



The Art of Billy Heart Circles: a guide

Our space of healing & transformation

The Heart Circle is understood to be the core ritual of the Billy Communityⁱ and a key source of our depth. It is a tool for gathering like-hearted people together in weaving a tapestry of community and interconnectedness. It has been an important component of Radical Faerieⁱⁱ and Billy Community traditions for decades. The Heart Circle is a ritual opening into deeper collective sharing, a path of discovery, a space of healing from exposure to the lost, largely alienated mainstream world.

Since the 60s at least, there has been a resurgence of interest in and experimentation with the circle as a tool of consciousness-raising, community-building and spiritual connection. Some circles are goal-oriented – making decisions, setting direction – while others are for healing and witnessing, consciousness-raising or wisdom-building.

People have been gathering in circles since prehistoric times. Tribes and early cultures frequently functioned in circles. Talismans were passed, histories preserved, minds converged, hearts opened. Stories were told, direction chosen, consensus achieved. Meaning was made. It is yet the way in indigenous and contemporary communities around the planet.

Our Billy Heart Circles mirror many aspects of those earlier circles yet are specifically inherited in their form and purpose from the Radical Faeries. In those original Heart Circles, we offered songs and poetry and dance, we shared our stories, our yearnings. We revealed our secret places. We created common ground. We discovered that each other's experiences, though differing in details, mirrored our own; they allowed us to better understand our own lives and helped us heal.

Heart Circles grew to a new depth with the Dying Times, the mid-80s to mid-90s. Circling with open hearts, holding each other, we helped each other die, we helped each other grieve and we helped each other survive. We wove a community that was loving, present and available with each other through unbelievably hard times. Now, with an aging community, in a time of political instability and environmental uncertainty, we can expect Circles to change again according to our needs.

In Circle, we are taking the time and extending our trust to know each other on a deeper level than mainstream culture encourages us to do. Modern culture teaches us, presses us to think of ourselves as individuals, isolated in our strivings, fearful of “the other.” In breaking down these barriers between us, Heart Circles are both evolutionary and revolutionary, offering us an experience of a world where we are heartfully interconnected.

The following is a guide for coordinating as well as facilitating Heart Circles at Billy gatherings and elsewhere. It is not presented as a set of rules but rather as guidelines. This is an unfolding process in a living tradition; creative, heart-centered improvisations can contribute to our experience.



FACILITATING HEART CIRCLES AT-A-GLANCE

(FOR DETAILS, SEE FOLLOWING PAGES)

- ❖ Describe Heart Circles – our core ritual – to newcomers, for instance at pre-dinner circles, and invite participation
- ❖ Announce time and place
- ❖ Set up physical space: seating and an altar with talisman(s).
- ❖ Decide talismanic process (passed around the Circle or Quaker/popcorn style)
- ❖ Welcome participants when a critical mass is assembled
- ❖ Describe guidelines, usually with the help of the community
 - ❖ Speaking and listening from the heart & from your own experience, confidentiality ensures safety, suspend judgment, be respectful of time, enter and leave between shares, the talisman passed with a hug, the Hiss as a sign of resonance, people need not speak, and more. (see page 5)
- ❖ Emphasize confidentiality, the key to success
- ❖ Begin the Heart Circle by holding hands and breathing together, having a few minutes of silence, or other brief ceremony
- ❖ Pass the talisman for names and perhaps one word (feelings, where from, etc.)
- ❖ Begin the talismanic process
- ❖ Holding space is the central role of the facilitator
- ❖ Interventions are possible but rare (see page 9)
- ❖ When shares stop flowing or time requires it, ask if any burning shares remain and if at all possible make space for them.
- ❖ Have a clear closing (thanks and appreciation, hands and breaths together, a song, ...)
- ❖ Say the magic words: “The Circle is Open and Unbroken!”

I HAVE GOTTEN THE HINT:
THERE IS SOMETHING ABOUT CIRCLES THE BELOVED LIKES.
– HAFIZ



COORDINATION AND FACILITATION OF THE HEART CIRCLE

Thank you for bringing your compassion and spaciousness to the treasured experience of Heart Circle. The description here is lengthy and detailed. What is presented is an in-depth study, almost as if empowering someone who has never participated in Heart Circle to facilitate one. If you have been asked to coordinate &/or facilitate Heart Circle for a gathering, chances are you have participated in many of them already. **Let the information here serve to guide and inspire you but use your own experience to inform you as well.** People coming to a Heart Circle want a deep, intimate, vulnerable experience and will support you in guiding them there.

Heart Circle is considered by many to be **our core ritual – the heart of our community and of our gatherings.** It is the place where we share our lives, our trust and support, our hopes and our vision from the very center of our hearts. We come to know each other to a depth that is generally absent from the mainstream gay community. In Heart Circle, we realize we truly are not alone as others' hurts and joys, desires, strivings, struggles and achievements reflect our own. We discover the shared values that give our community a firm foundation. We support growth and change as we provide witness for others. Elders emerge, and often the elder in each of us emerges. We build wisdom as our various insights and perspectives accumulate. In this space, we may find we are able to offer and receive unconditional love, acceptance and deep healing as our hearts blossom into compassion.

THE COORDINATOR ROLE

The primary responsibility of the Gathering Heart Circle Coordinator is to see that Heart Circles continue to be held every day. This includes asking volunteers to facilitate each day's Circle, making sure that a time and site are designated for them, and especially that new Billys are given an understanding of what Heart Circles are, their importance to our Billy culture, and that they are warmly encouraged to participate. The pre-dinner Circle is a great place to announce the next day's Heart Circle, explaining a bit about them for newcomers and inviting people to participate.

We usually ask different, qualified individuals to facilitate Circles each day in order to broaden the experience and to develop leadership. Though it's good to have well-experienced facilitators, it's equally wonderful to ask Circle regulars you deem ready to step up to the task; be willing to mentor them if they ask, perhaps by sitting next to them during the Circle. **Inviting a diversity of facilitators – a diversity of race, age, gender, & sex – encourages a diversity of participants in the Circles themselves and expands our experience.**

Especially during big gatherings where Circles can become quite large, we have been offering **an option of small Heart Circles** to be held in another space; this benefits people who find it difficult to speak in large Circles or who want to go deeper into an experience they are having.

We have been experimenting by offering to hold Heart Circles specifically, exclusively for people of color, for Spanish-speakers, for transmen. The response so far has been that simply offering to hold them has been important to those communities and



that, should an incident happen in the future around race or gender, they may want to hold one. As of this writing, that opportunity has not been taken. For those wondering why those parts of our community might want a Circle exclusive to their group, we can ask: Why would gay/bi/transmen such as Billys want a Circle for ourselves away from the straight world? The answer of course is safety, the need to share one's heart without fear of misunderstanding or judgment, free from the need to overly explain or defend oneself. Gatekeeping is controversial to some degree but this writer feels strongly that it is appropriate to restrict participation according to those who issue the call to Circle.

That said, it is good to remember that some people may never participate, that **the Heart Circle is not a comfortable place for everyone**. However, they will likely be touched by Heart Circle energy brought out into the gathering by those who do participate.

Remember, for much of the history of Heart Circles, there was never a designated coordinator, and the Circles created themselves. That said, **there is much a coordinator can do to provide a setting and understanding that will allow the Circle to flourish**.

LOGISTICS

Depending on the circumstances, the following can be taken into account in planning Heart Circles for a gathering:

- ❖ **Designate a facilitator for each day and announce a location and a time** that has no other events scheduled opposite it and that allows time for everyone present to share. For example, 60 people @ 2 minutes per person necessitates 2 hours.
- ❖ **Consider providing a copy of this guide to facilitators well in advance of the Heart Circle, particularly to those who are facilitating for the first time.**
- ❖ **The comfort and privacy of participants is important** – a flat, quiet, private space with few distractions, with shade, warmth, pillows, mats & chairs, and water always available.
- ❖ Have a small bell on hand to offer to facilitators to use in opening the Circle.

THE FACILITATOR ROLE

As facilitator of the Circle: Your quality of attention and respectfulness creates the container for what is to happen in this sacred place. Your presence and centeredness provides the ground and holds the space. Your willingness to be vulnerable and risk sharing of yourself can greatly help create the opening for others to expand into. Your words will help shape the Circle but it is important not to attempt to present everything in this manual at each Circle. For instance, reading the guidelines section aloud to a Circle would be dull and boring.

Set up a simple altar in the center of the Circle, select a talisman or talismans and provide pads, backjacks, and chairs to accommodate participant's needs. Volunteers are usually happy to help. The altar can be a piece of fabric placed on the floor or a low box in the center of the Circle. The talisman, or talking stick, can be selected by the facilitator or else a request to the Circle can produce it. You can place alternative talismans, flowers, or other objects on the altar and invite other participants to add objects of personal significance or from nature.



COMPONENTS OF THE HEART CIRCLE

ANNOUNCEMENTS

Heart Circles can be undercut by lengthy recitals of information or other head-centered diversions. Announcements are best left to other times. **It is vital for building the energy of heartspace that this announcement period be brief and concise or skipped entirely.** If larger presentations or discussions are required, consider a time when people gather before meals or at a special Circle called for that purpose.

A NOTE ON CONFIDENTIALITY

We Billys almost universally regard our Heart Circle as the core ritual of our community and a precious gift that has helped us become who we are. Yet our actions have not always reflected this high regard. Confidentiality has sometimes been breached. We speak frequently of the need for confidentiality in our Circles but until we make confidentiality an integral part of our way of being, we endanger the safety and integrity of our Heart Circles and risk discouraging full participation and risk-taking. Stated positively: **If we make strict confidentiality a conscious practice, we will enhance its power to connect and heal us.**

HEART CIRCLE GUIDELINES

Our guidelines protect the sanctity and safety of the circle and its participants.

Describe the purpose and format of the Circle and then present the guidelines to the group assembled. There are often new people present who need this recitation and further, it brings us into ritual space. The tradition is that the facilitator name a few of the guidelines and then elicit others from participants, indicating that our guidelines are held in the broader community. Aspects of the process that can be presented are as follows:

- ❖ **Heart Circle is an opportunity we give ourselves to speak deeply and personally from heart space and to witness each other's sharing.**
- ❖ **The talisman is an object that is passed from one person to another that gives a person the right to speak to the Circle.**
- ❖ **Speaking from the heart means talking about what you are feeling in the present moment.** In Heart Circle sharing, emphasis is on emotional authenticity rather than on storytelling, speaking about one's life or insights from a feeling place that is deeper and more universal than the head or intellect.
- ❖ **"I" statements are best.** Do not make assumptions about others. Refrain from blaming or shaming self or others. A Heart Circle is never the appropriate place to attack someone.
- ❖ **No one has to speak.** It's fine to pass when the talisman comes around. There may be a later opportunity to speak if time permits.
- ❖ **We say that we listen from the heart.** Giving focus and support is the job description for the rest of the Circle. That means to maintain attention on the speaker, **work to suspend judgment** of the content, and offer respect and compassion. **For many, this is a meditative practice.**
- ❖ With the speaker sharing from the heart, **our deep listening completes the heart-to-heart connection.**



- ❖ Everyone is invited to be a full participant, which includes attentive listening. **Everyone holds the circle.**
- ❖ **We are not there to fix or advise anyone and we refrain from trying to do so.**
- ❖ **We ask that participants refrain from crosstalk** – that is, we refrain from commenting to the one holding the talisman (unless requested to do so) or to others.
- ❖ **Please respect with confidentiality those who share their stories.** You may speak freely of how a share or theme has affected you. However, if you must speak about something you heard in Circle, do not name people, do not give any identifying information about them, don't tell their story and be sure you are holding respect and compassion in your heart, not malice or judgment.
- ❖ **If you wish to speak to someone after the Circle about something they shared, always ask if they are willing to engage** you about it and ask when would be an appropriate time. People may not want to talk about things they said in Circle.
- ❖ This is seldom spoken but is very helpful guidance: **It is important to not take in the pain or grief of the speaker.** This helps participants to stay present with the speaker and not feel depleted or traumatized when the Circle ends.
- ❖ **We would do well to call for a deep breath following an intense share** as this gives the next speaker as well as the listeners an opportunity to transition.
- ❖ **Silence between shares, even lasting several minutes after a powerful share, can help everyone remain present.**
- ❖ **Don't make assumptions about who is present in Circle.** There are likely people of many abilities, religions, races, occupations, beliefs, incomes, political parties, sexualities and varied histories and struggles, some invisible.
- ❖ **Try to avoid the tendency to plan what you'll say ahead of time.** This allows you to stay present to the current speaker and able to speak of what is truly in your heart at the moment the talisman comes to you.
- ❖ **The Hisssss** is the one generally acceptable sound people in the Circle can make that **signals strong support or resonance with the speaker** without interruption as applause would do. Inherited from the Radical Faeries as is the Heart Circle itself, the Hisssss is considered the sound of the snake, often reviled in mainstream culture yet sacred to indigenous peoples.
- ❖ **Please leave and enter the Circle between shares** so as to be respectful and non-interruptive.
- ❖ **Time constraints are real and can be mentioned.** People put great effort into creating workshops and meals, and a Circle that runs over can wreak havoc on a gathering schedule. Occasional reminders of the advancing time are appropriate.
- ❖ **An intervention may become necessary** if someone loses track of time. You can mention that you might, during the Circle, gently ring a bell to bring a speaker back into present time if you notice one wandering, not to stop someone from talking but rather to help them center and ground.
- ❖ That said, **it is equally true that heart space is sacred and timeless.** Many of the most memorable gathering experiences have been of Heart Circles that lasted hours beyond their scheduled close.
- ❖ So far, we have been considering the talismanic process in terms of people speaking. It is also possible for people to do a variety of other things that are appropriate if they are acting from the heart. In the past, **people have chosen to offer a song, a poem or**



movement, or to silently hold the talisman, to move about the Circle establishing eye contact with everyone, or to ask to be held or to be levitated by the group. All of these actions accomplish an exchange of energy between the holder of the talisman and the group in ways that are in tune with the purposes of Heart Circle.

- ❖ Very occasionally, a **themed Heart Circle has been called to explore an issue that is present in community**, such as grief for the planet or, at a Fathers & Sons Gathering, our fathers. Participants are encouraged to focus their shares on that theme but people can always share what is up for them in the moment.
- ❖ To complete a Heart Circle, **it is important to have a closing rather than everyone simply drifting away**. It's fine for individuals to leave, but if there is a general sense that it's time to close, we will do so. Ask if there are any burning needs to share and make space if you can.
- ❖ **The Heart Circle has a rich healing potential**. When we share our deepest selves - our pain, hopes and vision - and are then met with loving respect and acceptance, profound change is possible. Old thought forms can be let go, wounds can be healed, isolation can be broken, and limitations overcome when we experience the unconditional love and deep connection with each other that lies at the core of Heart Circle.

THE TALISMANIC PROCESSES

We have **two time-honored mechanisms for the talisman to be passed**. Each has its benefits and “costs,” and each has its proponents within the community.

- ❖ **Passed hand-to-hand around the Circle**, the talisman gives one permission to speak. **With this process, everyone is encouraged to speak, even those who are shy, as the talisman is placed in their hands**. The talisman is **passed with a hug**. If, after the talisman has gone around the Circle once, there is still time and energy for more, it can either go around again or placed in the center, sometimes with the agreement that only those who have not yet spoken may speak. Simply because they may not get the talisman again later in the Circle, this passed-around-the-Circle process can encourage people to speak when they're not bubbling with something to say,
- ❖ **Placed in the center Quaker- or popcorn-style, the talisman is offered to the Circle when someone is finished speaking** and someone else indicates they wish to receive it. **This process encourages people to speak when they are truly moved to speak and allows people to develop themes just addressed that have touched them**. The talisman is **passed with a hug**. However, this format can lead to the most confident being the ones who speak and to a competition to get the talisman. One tradition addressing this point is to have people who want to speak move a few feet into the Circle and the talisman is then passed to them next, with the facilitator “stacking” people who wish to speak if necessary.
- ❖ **One possibility given the two systems is to use both but on alternate days**. It is perhaps a good idea to pass the talisman around the Circle the first day or when lots of new people are present to give everyone the experience of holding it and speaking.
- ❖ **It is never a good idea to ask the Circle which of the two talismanic processes to use**. Proponents of both will voice their strong preferences and the facilitator will still be forced to choose.



OPENING

It is best to begin as soon as a critical mass assembles rather than waiting beyond the scheduled time for everyone who is likely to arrive.

If they are required, **position announcements before the actual opening.**

The assembled Heart Circle is not an appropriate place to recruit volunteers for immediate duty. There are usually plenty of others elsewhere on the land who are not engaged in this important heartwork.

A Heart Circle is a ritual in the truest sense of the word, and the traditional components of ritual are: 1.) **an opening** which can include a purification plus a grounding to bring everyone into their bodies and connected with the earth and each other; 2.) **a focusing of intent**, here, the opening of hearts and creation of meaningful community; 3.) **the “working,”** 4.) **a connection with the sacred**, Heart-to-Heart; and 5.) **a closing.**

The opening can be simple or somewhat more elaborate. It's a good idea to plan ahead how you will gather and ground participants in opening the Circle.

Ring a bell, perhaps, to quiet those who have assembled. **Warmly welcome participants and ask everyone to join hands in a Circle** - seated or standing. Ask people to be silent and breathe together for a few moments, consciously letting go of everything outside the Circle. This is a purification. The joining of our hands and breaths brings us into collective, sacred space.

A brief grounding or visualization is possible here, though holding hands and breathing in a Circle is a grounding as well. So is some form of setting of intention for a loving Circle. A song or poem would be possible here. A few minutes in silent meditation can be a profound beginning to Heart Circle.

Facilitators might also consider honoring the land on which we meet and the Original Peoples who lived there. Or they might invoke or call in qualities that can infuse and inspire the Circle, qualities such as compassion, wisdom, healing, belonging, gratitude.

In a brief go-round with names, you as the facilitator introduce yourself – your name and possibly a word describing how you're feeling or where you make your home – and then **pass the talisman around the Circle clockwise with everyone introducing themselves briefly**, as you did. The Circle may echo each name as it is given. This little go-round effectively casts the Circle, brings everyone into participation and helps prepare us to wait for our turn to speak.

Often, coordinators will find themselves a bit in their head from shepherding the process to this point. **It is usually best to pass the talisman on to someone else for the first heart share**, asking: “Who would like to be first?”



The Heart Circle truly begins when the first person allows their walls to come down, becomes vulnerable, and risks deeply. Here, too, arises the connection with the sacred for, after all, who are we at the center of our hearts if not one with each other?

INTERVENTIONS

These should be rare and limited only to circumstances that make intervention truly necessary. A Heart Circle is not facilitated in any traditional sense of the word but rather takes on a life and impetus of its own. There is no hierarchy. Everyone's in charge! However, sometimes Heart Circles do require an intervention, and the facilitator is often the appropriate person to do this, although skilled others may do so as well. Interventions can be seen as a way of protecting the Circle and its participants.

- ❖ **Suggest a stretch between shares if you notice that the energy of the Circle is falling:** “Darlings, if you don’t mind, I’m going to suggest we all stand up and stretch for just a minute so we can all be more present for your sharing.” The challenge is that this can sometimes precipitate many leaving. It’s a good idea to ask people to remain silent during a very short break so the focused energy is not broken.
- ❖ **Consider reminding people of time considerations,** especially if the process seems to be developing toward longer and longer shares. “I want to remind the Circle that 20 have spoken in the last hour and we have another 50 yet to speak. It would be great if everybody had an opportunity.”
- ❖ **Give a gentle reminder of relevant guidelines discussed earlier if consistently disregarded,** e.g., “Please, in respect for process, no crosstalk no matter how witty, wise, and wondrous you can be.”
- ❖ **Not every share has to be compelling or deep.** People can share just to be present in Circle and that’s fine as long as it doesn’t become a major time grab.
- ❖ **Take note of who shares and who tends to remain silent.** If this seems to be an issue, **suggest people “step up/step back,”** i.e., allow more quiet people the space that they deserve while, if one speaks readily and frequently, holding off for awhile.
- ❖ **Occasionally, someone will reach a crisis or breakdown/breakthrough while speaking and require more time. It is important that the Circle supports the person’s process and not interrupt.** Remaining focused and respectfully silent will often be enough, but if the person feels he or she is being inappropriate and apologizes, reassure the person that this is what Heart Circle is for. A person lovingly supported as they look deeply into hard places can experience profound movement and healing.
- ❖ **If people attempt to interrupt an emotional share** by offering tissue, trying to hold or contain them or patting them on the back, in effect saying “There, there, you’ll be all right,” **tell the would-be helper, “Please let the speaker have space.”** This is a delicate but vital point. Sometimes one can hold or touch someone in such a way as to encourage their flow, but it is more likely that the words or touch of others could inhibit the speaker and stop their process. Unless such help is requested, don’t attempt it.
- ❖ **Levitation where the group lifts an individual into their arms, or surrounding them in a hug circle, have been practices used to reassure a speaker who has gone to a deep place of our support or to help integrate a healing experience.**
- ❖ **If you notice a speaker rambling excessively or lost in their head, attempt a delicate intervention if you feel capable.** A speaker at times can drop into a trance and lose track of time or direction; your purpose is to gently bring them into the present



moment. Often, you'll first notice this when you sense the Circle or yourself becoming bored and restless during a share. If you mention the possibility of sounding a bell in the guidelines, gently ringing it may well work to bring the speaker to their center. Other effective interventions that have been effective in the past are gently asking "Honey, what's in your heart right now?" or "Darlin', what do you want from us right now?"

- ❖ Note: These interventions are not fail-safe as we cannot control their impact upon the speaker. It is important that we are clear with our intent: **to help the speaker become better focused by gently bringing them into the here and now and, perhaps even more importantly, to protect the Circle from feeling captive.** Heart Circle can be disdained if rambling shares too often go unchecked.
- ❖ **The facilitator bears some responsibility** in this protection of the Circle but they do not *own* the Circle. **Elders can intervene as well if they see the necessity.**
- ❖ **A rare situation that would demand immediate intervention would be if someone uses abusive language or makes attacks.** Attacking someone (present or not), name-calling, gossiping, etc., is unacceptable. However, even here, it is best not to say, "You're out of line!" or "You can't say that." Instead, try something like, **"It would be best if you could make *I-statements*."**
- ❖ Again, be assured that you, as facilitator, don't have to do it all. **A Heart Circle is, ideally, self-sustaining and group wisdom is fully present.**

CLOSING

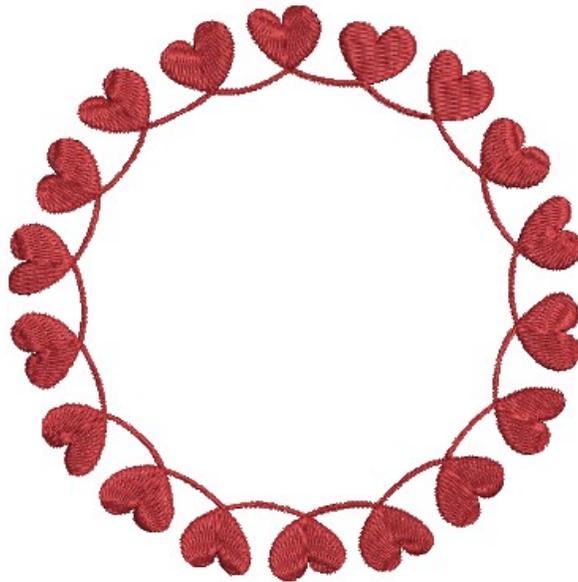
As with any ritual, having a closing is important to mark the change from sacred space to ordinary space, to gather the group's energy one last time before letting it go and to release the participants from the shared agreements of focus and attention. When group energy or the clock indicates that it's time to close, ask the Circle if it is ready. Then ask if there's anyone left who has a burning desire to share. Accommodate the person(s), if possible. Then ask people to stand together if possible, hold hands, thank everyone for their contributions, and then do some simple thing: breathe in unison, be silent for a minute, sing a song together, do the hokey pokey or a Hip Hip Hooray.

And finally, the ritual closing words are spoken: **"The Circle is open and unbroken!"**

NEVER FINAL WORDS

Please don't allow all these words to convince anyone that Heart Circle is too complicated to lead or a matter for the head. By the time Circle begins, let all these words go and lead from the heart.

Heartspace is ineffable. Words can never describe Heartspace.



ⁱ The Billys is a community of diverse gay, bi, and gay-oriented trans men and friends, birthed in 1988 and primarily centered in Northern California. We hold six gatherings/year and regional potlucks and Heart Circles. We are, in part, in the lineage of the Radical Faeries. The Billy Foundation, a 501(c)3, was established in 1993. The mission of the Billys is to foster community, intimacy, and personal exploration among gay, bi, and queer men through shared values and heart-centered brotherhood.

ⁱⁱ Radical Faeries, at the time of the birth of the Billys, were a loosely affiliated international movement that arose in the 70s consisting of mostly gay men who generally rejected assimilating into mainstream gay and general culture while reverencing nature and their sexuality. They gather together in nature and make magic.