

STEP INTO MY PARLOUR



By Shaun Proulx

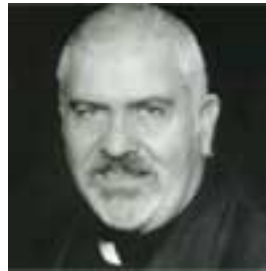
Billed as Canada's largest and sexiest weekend, the Mr. Leatherman Toronto Competition is back at the end of this month. Included among the judges is the **Reverend Troy Perry**.

Nearly four decades ago while Perry was in his twenties his watershed disclosure of his homosexuality destroyed his life and branded him a pariah. In a headline-making scandal the Pentecostal minister from California - first licensed in Florida at the age of fifteen - lost his wife, his ministry, and was abandoned by his two sons amidst persecution leading to a failed suicide attempt.

Yet Perry survived, emerging from his trial by fire and his painful past to re-discover his calling. An ad in a local paper yielded twelve people to his living room for the first service of what would become a highly controversial new Christian church, the success of which has since been covered by every major magazine and newspaper in the world.

Ministering to gays, lesbians, bisexuals and transgendered people, the fledgling little organization was called the Metropolitan Community Church, and is now commonly referred to as MCC: forty-two thousand members strong in three hundred congregations in sixteen countries worldwide.

SHAUN PROULX TALKS TO REVEREND TROY PERRY



Perry has authored three books, including *The Lord Is My Shepherd And He Knows I'm Gay* and *Don't Be Afraid Anymore*. A leading activist and the recipient of the Humanitarian Award from the

American Civil Liberties Union, he has also been invited to the White House on four occasions to discuss GLBT civil rights, AIDS, and hate crimes with Presidents Carter and Clinton. He was also Clinton's honouree at a Whitehouse breakfast honouring one hundred national spiritual leaders in 1997.

And Perry is also a proud leatherman. As such, he is a member of yet another culture of still frequently misunderstood and sometimes condemned people. Both non-gays and gays alike are among those who clone leatherfolk and view leathersex as sadomasochism, with S/M being considered an intolerant form of behaviour. Disagreeing, however are the many who take the odyssey into the leather world. There, it's argued, leathersex involves confronting elements of taboo, power, instinct and sexuality, and of stripping away cultural patterns through intimate forms of play using tools that include bondage, role-play, and pain-pleasure. The result is often described as conscious-shifting to a new vision of self and a new mind space to explore.

I phoned Troy Perry at his office in Los Angeles where we discussed these ideas. I asked him about his own journey into leather, the conflict of religion versus physical appetites, releasing the burden of guilt, and the intersection of sex and spirituality.



Don't you find it's common, the painting of misinformed and clichéd strokes about what leather is really about, even within the gay community?



That's correct. I tell people that S/M means 'sensuality and maturity', that's what S/M means to me. That kind of thing moves over from the leather community to the gay community to the fetish community. But somehow the leather community is even more sexual, and for someone who is having trouble with their own sexuality and is stuck in that situation, they think 'well at least my sexuality is not as bad as theirs'. And that's just crazy.



You've commented in the past that many elements of the spiritual leanings of some leathermen have shared common denominators with more conventional religious experiences.



It is amazing to me the spirituality and the care – especially during AIDS - of leathermen, the owners of leather bars and clubs, just amazing. The camaraderie combined with a deep spirituality. I discovered if you scratch, usually leathermen have a deep spirituality, and that includes pagans, Hindus... A few years ago I was the keynote speaker at the National Leather Association meeting here in America - eight hundred people gathered at the convention centre in Portland, Oregon - and because I was there they were going to do a first-ever panel on spirituality and leather. They put us in a little room, and you know what? The crowd was so big they had to move us to an auditorium. And it was incredible. I was the only Christian on this panel, but there was every thing from Christians, to Buddhists, to pagans, to Hindus. And what was incredible to me was how well everyone on that panel articulated their spirituality. And there was no nonsense about 'my spirituality is better than yours'. Just everybody talking with respect for everyone there. It was just incredible.



Some leatherfolk speak of having spiritual experiences or highs through their sexual explorations. Can this be the result of a deeper exchange of energy between a top and a bottom, of intensifying sex, going beyond boundaries so that indeed sex intersects with spirit?



Yes, I think that. There is a mutually agreed upon exchange of power, in other words the top / the bottom, the slave / the master, the daddy / the boy. And as you said, because sometimes some of the sexuality that is involved in the leather community is so intense, it automatically takes you into your spiritual self. Some of the things I've seen and witnessed at leather gatherings are akin to reading about the saints filled with rapture of being so involved with God and God's love.



Leathersex is also described by some as something that can heal wounds, mend shame, aid physiological growth and provide the basis for expanded spiritual awareness.



For many people it certainly does. I can't speak in general terms and say that happens for everyone. But I certainly can say that it has done that for so many people. The whole thing of being hurt as a child, sometimes that child needs healing. And for a lot of boys – and I mean that in the leather sense – they come to terms with their daddies. It's an entire thing that goes beyond being used as a sex toy, there's a healing that takes place that helps people and that's just unbelievable. It's better than therapy.



You're talking about sexual acts being the way to *connect* with your spirituality instead of denying your spirit through denying sexual acts.



That's absolutely correct. As long as we who are part of the leather community are not there because we want to be destructive, or to see ourselves as hurt or harmed in some way or become the person who hurts someone in some way.



Isn't it just a great human disservice that our culture separates the mind and the body? Because if we didn't, no one would be burdened with guilt for enjoying their own bodies.



Absolutely I agree with you there. I know as a person who is involved with spirituality and sexuality in my own church that I learned a long time ago that sex is Christianity's dirty little secret. We want people to be wonderful, we want people to be saints, but we feel so uncomfortable around sexuality. It's pathetic. People forget: God created sex. God created sex and it's a good thing. Marriage of our sexuality and our spirituality is something we should expect in life.



Instead many people deny their sexuality to affirm their spirituality - recipe for guilt and shame. How do you get to the point where you can counteract that, and maybe consider that guilt and shame are by-products of a condemning society, rather than of God?



We have to look at ourselves. When I travel around I always tell people 'if you hear me say just one thing, I want you to hear loud and clear from me this: God didn't create you so God could have someone to sit around and hate.' We get this notion that because we're sexual beings that somehow we're not good enough, or that we should be guilty about the feelings that we have, that are natural feelings, that are created feelings from God. I tell people over and over again: explore your spirituality *and* your sexuality, which are not mutually exclusive the way some religious groups try and teach.



But the root of conflict between religious practices and physical appetites is grounded in many things.



It's grounded in a lot of things. I always say that Jesus was very positive about a lot of things, that Jesus never once mentions once in the gospel about homosexuality. I actually had a man who came and talked to me a few years ago in 1989. His wife attended an Irish American Catholic church, and once she couldn't have children anymore she talked to her priest, who suggested they not have sex anymore. The man said to me, 'We're having problems in our house. Because our priest said that because my wife can't have children anymore we shouldn't have sex. And because my wife is a devout Catholic she is doing as the priest advised, and I'm having a real problem with it.' All I could really do is talk to them, get them to seek some counselling and perhaps find another priest to talk to. The conflict has always been a real problem, and I always say that one of the reasons that people like to point fingers at the gay and lesbian community is this reputation we have for having more fun sexually -



Well you *know* that's true. Come on!



(Laughing) – and the other reason is that we supposedly sleep with thousands of partners. I don't believe that one either. I saw a statistic years ago that said we were supposed to be sleeping with 1,600 different men a year!



I wish I had that kind of time. Five guys a day.



(Laughing) I'd have to lie out on the Hollywood freeway and have every car that came my way stop! I think in the gay community even with leather, moving back into that, there's even that extra added on. People sometimes don't understand the leather community, and in dealing with sexuality and what's right and wrong, people try to project onto us what they think leather is.



Can you describe your journey into leather?



I fell into leather in a weird way. I had separated from my wife and had moved to Los Angeles. I was thrown out of my church for being gay and I started my journey into the gay and lesbian community. I worked with someone who was into leather and I didn't know what that meant exactly. But one day he asked me, 'Would you meet me at this bar?'

Well, stupid me I went to the leather bar. I'd never been to one and didn't know what it was. (Laughing) And I'm wearing my polyester pants, shirt; I arrived at the door and tried to get in. And the doorman said, 'Where do you think you're going?' And I said, 'Well, I'm going in the bar, I guess.' 'Not dressed like that,' he tells me. 'Pull off that coat and tie.' I went back to my car, took off my coat and tie and went back. The doorman looked at me and said 'Now where do you think you're going?' And I'm thinking, 'What is wrong with this man?' 'Leather's preferred here,' he tells me.

So I said to the doorman, 'Look, a friend of mine is in here, can I just go in and have him paged and then I'll leave?' So he let me in. I asked the bartender to page my friend and waited. And it was very dark; I started looking around and all at once I saw this guy at the end of the bar: chaps, boots, no shirt and a leather vest on. He was looking at me like he was undressing me. But here I am this little twenty-five year old guy! And all at once he said, 'Here, pussy, pussy...'

He scared the living crap out of me and I thought ‘this is a Hell’s Angel’s bar, I’m fixing to get beat up,’ and I left. But: I could not get over the way he looked at me.

Then, after I founded MCC, I had four leathermen walk into my church. I thought again they were Hell’s Angels – we’d had some problems with bikers – and I told the ushers, ‘If they start anything call the police’. After service it turned out one of them was the president of a leather group. He invited me to meet other presidents of leather groups and asked if I’d ever been to a leather bar. I told him the story I just told you and he just laughed, laughed, laughed. And he took me out to one, but made me wear jeans, a black T-shirt and boots. The people that I met were genuinely interesting people, were professional for the most part. And I got cruised like mad and I just loved it. But I knew from that first visit before, when I saw that guy at the bar who turned me on with that first view – it was an exchange of energy. But it still frightened me and I was new to the gay community and I didn’t know how to act.



And you were so young as well.



And I was young. And so immediately I started going to leather bars from that day forward and it was amazing, and still continues to be, the most amazing experience for me.



Tell me about balancing being a proud leatherman and serving God.



I have a deep love of God. And I have a deep love of that part of me that is part of the leather community, too. And I don’t back off from that. I think balance comes because they are different facets of my life. When I’ve gone to see the U.S. President I wore a suit because that’s appropriate. But I’m not going to wear my three-piece suit or my clergy collar to a leather bar, I’m going to wear my leather there. And have a great time with my leather friends when I am there, too. I tell people I carry all of me before God. My work, leather or whatever, I carry all of that before God. I’m one to remind people that the spirituality you have is to be taken into the bedroom, too. You don’t leave it outside. And it’s really helped shaped me to be the person that I am. And the interests I have in leather have really shaped me.



Before we close, I have to tell you I can’t help but think of your story and be reminded of the Robert Duvall character in *The Apostle*.



You know something? That’s amazing. The *L.A. Times* did a story on me and the reporter went with me to see that. And when they showed Robert Duvall as a child, I said, ‘That is so close to home I can’t believe it’. That was just an incredible film for me because I also come from a Pentecostal background, and it’s about doing something you never thought you would do – it was an incredible story and a lot like me.



You’re a gay hero if there ever was one. Thanks for your time.



Thank you, Shaun.

