby  
 it would be starting to feed itself  
 in a messy sort of way  
 but with great relish in delighted, globby handfuls.  
 We'd have infinite patience  
 repeating the same simple phrases  
 over and over again  
 and mopping up the spills.

If our relationship was a baby,  
 it would already be bonded with both of us.  
 At this age it would scream and cry

when we left it alone  
or didn't feed it enough  
or even if we forgot to give it attention  
sometimes it would get cranky.  
Sometimes it would have a load in its diaper.  
Sometimes it would keep us from sleeping  
all night long.  
We'd know this stage wouldn't last forever  
and love it anyhow.

If our relationship was a baby,  
it would already have a few useful skills  
it would be very good at:  
making us smile  
and laugh and sing  
helping us to play  
making us talk babytalk  
and produce funny noises  
keeping us thinking seriously  
about the future.

If our relationship was a baby,  
there'd be no question about it absolute  
and definite  
and permanent  
belonging in the world.  
We'd show it off to everyone.  
We'd know it was here to stay.  
It would still need changing  
three or four times a day  
and have plenty of growing to do.  
But we'd have no doubt  
that it would grow wiser and brighter  
more capable and more delightful  
with every passing year.  
We'd assume it would still be around  
ten or twenty years from now  
having a life of its own  
turning out fine.

*[Applause]*

I think we often need to look that way at our gay and lesbian relationships in particular. It is so easy. But so much of the feedback we get tries to discount what is going on with us—that this relationship doesn't really count, that it will probably be over in a few months. Relationships need the kind of acceptance and love that we would give to children.

In the end, I feel the ultimate gift is love. In meeting one morning, two words came to me—*loving acceptance*. They have been among the words that I have taped up on the walls of my house.

On some level, there's really no reason for me to feel anything else towards myself except loving acceptance. I may strive to do better, or to improve parts of me, but there needs to be some part of me that is always loving and accepting of who I am essentially, no matter what I do. It is not about being self-centered or narcissistic. I hope I have conveyed how hard I sometimes come down on myself. I believe that unconditional love is here for all of us. I believe that we deserve it. And I believe that the way to tap into it and to experience it and to have it is to give it to ourselves.

So I am going to close with a poem called "Love Poem to Myself." I have found that what helps me is to write love poems to myself. I hope that you will hear it as a love poem to yourself. I wrote this around the time of my fortieth birthday, so I decided to use it as a birthday gift to myself.

### Love Poem to Myself

*(for my fortieth birthday)*

Happy Birthday whoever you are  
 little one  
 old one  
 love of my life  
 my likeness  
 my most cherished darkness  
 my radiance  
  
 innocent  
 knowing one  
 with the wide eyes  
 open hands  
 wide open heart  
 I open  
 my heart to you.

Listen—

I will be exactly who you need:  
 wise mother

all forgiving lover  
playful sister  
listening, intimate friend

I will love you no matter what.  
I will love you at any cost.  
I will love you the way  
you deserve to be loved.  
Nothing you could do  
could keep me from loving you.  
This is my gift for you  
this year this day this hour  
for you whom I love most of all

You may get whatever you want to get.  
You may have whatever you want to have.  
You may feel whatever it is you feel.  
You may do whatever you want to do  
most of all  
You may be who you  
always were  
always will be  
who you  
absolutely amazingly  
all ways  
already are.



Becky Birtha is the author of two collections of short stories, *For Nights Like This One: Stories of Loving Women* (Frog in the Well, 1983) and *Lovers' Choice* (Seal, 1987). Her first published book of poetry is *The Forbidden Poems* (Seal, 1991). She received an Individual Fellowship in Literature from the Pennsylvania Council on the Arts in 1985, a Creative Writing Fellowship Grant from the National Endowment for the Arts in 1988, and Pew Fellowship in the Arts in 1993. Her poems and stories have been widely anthologized. A black lesbian feminist Quaker who adopted a daughter in 1990, she remains a member of the Central Philadelphia (Race Street) Monthly Meeting of the Religious Society of Friends. She lives near Philadelphia with her partner and daughter. She wishes to acknowledge and thank “The Seal Press, who published my book *The Forbidden Poems*, in which many of the poems included here appeared, the women of the Quaker Lesbian Conference, where I have found support and renewal for the past 25 years, and the Spirit, generous in providing me with words for my talk.”

Becky BIRTHA (1991)



Sharon Gumbler

Becky BIRTHA