



The Book of Vish

A Collection of Five Short Essays

by Sister Ardhanarishvara

(a.k.a. "Grand Mother Vicious Power Hungry Bitch")

as respectfully complied and formatted by

Sister Ambrosia Discordia

former Mistress of Nunlings

The Orlando Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence



"This is to be taken with a grain of salt."
Commentary on the Old and New Testaments
by John Trapp (1647)

Origins of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence

By Kenneth Bunch

(a.k.a. Grand Mother Vicious Power Hungry Bitch)

A Founder of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, San Francisco

In 1974, 75 and 76 at the University of Iowa, Fred Brungard and I co-produced the first Midwest Gay Pride Conferences. This was at a time when Iowa gay organizations consisted of 3 bars and two student groups.

At the same time I formed a traveling drag performance troupe called The Sugar Plum Fairies, consisting of myself, Tracy Bjorgum, Susan Short (a born female) Lisa (a transvestite) and Michael Salinas (who later became editor of one of the most important gay newspapers in the U.S.-The Bay Area Reporter). During a weekly planning session Susan said, "I know the Mother Superior in an Order of Catholic nuns in Cedar Rapids (Iowa). Mother Superior is a good friend of mine. When nuns die there they put their habits into storage. If I ask her if I can borrow some habits she'll probably loan them to us." Susan went to the Mother Superior and told her we were doing The Sound Of Music and she got the habits. The original names of the dead nuns were still sewn into the habit collars. We performed at the few gay bars across the state of Iowa. Most drag shows at the time consisted of classic diva tributes (Diana Ross, Judy Garland, etc.) Queens weren't ready for the iconoclasm about to engulf them! When we hit the stage doing a pom pom routine to the U.of I. Fight song the audience erupted into pandemonium!

Following the final Pride Conference in 1976, Tracy and I realized we were preaching to the converted and needed a way of reaching the general public with our messages of gay liberation, challenging their homophobia. I suggested to Tracy we apply for a marriage license, knowing the statewide media would give us wide visibility. At this time most people did not think they knew a gay person. The whole word "gay" was not familiar to most Iowan's. In their minds queers were imaginary child molesters with horns and tails. We set out to show the people of Iowa that a gay person could be their neighbor, friend, relative and co- worker. Privately to our friends we called it „A Fag In Every Living Room Campaign”.

We were the FIRST people to apply for a same-sex marriage license in the state of Iowa. The statewide mainstream newspaper The Des Moines Register carried our photo and story applying for the license. This is how I "came out" to my parents!

In 1977 I moved to San Francisco from a gay farm on the outskirts of Iowa City. I had "come out of the closet" in 1973 and lived every day in scag- drag, as a political statement. While packing for the move I decided to throw all my drag in the trash. I was getting out of drag and into the new leather/levi look that gay men were adopting. While packing for the move I came across those nun's habits. It is amazing that history can turn on a small moment and an instant decision. I decided they would be the ONLY drag I would keep "in case one day I get bored". If I had not kept those nun's habits we might have become the CLOWNS of Perpetual Indulgence. :)

In 1978 I convinced Fred Brungard to move to San Francisco and live with me. We found a cottage apartment at 272 Dolores Street. The atmosphere in San Francisco at the time was VERY conformist. S.F. Chronicle columnist dubbed it "the Castro clone" look. On Holy Saturday (day before Easter) 1979 I announced to Fred that I was bored and "the only thing different that I have are those nun's habits". Fred, myself and Bruce (Barouk) Golden dressed up in those habits and terrorized the Castro, Lands End and Polk Street. The reaction even in liberal and jaded San Francisco that first day out was electric, like someone had lit a stick of dynamite!

In June of 1979 the Gay Softball League played against the San Francisco Fire Department in a game in Kezar Stadium. I asked my friend Edmund Garron to come along to the game. I said," Now, we can

go as normal looking college cheerleaders or as nun cheerleaders.” We decided the habits I had from Iowa would be more fun. We ran around the rim of the stadium and ran our veils up the flagpole. We caused so much distraction with the crowd cheering us that the game had to be stopped temporarily. That was the moment, I believe, that Edmund caught the nun bug and saw the potential of a group of queer nuns, I then introduced my roommate Fred Brungard (who became Sister Missionary Position) to my friends Bill Graham (Reverend Mother) and Edmund Garron (Agnes - Sister Hysterectoria).

I had met Edmund in a dance class in San Francisco run by a lesbian friend from Iowa in 1977. Bill was a teacher in the gay Transcendental Meditation group I had formed with him in San Francisco in 1977. The 4 of us moved into a flat on Ashbury Street in 1979 which became known as The Convent. We discussed our mutual experiences we had in those nun’s habits earlier in the year. The general consensus between us was that we should form a group, making use of the intense energy this iconic symbol seemed to evoke not only in the general public, but also in ourselves. Maybe we could use this as a tool for social activism and have some fun as well.

The 4 of us convened a meeting of our friends to form SPI later that year. The friends of the 4 of us formed the first Order of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, and our apartment on Ashbury (The Convent) became the meeting space for the General Membership. Our telephone was the SPI telephone line. In 1980, Fabian, a friend of Sister Missionary Position who became Mother Abyss (once Mother Inferior) came to stay the night in The Convent. After being exposed to our Sister activities he returned to Sydney, Australia and formed the second Order of The Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence (SPI). The third Order of SPI in the world was in Toronto, Canada (which no longer exists) and the fourth Order of SPI in the entire world (second in the United States) was in Seattle, Washington founded by Mother Theresa Nervina in 1987. In 1990 the first French Order was formed in Paris by Mother Rita. Shortly after that the first German Order was formed by Erzmutter Johanna in Heidelberg. Today Orders are formed or forming on four continents.

Our first experiences in those Iowa nun’s habits in 1979 were the flame that became a roaring bonfire blazing across the world to this very day.

If only those Catholic nuns and Mother Superior in Cedar Rapids, Iowa knew what their habits had ignited!!!

History of Whiteface In SPI

By Kenneth Bunch

(a.k.a. Grand Mother Vicious Power Hungry Bitch)

A Founder of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, San Francisco

I was doing whiteface in Iowa in the mid-1970's for artistic photography sessions. My friends and I lived in a Victorian house on Iowa Avenue in Iowa City (where we started RFD, the Radical Fairy magazine). One roommate was a photographer. We would drop acid, I would get into costumes, do makeup and he would take pictures of me. It just seemed that the photos were richer and more dramatic with the whiteface on. The costumes were one way of expressing something and painting my face just added to that. When a painter begins he/she paints the canvas white first so that all the colors are more vivid.

After moving to a gay fairie farm outside Iowa City, Iowa I would get dressed in a costume, paint my face, and this time do mushrooms, skipping down the country lane jumping thru imaginary hoops.

Moving to San Francisco in January 1977, I brought the 5 nun's habits we had gotten from a Catholic convent in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. And I brought my love of whiteface.

So that Holy Saturday 1979, in a fit of boredom, I painted on the whiteface. Mish and Bruce (Barouk) Golden did not. We dressed in those nun's habits, on our first day out in San Francisco. Yes, I was the FIRST Sister of Perpetual Indulgence to wear whiteface. I had no idea it would become part of the worldwide iconic look of the Sisters. I was just doing it for me. Because I liked it.

In the years 1979 to 1984 most of the Sisters were negative about wearing whiteface because they felt they couldn't be "real nuns" if they wore whiteface. After all, Catholic nuns don't wear makeup. For mostly this same reason, the Australian and British Orders did not wear whiteface and only recently have some begun to appear in makeup.

Gradually San Francisco Sisters began to wear whiteface because they realized that in interactions with the public, people were more drawn to the makeup with comments and enthusiasm. Besides, photographers gravitated toward it. It looked more dramatic in photographs.

When the S.F. Order dwindled to 6 members from 1984 to 1987 we ALL wore whiteface and it became one of the recognizable iconic symbols of SPI as much as the wimples, veils and habits. Besides artistic expression, I used whiteface to disguise myself from potential sex partners. In the early 1980's it was NOT acceptable for "real" men in our community to do drag. You were considered not a "real man" if you did drag. Word would get around that you were seen in drag and your sexual prospects dwindled accordingly. Drag was anathema, essentially "in the closet". The thinking was "we have to be acceptable to straight people so they will GIVE US our civil rights". As well, I just liked the idea of anonymity. Nobody knew who I was when I was in "mufti", out of costume. This provided some very interesting eavesdropping opportunities. Listening to people talk about me without them knowing it was ME they were talking about offered me some honest opinions on what the Sisters were doing.

Today, whiteface is part of the worldwide uniform of SPI queer nuns, along with our individual wimple design. Without the wimple and habit we would just be clowns. The wimple and habit add the political aspect. The whiteface is the artistic aspect. I'm sure the Catholic Church would prefer we stop wearing the wimple and habit and just wore the whiteface. (They'd be our best friends!) The reason the church to this day is so OUTRAGED about us is that this iconic symbol has been expropriated by SPI for our own purposes. And that is POLITICAL. Whether you choose to be conscious of that political aspect of your image or not, every time you put on your habit you are making a political statement.

The makeup makes us pretty.

SPI Donation Collection History

By Kenneth Bunch

(a.k.a. Grand Mother Vicious Power Hungry Bitch)

A Founder of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, San Francisco

This is the history of how it came about that all the street fairs and some of the public celebrations in San Francisco have donation collection at their entrances.

This is a recent phenomenon and one that SPI created. None of the street fairs and public celebrations used to collect donations at the entrances/gates to these public events (or anywhere within the event itself) prior to 1989.

In October of 1989 the Loma Prieta earthquake that collapsed the Bay Bridge occurred. I was sitting watching TV one night when a reporter said the mayor was asking for donations to earthquake relief organizations. Halloween on Castro Street was only a few weeks away. The Castro Halloween had been a spontaneous event for 10 years prior to this. It was chaotic, without a sponsor, producer, or any organization providing structure. 100,000 people would show up spontaneously in the queer neighborhood on the street October 31 every year and the police would close the streets to traffic. Each year Community United Against Violence (CUAV) assembled "safety monitors" whose job it was to patrol the footprint of the event inside the closed off streets. If they spotted violence they would radio the police who took care of the problem.

I decided it might be worthwhile to try to raise some donations Halloween night for the Mayor's Earthquake Relief Fund. I called 6 of my fellow Sisters. We stood at Market and Castro Streets (the entrance to the event) with buckets. I stood on a ladder exhorting the revelers to donate when they entered. We collected several hundred dollars in 4 hours.

The following weeks Sister X and I met with CUAV and a supervisor's aide to plan Castro Halloween 1990.

In 1990 I asked the Gay Men's Chorus to do the collection at ALL entrances to the celebration. We set up a stage at Noe and Market streets. Mother Theresa Nervina (Founder of Seattle SPI) sang and the Seattle Order performed, as well as numerous other acts. The evening included a costume contest. We hung a giant mirrored ball in the intersection. We raised about \$30,000 for charity the first year. For the first time in the history of Castro Halloween the event had an official producer and street closure permit holder. It was an intensive organizational effort beginning each December for the following year's Halloween, for the next 5 years. When it became obvious that thousands of untapped dollars could be raised through donations, all the other street fairs and outdoor celebrations (Pride, Folsom, Castro, etc.) began doing the same thing.

A couple years after our successful harnessing of Castro Halloween, CUAV and other "mainstream" groups felt we should hand the entire event over to more "respectable" organizations. Sister X and I went to an arbitration with CUAV, the Human Rights Commission (Larry Brinkin) acting as arbiters. We argued that Halloween was a quintessentially QUEER and drag holiday and SPI was the queerest organization in the community. We argued that these more "mainstream" gay/lesbian groups were condescending and oppressive in their attempts to steal this event from a drag/transgender activist group after we had done the hard work of transforming it from a fund-drain to a fundraiser. We said we deserved the SAME respect on the SAME level as any other community organization. The Human Rights Commission's decision was that the drag queens (SPI) had a right to continue producing and controlling Castro Halloween. It was OUR idea to harness this spontaneous event and start collecting donations IN THE FIRST PLACE! It was a HUGE fight, and WE WON!

Prior to this, drag/transgender organizations were NOT given the same respect as other community groups. They had no transgenders on their Boards of Directors, in the titles of their organizations, or represented on stages at their events. The whole term "transgender" was brand new, being debated and pushed by Sister X and I and other SPI members-DEMANDED would be a better description. We would barge into community meetings and wouldn't sit down or shut up until they addressed the issues important to transgenders.

It is amazing what we got away with in those days. We would go to police and ISCOTT meetings and demand that they waive ALL fees for police and other services for the event. If we didn't get our way, we would go to the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and have a Supervisor bring the issue up for a vote. We argued that Castro Halloween was a spontaneous event for 10 years and the event would happen whether we were involved or not. The city would have to provide police, etc., ANYWAY. We threatened that if the city forced us to pay for these services we would walk away from the event and they could deal with the ensuing chaos. We NEVER paid for ANY city services all 5 years we produced the event. I guess it is hard for someone to say NO to a nun!!!

THE WHITE NIGHT RIOTS

(The Second Stonewall)

By Kenneth Bunch

(a.k.a. Grand Mother Vicious Power Hungry Bitch)

A Founder of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, San Francisco

In November 1978, Dan White assassinated the San Francisco Mayor and Supervisor Harvey Milk. After a flawed trial, Dan was convicted of manslaughter (not murder) and given a light sentence of 8 years (out in 5) for killing 2 people. Dan had been a cop, and the atmosphere between the queer community and the police had been hostile for years.

The verdict was issued on May 21, 1979. The first manifestation of The Sisters was the month before (day before Easter). The night of the assassination had been a somber march of thousands from the Castro to City Hall. The day of the verdict would be anything but somber. People were outraged and expressed it!

Fred Brungard (Sister Missionary Position [a.k.a. Mish]) and I were living at 272 Dolores and I was working at the Hall of Justice where the courts were. My co-workers and I heard the verdict over the radio. I told my boss, "I have to go>" He said, "I understand." I got to Noe and Market streets (not in habit) when this wave of angry marchers came down the middle of Market street with a banner stretched across the street in front of them which read "HE GOT AWAY WITH MURDER". I joined in and when we arrived at City Hall there were already 2000 people on the steps screaming, "1, 2, 3, 4, we won't take this shit no more". They were shaking their fists in unison to the rhythm of the chant. Shaking them at City Hall, the symbol of authority and power in San Francisco. This went on for about 2 hours. The police were just inside the doors of City Hall in riot gear, expecting that we might break in through the locked doors. Outside, in the front row of the protesters on the steps, were a group of young men who were anarchists. The vast majority of the crowd were gay men but these guys didn't look like gay clones. They had long hair. One of the anarchists succeeded in pulling a long strip of gold metal off of the ornate metal work on the doors. He used it as a battering ram, smashed the glass and all HELL BROKE LOOSE! Where all the rocks came from I have no idea but I saw lesbians and gay men ripping up the pavement in the Civic Center and hurling it toward the windows on the Polk street side of City Hall. Before we were through, every window on the building had been broken. A group of lesbians climbed in through the basement windows and tried to set papers on desks on fire. Firemen rushed into the rooms from inside the building, putting out fires. About this time, a fire truck with a ladder came slowly down Polk Street in front of City Hall. The crowd landed on this truck like locusts breaking everything we could reach. I broke a windshield wiper. The truck slowly backed up and disappeared.

Suddenly, all at the same time, everyone took notice of 10 cop cars parked in a neat row, bumper to bumper, through Civic Center plaza. The cops had left them there, unguarded, when they went into City Hall. The windows were all down. It was a mad dash to see who could set them on fire first. I got to the 3rd car with a lighted palm frond and stuck it into the driver's side window just as another boy arrived at the opposite passenger's side window. He said, "DAMN!" and went on to the next car. The cars went up in flames immediately, with sirens screaming all night in a mournful wail.

Finally, the cops inside City Hall had had enough. They came rushing out of the building and across Civic Center plaza. We took off running toward Market Street. As I passed by a van, Mish called out to me. He was hiding under it, with a helmet on his head. We continued breaking windows up Market Street. I thought that was the end of the night's activities and decided to head to Castro Street for a cocktail at the Midnight Sun. When I arrived on Castro Street cop cars were speeding 60 miles an hour down the street as queens were hurling bottles, and anything they could lay their hands on, at the cars. I threw a bottle and hit a back window. The cops were the most fascist homophobic pigs you could

imagine. I know. I WORKED WITH THEM! I saw every day what they did, said and acted like.

I went into the Midnight Sun and 20 to 30 preppy looking sweater queens were watching music videos and sipping cocktails. All of a sudden the doors to the bar slammed shut. Then a baton was banging and the door popped open with the cop ordering everyone out into the street. You should have seen the expressions on the faces of these poor lil' gay children who had NEVER been in anything more than a wild college pep rally, forced out into MAYHEM! A line of cops were stretched across Castro at the Castro Theater and a line of queers were stretched out across the street 100 feet in front of them, face to face. All night these lines moved up and down the street. The cops would force our line down toward 18th street and we would force them back up toward Market street, trying to force them out of OUR neighborhood. After a couple hours I left and went home. After I left the cops stormed into the Elephant Walk bar at 18th and Castro streets and trashed the place. The Bay Area Reporter newspaper upon the 30th anniversary of the White Night Riots interviewed one of Harvey Milk's associates (now California State Assemblyman) Tom Ammiano who said, "I am grateful that when the verdict came out people were not just silent. I am glad we were so „vocal”." California State Senator Mark Leno said the White Night riots were "something San Francisco needed to go through in order for its populace to heal."

Where Have All The Radicals Gone?

By Kenneth Bunch

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A Founder of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence, San Francisco

*A speech delivered At Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, San Francisco,
where four famous activists were invited to address
the issue of "State of the Queer Community"*

Where have all the radicals gone?
Longtime passing,
Where have all the radicals gone?
Long time ago,
Where have all the radicals gone?
Gone to sleep, every one.
When will we ever learn?
When will we ever learn?

The vital role of queer radicals using political theater is legendary.

The **Cockettes** set the standard in the late 1960's. A former **Cockette** characterized their performances:

"Of course they were political, but no one among us verbalized it. We had no need of rhetoric. We were madcap chefs cooking up a storm and the ingredients were theater, magic and tribal anarchy."
WORDS, WORDS, WE DIDN'T NEED WORDS, WE HAD POLITICAL IMAGES!

Their successors, **The Angels Of Light**, carried on with "**Paris Sights Under The Bourgeois Sea**", attacking the ruling class, the anti-imperialist "**Sci-Clones**", and the Hindu queer spiritual odyssey "**Holy Cow**".

In 1973 **The Radical Queens** sponsored a "**Kiss A Queer**" booth at Temple University.

The Cycle Sluts used gender-fuck as a potent theatrical weapon. Then came **The Radical Fairies**, **ACT-UP** and **Queer Nation** in the 1980's and currently, since 1979, **The Sisters Of Perpetual Indulgence**.

We must be the imaginative visionaries supplying originality to a movement that is often reduced to a civil rights agenda.

Speaking of civil rights: with our defeat in Maine, we now have lost marriage rights in 31 states. What I read in this week's **Bay Times** by **Ann Rostow** pretty much sums up the state of marriage rights, at this time, in this country:

"I am guessing that we really underestimate the breadth of anti-marriage sentiment. **Dislike** of gay men and women is not only intense on the right fringe, but it is also **pervasive across the political spectrum**. By contrast, our support in the center and center left is, let's call it **affectionate**, or maybe **principled**. It's not **passionate** enough to counter the opposition."

These **elections** are great for exposing the depth of homophobia in this society, not just from the religious lunatics, but also from our liberal "friends".

But **CIVIL RIGHTS ARE NOT A PANACEA**. Civil rights are a **tool** for **social change**, not just **electoral change**, but **radical cultural transformation**.

I will work my ass off to reverse Prop 8, signature collecting, phone calling, canvassing and campaigning but an **election victory** is **not** what excites me about this marriage issue.

While visiting my mom 3 summers ago as the marriage issue began to be debated in Iowa, we were watching a news report on the subject. As a lesbian couple appeared on the TV screen my mom blurted out, "**Well, their relationship isn't at all the same as your dad's and mine!**"

In that moment I realized how passionately **PERSONAL** Americans feel about marriage. Most people care less about gays in the military, hate crimes, workplace discrimination, domestic partnerships or civil unions. But when it comes to marriage, as my mom so eloquently stated, "**they**" aren't equal. **WE** aren't equal.

Precisely because Americans value marriage so intensely, marriage is a powerful tool for confronting homophobia/gender conformity where it lives. It lives in the minds of all Americans. **But marriage equality is not an end in itself. Marriage equality is a MARKER on the road to cultural transformation.**

On the left, queer radicals perform a **valuable role** for the LGBT community in the current **cultural "Tug-Of-War"**. The rightwing has their heavyweights at their end of the rope. **Fundamentalists** are tugging mightily. At the **left end** we need more radical activists using theatrical social commentary, crystallizing the issues, tugging the debate in a leftward direction, framing the discussion on **our terms** and setting the agenda.

As an example:

Following the passage of Prop 8 we publicly exorcised Archbishop George Noderauer, stripping him bare to his homophobic bones. George played a pivotal role in Prop 8's enactment. People are afraid to criticize Christian clergy. The Sisters exorcised the Archbishop's homophobic demons, calling him to redemption.

(Jesus Christ. He's a fag! The Archbishop can kiss my queer ass on his unrepentant pilgrimage to hell!)

The necessary role of our LGBT liberal allies is to go before the establishment media, make "**apologies**" for our shocking **behavior** and **negotiate** the dialogue. As long as "**condemnations**" are not substituted for "**apologies**", this symbiotic system works. We play the "**Bad Guys**". They play the "**Good Guys**".

When some of our LGBT allies accuse us of "**ruining it for everyone**", I ask, "**ruining**" what? If "**ruining it**" means "**ruining**" religious oppression and bourgeois conformity then I say, "**Yes, let's ruin it!**"

We need a new Queer Community based on values, not based on a sex act. The whole idea of a homosexual is only 100 years old. It was created by the dominant culture attempting to identify and control us. We cannot continue to define ourselves on their terms.

Rightwing Christians are right, it's about values, though **their** values are drenched in homophobia, sexism, bigotry and religious intolerance.

I share few common values with LGBT **assimilationists**. Serving in the military, getting married, moving to a suburban home with a white picket fence, a kid, a dog, a car in the garage, and working as

an upwardly mobile cog in the corporate world order are nothing I aspire to. What we **do** have in common is I don't want to be killed or discriminated against because **I suck cock**.

But, are we to be defined by a sex act or by a spiritual vision?

To paraphrase Don Kilhefner:

Now, for the first time, the forward-moving force of history compels us to **MAXIMIZE** our differences from the dominant culture as an act of love to ourselves and to them – the emergence of a **new radical queer consciousness**.

“Let us pursue relationships of **differentiation**, of **creation**, of **innovation**. An identity to our unique selves.”

Let us challenge the **assimilationist** values of our LGBT **compatriots**. We must be the **vanguard of the truth**, the **early adopters** on the **cutting edge** of a **new radical queer consciousness**.

The world depends on us.

Lead and they will follow.