

WE WHO FEEL DIFFERENTLY INTERVIEWS

I talk about trans talents, Androgen Insensitivity Talent, Intersex Talent, etc., because in that way I am opposing medicalizing terms like syndrome, misshape, and others that aren't very good as labels. For example, I also use the word 'phenomenon.' I think it is much better for a human being to be a phenomenon than to be a kind of walking disease or walking misfortune. In that way I try to add to the language words that are much more positive. Talent is a positive word. My talent for being trans is a very strong one.

An Interview with Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad

November 5, 2009
Esben Esther's Office, Oslo, Norway

Carlos Motta: I would like to begin by asking you introduce yourself and to mention where we are now and what you do for work.

Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad: We are in the center of the city of Oslo, Norway where my wife and I have our offices. Here, we offer clinical work of sexology, family therapy and systemic thinking. I do a lot of work with trans people of all the 'flavors,' to put it that way.

My name is Esben Esther Pirelli Benestad. I was named Esben when I was born, which is a typical Norwegian male name, so I added Esther and Pirelli later because for me there is no point being neither a man nor a woman. I am a trans person; that is my gender so to speak. I think the double name, the Esben for the male and the Esther for the female suit me very well.

I am a medical doctor, a pharmatherapist and an Associate Professor at the *University of Agder* in Southern Norway. I am the proud father of two kids, one of whom, my son Even made a film in 2002 titled *All About My Father*. It happened to be the most awarded Norwegian film ever. It even won the Teddy Award in Berlin. It has been really marvelous. For a little while I was a movie star.

I am a person who is very engaged in gender matters and gender politics. I am trying to introduce more genders than the ordinary two in order for more people to find a more suitable place for themselves in society and culture. If we were all going to win the first prize in the 'amusement fair' of life we would need more than two 'Teddies.' We need more than a pink one and a blue one. We need a yellow one, a brown one, we need a crocodile one... We need as many genders as possible for all people to find an image that they can identify with. That is the main thing I do: I introduce more gender options. I do not want to take away much but I do want to introduce more.

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CM: When and where were you born? What was the political and social context in Norway at the time? What is your background? How did you get started in your profession?

EEPB: Oh good Heavens! You are asking me to tell you the short story of my life! I was born on May 3rd, 1949. I grew up in a small town in the south of Norway where I still live now. My father was a medical doctor and my mother was a nurse. Everything took place in the house because my father worked on the first floor and my mother assisted him. I have two sisters and one brother; we all grew up in this house with very open doors.

There is a story that may have influenced me in some way; my father was a medical doctor. One time one of his patients started the conversation by saying: "I just want to tell you that I am a lesbian." And my father said: "OK. But do you suffer from anything?" This is indicative of the attitude at home, my family was very open minded.

I was a good looking young man. I was very clever at school and at an early point in time I decided I should be a doctor. I could also do just about anything in sports. But at the same time I knew that I was more than all that. I kept secrets within me that I didn't tell many people about: my hidden woman. *She* came out, that part of me came out in the public realm very slowly, starting with me being caught red handed by my first wife. That was during my medical studies. We had already had one child and had lived together for 16 years.

I finished my studies and I wanted to be a G.P. By this time, I also had the thought that if anybody should out him-or-herself as a trans person, it should be me. That idea dropped into my head. People need some kind of figure head person that is there and that opens the gates and paths for those behind. I knew I was going to do that. I didn't know exactly how I would do it but I knew I was going to do it.

CM: This is around what year?

EEPB: Now we are back in my twenties, which would be more than thirty years ago. I acted very slowly. I opened up to my friends and started to do some research on trans people. And then on the 16th of October, 1986 I met Elsa, my current wife, in Bergen. She had invited me there to present my research about trans issues and we fell in love with all the stars, the moons and the planets of the universe. I had no choice but to go back home and end my marriage. I was not a good man for my ex-wife. Elsa and I have now been together for 23 years.

It was a process to disclose my identity and it happened slowly. In 1992 I was contacted by a Norwegian T.V. team that asked me whether I would out myself to the Norwegian public. I said yes. Later on, when my son was in his teens, I was asked by another T.V. team if they could make a documentary on me. My son heard that and asked me if I could wait until he had had an education in movie making so that he could make that documentary. I told him yes and that I would wait as long as he needed. When he was 25 we made *All About My Father*, which was really my son's perspective on having a father who is trans and how that affected him and the family at large.

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CM: Where there any other public figures in Norway at the time that you were growing up or at the time when you came out publicly that represented what you wanted to do?

EEPB: Not really. There was an artist, a painter who also had a female persona but he or she was expressing him or herself very differently. As far as my senses go he or she acted with fear and wasn't taken very seriously locally. He or she is dead now.

CM: You have not only dealt personally with your own gender identity but you have worked to break with the norms and have used your 'case' as of political strategy.

EEPB: Yes, as a political tool. The general public knows very little about trans 'talents.' I too was as ignorant as anybody back then. I had to search for information on transsexuality in books and encyclopedias, and wherever I read, it said I was a sick person. Honestly, I didn't feel very sick, I didn't even run a fever! I thought these books were wrong. Their ideas were burdening me with a diagnosis that was unnecessary. A diagnosis that made something that is precious to me into something that is ill and wrong. This sparked the necessity for me to be political and to open up space to the 'unusual' human being: you are not sick, you are not disturbed but you certainly do disturb. My work today entails being a therapist to individuals and to couples but I am also trying to assist those that are disturbed by me. Instead of accepting the label 'disturbing,' I like to assist those I disturb. I disturb psychiatry, I disturb psychology, I disturb a lot of people. My wife and I have a favorite lecture we give called "Gender Euphoria," in which we quote Marcel Proust: "...the real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes..." That is maybe what you are doing with your work too, to promote the renewal of eyes in people.

CM: I certainly hope so. Why do you think that issues of gender identity are so threatening to society?

EEPB: I wouldn't really confirm that idea. My experience is that I do not provoke people and that people are not provoked by those who are different. I think what is more provoking is *our* insecurity: when you say "excuse me" or "I am so sorry but I am different." That's much more provoking than saying "I am different," or "I have something to tell you, I can see something that you cannot see!" I think it is much better to promote euphoria. People are not disturbed by euphoria but most people are disturbed by dysphoria.

CM: What is the general understanding about trans issue in Norway today?

EEPB: I think the attitude towards trans people amongst the general public is very positive. Since I am a public figure, I often meet people on the street that smile at me, tap my shoulder and tell me keep it up the good work. The problem in Norway is elsewhere. Those that have been given the official task to work with trans people, be they transsexual or other kind of trans, they don't like me. They work against me and those that have similar ideas to me.

CM: Can you expand on that?

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EEPB: At the *Central Hospital of Norway* there is a division called the *Gender Identity Disorder Clinic* (G.I.D. Clinic), ran by a psychiatrist. I call it the *Gender Identity Dysphoria Clinic*. I was very happy when she was appointed because we really needed such a clinic. I contacted her on several occasions and told her that we should cooperate to build a network that would make the situation for trans people much better. Sadly, she was never interested and in fact she started to work against me.

Because of my public nature in Norway I am doing a kind of third order of therapy. In a way, I am doing therapy through the Norwegian population. Parents of kids who don't perform gender the way 'they should' often call me because they have seen me on television. The first kid I ever met was nine years old. She was a somatic boy, she had a penis but felt like a girl. I worked with her and her family, with her school and with everyone that could be disturbed by her. You know, when puberty starts kids may become very annoyed and potentially very depressed because of this bodily 'betrayal.' At the time I was aware of work being done in The Netherlands that taught me that you can postpone puberty in cases like hers, to give kids more time to establish what gender they identify with more. I did that but I was turned in by the *G.I.D Clinic* psychiatrist who said that this was the wrong medical treatment and that additionally I had another malpractice case pending with the Norwegian health authority. I won that case and coincidentally one and a half years later they started doing the same kind of treatment at the *G.I.D Clinic*! She never apologized. And this really took a lot of energy from me.

CM: Is the *G.I.D Clinic* the official trans organization?

EEPB: No. There are two official trans organizations in Norway and a third one may be opening up. The *G.I.D Clinic* does psychiatry, which it shouldn't do. Trans issues shouldn't concern psychiatry. It is a scandal that this is handled by psychiatry! This should be handled by endocrinology or sexology. If you scan the congresses of psychiatry in the world you will find very little on trans but if you scan the sexological conferences of the world you will find a lot more.

There is an organization for transsexuals called *F640* that used to be open, flexible and interesting. But they have established very close links to the *G.I.D Clinic* and have become rigid, orthodox and too gender-minded; and they believe in the dichotomy of gender. I used to sit at their board of directors but they kicked me out, maybe because I am not disciplined by that dichotomy. There is a struggle between those who believe in a more fluid way of perceiving gender, those who believe that there are far more genders than two. We operate with seven and if you propose an eighth one it will be welcomed.

CM: What are these seven genders?

EEPB: The seven genders are based on people we have actually met. They do not represent an ethereal map that we want to impose. The first is what we call the 'Female Genders,' and we put them in plural to indicate that there are many colors within that category as well. Then the 'Male Genders.' Then the 'Inter Genders,' or the 'Intersex Genders,' which is also a group that

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has been made ill. Here we have the Kleinfeld's phenomenon, the Turner's phenomenon and the Androgen Insensitivity phenomenon. Note that in medical terms these are called 'syndromes' but for me they are 'phenomenons.' That is a large group, which is organized amongst other organizations in the *Organization Intersex International* (OII). They emphatically say that when surgeons, like it happens in Norway, operate on babies' genitals because they do not fit one of the two predominant gender categories, it is genital mutilation, just as they do in Somalia. Then you have the 'Trans Genders,' where I belong, which is also another rainbow of people, of ways to express oneself. There are several ways to more or less change your body to make it a good 'place' to be. Then there are people who refuse gender, you could call them 'Gender Refusers.' They say gender is not for them. Those I have met have been very political on their position. Then you have the 'Personal Genders.' I met someone I called Oscar who has long blond hair, beautiful make up, female clothes, a bulge and no breasts. I asked Oscar: "What pronoun do you want me to use when I talk to and about you?" Oscar said: "He." So I asked him: "What gender are you Oscar, I am a little confused?" and he said: "I am Oscar. I do gender my way. I don't want to be in any categories." The seventh gender is the 'Eunuch Genders.' There are the *Hijras* or the *Khusras* of India who may or may not see themselves belonging to that category. There is an organized group called 'Eunuch Genders,' which are somatic males that want to remove their testicles because they feel that those testicles aren't 'them.' Of course they are entitled to do that. I believe in self-determined gender.

CM: Lets speak about the use of language in regards to gender. It seems like language is structured in such a way that it determines the categories, the naming and the fixing of identities.

EEPB: Language is our main way of communicating as human beings. We can not get rid of categories so I believe in them. Humans will categorize however hard we try no to and I want to be in dialogue with the existing terms. If I tried to introduce and to construct a totally different language that I would find more appropriate I wouldn't be able to communicate. I believe in changing things a little more gradually. I am sure you have heard me use the word 'talent.' I talk about trans *talents*, Androgen Insensitivity Talent, Intersex Talent, etc., because in that way I am opposing medicalizing terms like syndrome, misshape, and others that aren't very good as labels. For example, I also use the word 'phenomenon.' I think it is much better for a human being to be a phenomenon than to be a kind of walking disease or walking misfortune. In that way I try to add to the language words that are much more positive. Talent *is* a positive word. My *talent* for being trans is a very strong one. When I tried to suppress it, it made me quite depressed. I think that is true for all strong talents: I am sure that if one had tried to stop Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart from making music, he would have become depressed because he would have felt that he had something in *there* that wanted to come out! He could hear it in his head and he wanted us to hear it too!

CM: This makes me think about Judith Butler's theory of gender performance since creativity like gender is also a form of performance. Has any of the work done in queer theory or any other theoretical work influenced the way that you have shaped your political thinking and life?

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EEPB: Yes, in many ways. I am not a anybody's disciple but I have been influenced by Butler and others. I have also met a lot of trans therapists that have influenced me by giving me knowledge and insights, which I would have taken much longer to get without them. I am also influenced by Eli Coleman, who is one of the parents of the German sexual rights. I am specially influenced by my wife and by our mutual creative process when it comes to gender. I am also very inspired by my clients and the their stories. I think my main source of political energy comes from them. In fact, I would say that I use the work of other professionals as a power of confirmation but it is when I meet people that tell me about their stories, about their agonies, about their beautiful experiences and about their joy that I find the greatest source of inspiration.

CM: Let me return to the political reality of being a trans person in Norway and to the social and cultural challenges that trans people face. Are there any anti-discrimination laws or a legal framework that protects gender identity?

EEPB: The last government made a bill for LGBT rights. I tried to get the I and the Q in there but the T is as far as they could go.

CM: The I for Intersex and the Q for Queer?

EEPB: Yes. And maybe an M for miscellaneous! The bill is very very good. It underscores the right of all people to be the way they are. This bill could be used as a template for other societies in how to make this a political issue: it goes into work places, it goes into schools, it goes in everywhere. I was fortunate to be cooperating with the ones that made that bill.

CM: What does the bill say, what is it about?

EEPB: It promotes the right of all people to express gender the way they feel is right for them. It also underscores the right for medical and professional assistance when needed and it opens up room for more genders than two, which is very important. For the *G.I.D. Clinic* you are either a man or a woman. If you have a male body and they 'diagnose' that you are not transexual, then you *are* a man and you don't get assistance or treatment. But if they diagnosed that you *are* a woman then you get everything. If I was a person that would like to have a more female body, for example if I wanted to have tits but I wanted to keep my penis then I would get nothing!

The bill opens up for a more nuanced way of offering professional, medical and technological assistance to trans people, which is very very important because the way it is now you are forced either to be in congruence with the body you were born with or to be what they call the opposite gender. The recently approved bill from the *European Commissioner of Human Rights* is also very good. It says in very clear words that there is a rainbow of trans people, a rainbow of Intersex people and a rainbow of everyone. It underscores the human right to be and express what you are. That is beautiful.

CM: Yet there is a discrepancy between the law and culture. What is that like in Norway?

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EEPB: In Norway we have gendered I.D. cards. Mine is 03054946375. The number 3 says that I have a dick. However hard I have tried to hide it, this number discloses me. In the Norwegian passport you are also either a man or a woman. I tried to get two pictures in it since I quite often also appear as a man. It is no problem for me to be and to express myself as a man. I wanted two pictures so I could feel as secure in my female expression as in my male expression. Others have tried to do the same thing but we all met a brick wall.

Another important issue to add is that if you go to a Norwegian hospital and you are given a diagnosis and offered treatment and you feel that it isn't right, you have the right for a second opinion. As a trans person you do not have that right. The only other option for trans people is to go abroad to Thailand for example.

I have had many somatic women patients who want to have their breasts removed but they don't want neither testosterone nor genital surgery. I was able to assist three such people to remove their breasts but then I was accused of malpractice.

The main problem in Norway is the monopoly in the *G.I.D. Clinic*, the dichotomous thinking and the lack of more than two options. On the other hand the attitude amongst politicians and the general public is more open. The Norwegian public is much further in their development than the systems of law, medicine or psychiatry. But I know that this will change. There are very good signals from the *The Norwegian Directorate for Health and Social Affairs*, which recently announced they will be working on these issues as of January 1st, 2010.

CM: Is the accusation of malpractice a legal process?

EEPB: I have to face the health authorities not the legal authorities. They would not send me to jail. They would have problems finding what jail to put me in anyway. Don't you think?

CM: They would have to build a special cell for you!

EEPB: Yes, with a nice wardrobe and lots of big mirrors.

CM: I understand there have been some differences between the official organization for transexuals, the *Harry Benjamin Resource Center* (HBRS) and the *Norwegian LGBT Association* (Landsforeningen for lesbiske, homofile, bifile og transpersoner (LLH)). Even to the extent that the leader of the *HBRS*, Tone Maria Hansen, opposed being included in the anti-discrimination bill?

EEPB: At the *Harry Benjamin Resource Center* they consider themselves men and women. And thus, why should they be included in a bill that encompasses the 'T'? That is the reason why she was opposed to be included in the bill. I say that transexuals are also trans people. That doesn't mean that I would say to Tone Maria that she is a trans person. If she considers herself a woman, she considers herself a woman.

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That is not problematic at all. But we must have an umbrella term that can take in and embrace all trans phenomena including of course the transexual phenomena. The HBRS has become tight and looks upon itself as totally different from other trans people. Very few professionals, if any, who work with trans issues would agree with that position. But that's the way they feel.

Because of that the 'LBG' association has included a "T." To make it optional for the Ts, who don't agree with the *HBRS's* position to work politically and to have an organization to support them. I certainly contributed to that happening and I am happy to be in the 'T' group of the LGBT association.

CM: It seems like your position allows for broader political maneuvering.

EEPB: Yes it does. To work only for the transexuals is very limited. Most of what they need is already won. They can have their birth certificate changed, they have all the rights as the women or men they have become, they can marry, they can adopt children, they can do anything. They don't have the right to receive treatment by law but they have the *G.I.D. Clinic's* support. As long as you pass through those gates everything is done. If you don't pass those gates, you get nothing. Besides the *Norwegian LGBT Association*, there is another organization called the *Association for Transpersons* (FTP) where you can be trans in any way. That is a more colorful one.

CM: What has the representation of trans people in Norway been like when it comes to literature, film, art, etc.?

EEPB: There is not much in literature. There was one crime story written by a trans person with a trans character. There my son's movie *All About My Father* and there is another movie called *100% Human* about a transexual woman. There also is a documentary about trans people going about their ordinary life, in eight episodes that was just bought by Norway's main broadcasting company. I am looking forward to seeing that.

CM: Are you one of them?

EEPB: Yes and no. They said that I occupy so much space already that they didn't need me. And I agree. It is beautiful if they can get other people to present themselves publicly. Nevertheless, I think I am included because one of the persons that is featured comes to me for consultation.

I appear quite often in the media in different ways: making food, dancing... I am very often asked about things since I am a clinical sexologist so I am very often in the media answering questions that don't necessarily concern trans people. And remember that my name is Esben Esther. There is an old latin saying that says: "The drops will carve out the step not by its falls but by its constant drip." My life has become a constant dripping.

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On the professional side I have written several books such as *Sexology in Practice*, I co-authored the *Penis Atlas*, in which we picture 100 penises flacid and erect, we have written about them and made an atlas. Additionally, I have written three poems in English, which appear in the book *Gender in Motion*. There is also a fourth poem called *The Shameless Cocks* that takes place in the Caribbean. It is about some cocks that were making sounds when other people were sleeping. The last verse of that poem says:

*And when human kinds do for sameness stride
The shameless cocks, - they will not abide.
They gale and act by their innermost drives
Thus the shameless cocks live such beautiful lives.*

In *Gender in Motion* there is the first poem that 'happened' to me... I was invited to go to the Hekla Volcano in Iceland and I was wearing a miniskirt and pumps. I found that very amusing. To go on this mountain expedition in a mini skirt! So this poem popped up:

Iceland's Hekla As Seen From Below And From Behind Through Powers of The Earth and Powers of The Mind

*This tale I tell about to be,
was handed forcefully to me*

by land and sea of Hawaii.

*Once- very deep on ocean floor
some furious force flung out a door,
and from this spot of heated rock
came one by one an island flock.
A holy act of giving birth,
was thus performed by Mother Earth.*

*That row of islands clad in green,
- for nameless times the sun has seen.
- as they most slowly moved up north,
- that coat of green was coming forth.*

*Sun's rays of power day by day,
did foster wonders from the clay.
As all around the hands of sea
gave seeds for all the fruits to be.*

*We came by air, on man made wings,
to hear and watch the ways of things.-
I bore a restlessness in me.*

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A restlessness one names: To be.

*I house my being bodily,
as bodily I hear and see.*

*My soul, however, won't agree
my body to be fully me
- though:*

*We cannot leave our body shell,
although it may not suit us well.
Like all the islands in the row,
must stick to mother earth somehow.*

*I had two fruitful nights of rest,
and felt quite close to very best,
then once again I went by plane
to reach Volcano's own Domain.*

*I watched her form from way up high,
as sea and land below went by.
Her surface wrinkled, grey and broken,
secluded secrets not yet spoken.*

*I spent a day of distant mind,
some quaking quest left all behind.*

*The night that came gave meagre sleep,
the restlessness derived from deep.*

*Some force disturbed behind my back,
I could not rest, I lost my track.
Thus time went by in painful waves,-
That is how restlessness behaves.
I was so stubbornly awake,
I prayed for rest - for Heavens sake.*

*I closed my eyes and counted sheep.
The sleep that came was calm and deep.
I left the empty feel of tomb,
and made an entry to a womb.
In that secluded cavity, I lost my sense of gravity.*

*I heard a voice from way behind,
it took me in, it caught my mind.
It was so forceful, calm and sweet.*

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Who-ever spoke - we had to meet.

*And there she came in steady pace,
her arms wide opened for embrace.
She caught my glance, and held me tight.
She said:*

*«Let's render you good rest tonight.
I see your pain, your dark turmoil.
I know it by my link to soil.
I hand you clarity if you desire.
I am the deity of heat and fire.»*

*I smiled and said: « I must confess:
I ask no more, I pray no less!»*

*«Then talk to me,» she said, «and tell!
We need to know to make you well.
Whatever trembles in your mind,
it must by tale be left behind».*

*She led me by her friendly hand
on to her cracked and wrinkled land.
We slowly walked her glow paved street,
I felt a warmth rise through my feet,-
a warmth unsteady, incomplete.
She softly spoke: «We are in heat!»*

*«I know», I said, «I've known for years,
and shed from heat a sea of tears,
and seen my inner, sacred stage
be battleground for wrath and rage,
but from this rage so long compressed,
I have but minor wrath expressed!»*

*«My path was stony - in distress.
What was this hell, this painful mess?»
«I have», she said, «one only guess:
You sensed the well of loneliness!»*

*«It takes,» I said, « that I can tell-
a lot to face that deep, dark well!»
She answered smilingly: «To cope-
just see it as kaleidoscope.*

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*A fertile, twinkling treasure bin,
your deep and sacred womb within.
I tell you here and now, to night:
It can but be conceived by light.»*

*«And then,» I asked, «how shall I act,
when light has rendered its impact?»*

*«Then day by day you have to rise
and face the scrutiny of eyes.
There is a troubled lot - to do,
before they see the same as you.
You must reveal, you must declare
to gain a sense of being here.-*

*«From every pit, each glowing hole,
through manly spirits I control.
I must, myself, burst out in fire.
My yearn for being does require
that I express my gleaming heat.
Secluded powers spell defeat.
By fire's aid, I rise up high,
from heat alone, I fade and die»*

*«You must give birth to be alive,
from whatever source your births derive.
Birth is by any way of seeing,
the ground for all array of being!»*

*«From heat grows rage, from wrath rise fire,

you choose your ways as you desire.
But will you take a kind advice,
you choose the warmth and melt the ice.
Lead rage to heat, leave wrath for fire,
and you shall meet what you admire».*

*I sensed through trembling well so steep
the shift of magma in my deep.
It was alive my very sole,
I heaved in yearn for being whole.
I could erupt at any time -
in hot cascades or more sublime.*

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*I saw myself in smoke and flame
give rise to wild, to fierce to tame.
I felt as ripe as budding spring
and ready for most anything.*

*Though-
before eruption came to be,
The Goddess, Pele, spoke to me:
«We have encountered sweet as brothers,
like we did meet as heated mothers.
We have both sensed the inner urge,
to let our powers meet and merge.
It takes a motherhood of soul
to merge such forces to a whole.
It takes some qualities of male,
to let erupt such forceful tale.»*

*«As we inhale, as we expire,
we must for light and tale inquire.
We own a well of some extremes,
that can make living Hell it seems»*

*«To seat a wholesome rest require:
To mother heat and father fire.»*

Hawaii, Maui, Oahu Feb. 13th to 22nd. 2000

CM: Thank you!