

LARRY HARVEY

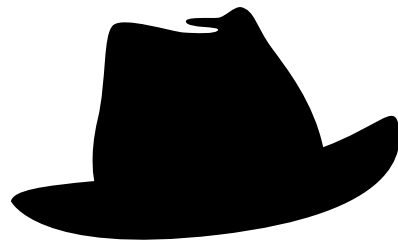
Larry Harvey (1948–2018) was one of the instrumental figures behind one of the most iconic cultural events of our time, participating in the creation of Burning Man out of a propitious subcultural context. Burning Man began in 1986 as a small gathering on San Francisco’s Baker Beach, inspired by Mary Grauburger’s solstice celebrations. Together with his friend Jerry James, a carpenter, Larry constructed and burned the first wooden effigy, sparking what would grow into an enduring cultural phenomenon. A gardener with a deep passion for philosophy and the human sciences, Larry was known for his ability to engage in profound and thought-provoking conversations.

In 1990, Burning Man joined the Cacophony Society for their “Zone Trip #4,” relocating the event to Nevada’s Black Rock Desert. The Cacophony Society, an experimental movement of anarchic free thinkers, was known for creating absurd, provocative, and participatory experiences that often challenged mainstream norms. Collaborations with key Cacophonists like John Law and Michael Mikel infused Burning Man with a spirit of radical experimentation. A nearby project called Desert Siteworks (1992–1994), led by William Binzen, added further artistic, ritualistic, and “intentional community” dimensions. Over the years, Burning Man evolved into a week-long radical experiment in community, art, and self-expression.

Larry played a pivotal role in formalizing the event’s structure, co-founding Black Rock City LLC in 1999 alongside Marian Goodell, Harley K. DuBois, Crimson Rose, Will Roger Peterson, and Michael Mikel. In 2004, he articulated the 10 Principles of Burning Man, offering a philosophical foundation that continues to guide the community. In 2013, the LLC transitioned into the nonprofit Burning Man Project, with Larry Harvey as a founding board

member and Chief Philosophic Officer, while Marian Goodell assumed the role of CEO. Until his passing in 2018, Larry remained deeply involved, shaping the vision of Burning Man. His intellectual legacy endures, inspiring the global Burning Man community.

This interview was conducted by Flo, Flore Muguet, a French anthropologist, on the Playa in 2015. While the very interesting original interview lasted two hours—punctuated by Larry’s characteristic chain-smoking—only Flo’s few questions addressing rituals, spirituality, and community are included here.



THE COMMUNITY IMPORTANCE OF FIRE AND THE MAN: CONTINUITY AND RENEWAL

FLO Do you think fire is important here?

LARRY Sure, it is.

[Larry goes back to the previous topic] We turned around and said that there would be no vending. And then there’s exceptions to the rule. Ice and coffee.

FLO And why coffee?

LARRY I don’t know how you can be civilized without coffee. And bohemian scenes have grown up around coffee houses. But that’s all that sells. And that was the finer place to get people together and create an attraction that wasn’t a stage show.



Larry Harvey. Photo credit: Stewart Harvey, 1990. Source: [BurningMan Journal](#).

FLO [Trying to talk about fire] Is that a little bit like the fire here? The importance of the fire here? Like how it’s related to the really highly sensitive experience people can get here?


LARRY Fire is a primal attraction. It goes back ever since we became human beings. The Neanderthals made fire. I just learned recently that I have a

certain percentage of Neanderthal genes. Almost every modern human has a little Neanderthal. But then we think about history. The history of empires is to go out and conquer. In history, the more powerful political... when they conquer another people, they interbred. And that’s apparently what happened with the Cro-Magnons and the Neanderthals.

FLO Would it all work if there was no fire? Can you imagine this place with no fire?

LARRY I think it’s at the heart of things. One reason we located here: it’s the perfect venue for fire. And it certainly creates a compelling sense of evanescence. Everywhere. Even if there’s fire in a city on a street, it draws a crowd immediately. And

human beings are... instinctively as it were, drawn towards fire. I like to joke, that on the beach we reinvented the first two technologies, and trial and error; the lever and the fire. You feel a sense of universal union, and it also makes you feel awfully small at the same time. If you repeat those cycles, and then they merge, and then you’re on the verge of a mystical experience. Infinitely small

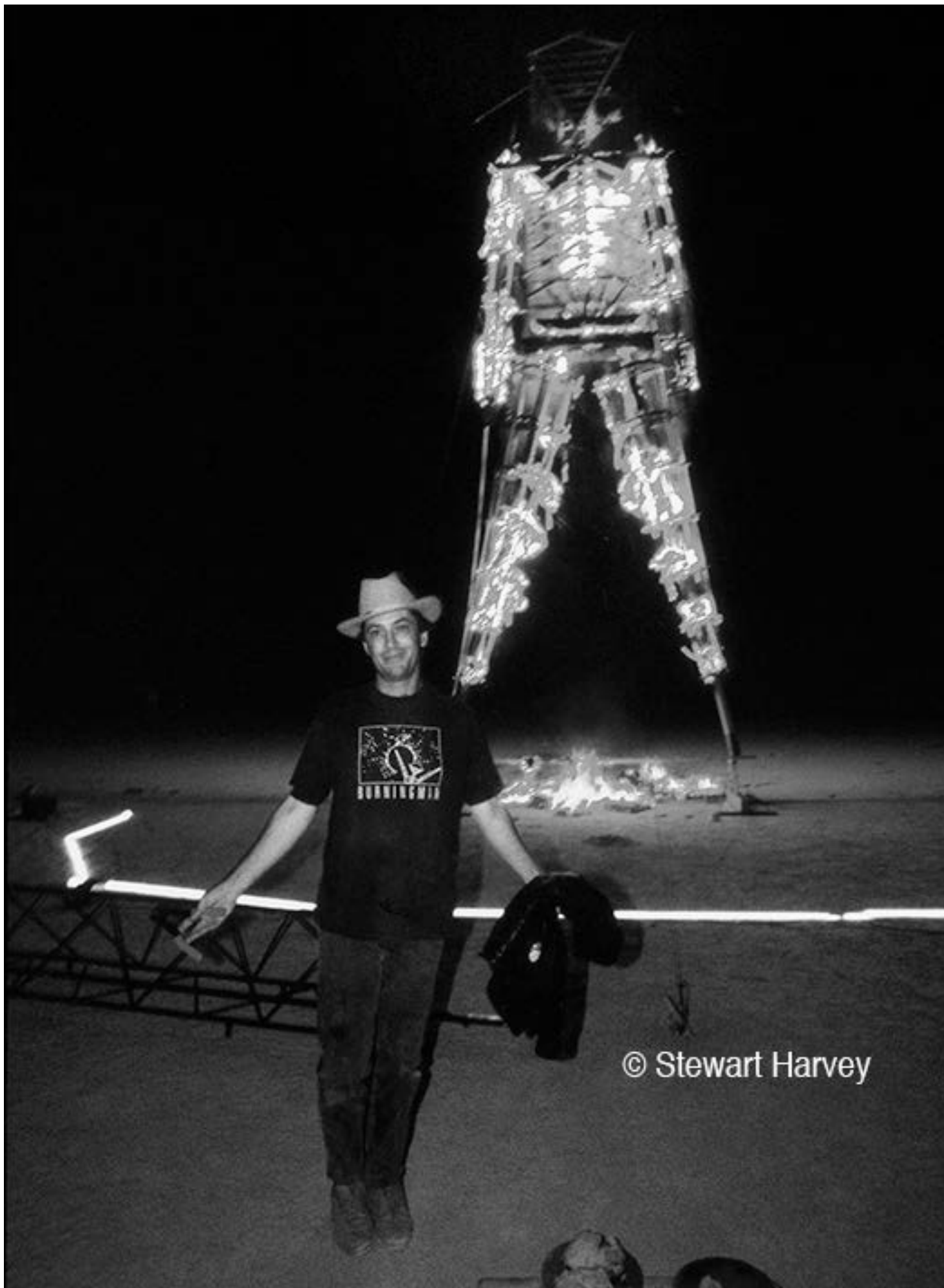


**“I’m not
really
interested
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believe, I’m
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in what they
feel”**

and infinitely big, and you can feel both at the same time. You’re getting near the territory that the Christian fathers in the desert were seeking. It’s always a perfect environment for fire. And it draws people instantaneously, anywhere and always. So, I think you can call that a kind of primal experience. Then of course it’s a natural metaphor for mortality, because we’re all burning in a way. We’re oxidation. You and I are burning as we speak, and the fire will turn to ashes. So, that’s a powerful and available metaphor.

FLO Is it also a metaphor for renewal?

LARRY It can be. It’s certainly, getting back to talking about the soul or spirit, seems to unite the soul and spirit. The body is fuel that burns. That’s kinda soulful. It’s energy coming out of the body, but then it flies up. And that’s like spirit. Spirit which flies above and diffuses out into the world. Even as he dies, he diffuses himself out into the world and seems to billow with energy. And of course, it’s a ritual action. It’s




Larry Harvey in front of the Man. Photo credit: Stewart Harvey, 1990. Source: [BurningMan Journal](#).

repeated and repeated, so in a sense he’s born every year. That’s an ancient, old, religious trope. I sometimes compare us to the mystery religions that were so common in the latter days of the classical world. About the time that the tribal religion of the Greeks and Romans. Well, what can be more accessible than a human figure? Nothing. Burning squirrel? I don’t think so. Burning toaster? No. So, I mean... it’s wholly accessible. When people watch that body burn, they’re thinking of the cells that exist in their body. That’s inevitable. And someone might deny it, and that’s fine. I’m not really interested in what they believe, I’m interested in what they feel—on what level people feel that. I don’t know what they do with that feeling. That’s up to... I don’t want to intellectually deconstruct it.

FLO That’s interesting. You don’t care what they believe, but you care what they feel?

LARRY I care about what they feel, and I care about what they do. There was an incident that shows you how. A couple years ago a wonderful Temple was built. It was done by an artist named Gregg Fleishman and friends. At the center there was this polished... [stones]. They were taking that from Inuit culture, called Inukshuk... it was basic, but it was clearly a body. They put that horizontal and created something like a trunk, shoulders, head. It was clearly a body. And some of us were worried that they hadn’t expressly designed niches or shrines, because people were accustomed to using those to memorialize the dead. But what people did... we did burn shields out of decomposed granite. And it’s chunks of rock. It’s how it comes. People did what, and I thought they began... the slides that were slatted... minimal. And I didn’t know if there was a specific cue for this kind of activity of creating



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shrines in places of things people might contemplate.

FLO Oh, you didn’t think it was made to be?

LARRY I’m not sure if they had provided the opportunity. [...] What they did is they seeded that. They took these little pebbles and made little Inukshuk, and if to make the being they had lost. Which nonetheless still informed this, because if you’re passionately attached they soulfully remain. They inform what you are. And they began placing these little Inukshuk until they lined the walls with all these little Inukshuk. No one told them to do that. But there was enough of a tradition and impetus to practice that they invented themselves that aspect of the ritual. And then, the next year—this is how contagious this kind of practice is—we did the giant Man and there were little kiosks around it that were sort of shrine like... But the year before we had done it and people just disco danced. But in the presence of this big Man, bigger than they’d ever seen, the force really moved people. So manifest and so monumental. And they began making—a sufficient number of people remembered from the previous year—they began making little Inukshuk inside. But this year 2015, I designed the funhouse maze.



Larry Harvey (left) and Jerry James (right). Photo credit: Stewart Harvey, 1989. Source: [BurningMan Journal](#).

“People go to someplace else outside the world, to rehearse unconditional value.”

FLO You designed it?

LARRY Well, working with others but I conceptualized it, and mandated the main features of the design and worked with all the guys, because

we have a creative kin's network... I thought what would happen if we made a sacred space and surrounded it with this utterly profane space around it, where people are lost and disoriented in a maze. And then I commissioned a friend to do that Temple. That big shrine that goes up several feet. There were these blue screens to take people's images—it was this big thing—and to turn them into animals. So, I went out there early and made a little Inukshuk and put it in there. I pulled a couple friends. “Let's make something. Let's do this.” ... and people began to imitate that. That's ritual practice: diffusing and reinventing itself. [...]

[Talking about the Man] And he's greater than they are. You know? And uniquely at that moment. It's the first time that the community all gathers together. And we do that little theatrical trick where the arms—he's bilaterally symmetric of course, the bodies are, and the temples all tend

to be. Because that's the pose of contemplation in fire. And then for the first time, his arms move. And less is more and suddenly he seems absolutely animated.

FLO Is that important for you, this trick?

LARRY Well, it's stagecraft. Religions have always done, you know. Religions are very theatrical. And ritual is very theatrical. And that's priest-craft. I love visiting Neolithic sites in particular to look at the priest-crafts and see how they engineered an experience. [...]

FLO Does it have a meaning behind it? To actually give life to the Man—

LARRY I keep saying the Man doesn't represent anything. He just is. [...] I turned it into a metaphor, and I said, “Well, it's his birthday.” And your birthdays keep you current. And the birthday celebrates nothing you did. It represents first advent as a being

They ask: “Well what were you trying to represent, what were you...?” and I say no, “The image came to me in my mind.”

in this world. I mean, that's what it's about.

FLO So, it's always a renewal then?

LARRY Well, that's what rituals do. You know, and they do that and then you think about your birthdays. There's something stable at the center that you belong to. Birthdays are your being day. [...] And you think back to your twenty first birthday and you think “oh. I'm something else.” I have been continually transforming. But, that's a frightening thought unless the conglomerate thought is this deep sense of continuity. [...] And that's what rituals provide. And often, historically, you're talking about religion. People go to someplace else outside the world, to rehearse unconditional value.

RADICAL RITUALS; THE MAN AND THE SPIRITUAL EXPERIENCE OF BURNING MAN

FLO Do you see Burning Man as a whole ritual experience?

LARRY If we just say [The Man] “He's the birthday boy,” well, he's there, and it's his day, and it's his being. But his being, as it does in your experience, it radiates out and orients everyone every minute of the day and at night. Especially at night, where everyone is like, “Where's the Man?” You've probably done that. Oh, there he is. Same place he's always been. And we've kept the city the same design

because it works for a number of reasons, and some very material, and also because that sense of..., that gets down to the word radical. Three of the principles say “radical”. Radical, in English, means two things. Pushing boundaries, and going where [nobody's] been, and deeply rooted in our nature. And to always be at odds. But it combines those two into one thing. And that's why it's so, when talking about the value of ritual, this message that everything is... that you are the same as you've ever been. But you're different. You're different from minute to minute. And over time you change as a result of those accumulating differences. And if you



Larry Harvey. Photo credit: DangerRanger, 1993. Source: [Danger Ranger Facebook](#).



“We’re not going to package it and tell you what that has to mean. You have to have an experience.”

can put that together, we keep the Man in the same basic form. But we work little changes everywhere. And not because we’ve become creatively [bored]. But really, if you look at it, it’s to suggest those two... [senses of] radical.

FLO Pushing the boundaries, and at the same time remaining really grounded in yourself.

LARRY Yeah. So, it’s not a refusal of meaning. We’re just saying don’t think about him as representing things. Think of him as being a Man.

FLO It just is.

LARRY It’s that simple. It just is. And they ask me about the beginnings. They ask: “Well what were you trying to represent, what were you...?” and I say no, “The image came to me in my mind.” And I always think of it as things coming out of black water. And that’s the artistic process. And he was fashioned to consciously mean it. Thinking back on it. Meanings, and meaning, meanings. But that’s everybody’s work to do.



Larry Harvey (left), Andrew Johnstone (center) and Flash Hopkins (right). Photo credit: Stewart Harvey, 1998.

Source: [BurningMan Journal](#).

FLO So the main ritual for you is—

LARRY We’re not going to package it and tell you what that has to mean. You have to have an experience. And the kind of principles are just communicating with others and thinking about it. This is an anti-authoritarian community. But here, the principles came out and they inhaled them, with no pause to second guess it. They just said, “oh, yes. That feels right.” And that enabled them to organize and actually do things. They [stopped] endlessly arguing about what Burning Man was about.

FLO So, is the Man for you the main ritual for you here? Or would you see the Temple—

LARRY There’s hundreds of rituals.

Ritual practice [has] grown up spontaneously. And that happens in meaning saturated environments. And so, there are thousands of rituals we can’t possibly... we could mount a great [investigative] effort. Goodness, no. In terms of our organization’s culture, there are certain things that have been incorporated into how we administer our city. So, there’s the Man. Then the Temple is the other great collective ritual. So, as you see, they’re organized on a spine that extends from the heart of the city. It’s a good metaphor.

But then there’s the Golden Spike. And that just happens among the workers of the DPW. They just started that. And rituals really arise when you get people working together for the common goal, and it gets turned into a physical labor. And that drops

some of the emotional value. When you get to the body.

FLO So, you would say that we kind of left it behind... we left the body behind? You know, regular lives?

LARRY Well, in a way, we have.

FLO Like, we’re not engaging the body in the ritual world?

LARRY Well, is that really spectacle? I don’t think so. My favorite poet, William Empson, the British Poet—sort a metaphysical poet, he wrote in the 30s, brilliant man. He said in one couplet:

“Man, as the prying housemaid of the soul, May know her happiness by eye to hole; He’s safe; the key is lost;

he knows, Door will not open, nor hole close.”

The image evoked is these housemaids who peer through keyholes to view our soul. And we’re safe because it’s at a distance that we can vicariously... it’s a poem about self-consciousness and the spiritual perplexity that comes thereof. And in a Society of spectacle [Larry mentioned Guy Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle* earlier], we’re all peeping through the hole.

FLO Do you think yourself as a spiritual person?

LARRY Of course I do! I consider everybody spiritual. I don’t care what they say they believe in. I just watch how they act.

FLO How would you define spiritual?

LARRY It comes back to this unconditional sense of absolute reality. Unconditional means... Normally at large, everything is conditional. And in your own mind thoughts are conditional. And “Belief is thought at rest” (William James). You know. It’s all conditional. Makes you think it has to be true. There are always other things around that create context and deliberate meaning. When we came out here, we encountered an earthly void where there was no context except for our actions. And that set the stage for a kind of spirituality in which everything seemed to be the entire truth of its own existence. Everything seemed to be a spectacle of its own condition. You traveled through all this nothingness, and the next few feet, whatever you were travelling for, grew up before you. And seemed unique in all the world. Because out of nothing came everything. From the vacuum came a plenum. But that’s not surprising. Look at the history of the Christian



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church. The whole period of the hermits who went out to the desert to seek immediate contact with an unconditional reality. It’s what they did. [...]

FLO What is an unconditional reality for you?

LARRY My love of my son is an unconditional reality. Those things that most deeply and passionately motivate us, and generate meaning in our lives, are not simply the result of logic. They transcend that. And always have. Unconditional reality is related to unconditional love. That



“My love of my son is an unconditional reality.”

in turn is related to the practice of gifting. Gifting says that the gift has an unconditional value. Therefore, it’s outside the realm of commodity transcendence. And everybody knows that. Children know that. You give them something and then you say: “Because of this, you’ve got to do this,” then you’ve just killed the gift. It’s a gift when, in its most potent form, it’s a gift to your being. And being has an unconditional value too. I think that’s actually at the root of it too. All our desires and lusts are byproducts of the failure to gain a sense of unconditionality. [...]

LARRY’S PHILOSOPHICAL INFLUENCES: JAMES, FREUD, AND DARWIN

FLO So, to look up is important? To be able to look up and see something bigger than you?

LARRY Yeah, to look up and see something bigger than you—something that makes you feel like you’ve become far more than yourself. William James said [in *The Varieties of Religious Experience*] that its essentially practical purpose is all that’s needed. At the end of that wonderful book, he writes in a little paragraph—I’ll paraphrase here—that practical purpose is all that’s required to become real yourself, and to connect to something continuous.

Anything bigger will do, as long as it is both proximate and “other.”

FLO When did you read that book? A long time ago? Is that book what inspired you?

LARRY I read *The Varieties of Religious Experience* a long time ago. James is my hero. I’m also attached to Emerson. America has two great philosophers—one was Emerson, and one was James. Emerson was connected to Transcendentalism, and James invented Pragmatism. Those are two great American philosophic traditions.

FLO That really inspired you and—

LARRY Well, Emerson I read much earlier. He’s an interesting thinker but not a systematic one. James, on the other hand, was a systematic philosopher and writer. He never tried to create a grand metaphysical framework or some elaborate plan to explain everything. Instead, he talked about knowledge in practical terms. Yeah, James influenced me. Freud influenced me. Darwin influenced me. Those are my heroes.

FLO Darwin?

LARRY Yeah, I even visited his house outside London a few years ago. Those were the intellectual giants of the 19th century. I feel like I have half a foot in the 19th century—and I like that. I think a lot about the future, but part of me is [intellectually] grounded in the 19th century. It’s a good perspective to have. We lack certain things today that they had back then.

Things change, of course, but I think we could reinvent some of what the 19th century offered. The 20th century... What happened to transcendence? There’s no transcendence anymore. In postmodern analysis, transcendence disappeared. All we’re left with are



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quasi-Marxist critiques of how hypocritical any belief system is. For example, in the 19th century, civic art was a thing. Artists created statues of cultural heroes. That’s impossible now; no one approaches art that way anymore. We don’t care so much about it. I’m not saying we should go back to biography or pedagogy, but I think we need a new standard.

And I think we’re seeing it emerge. The new standard is interactive art—art that generates community in its creation, in its unveiling, and in its ongoing presence. You look at the economics of art, and that’s exactly what’s happening. That’s real public art—not abstract modernist pieces.

Everyone hates those. They don’t inspire the spirit.

Modernism had its failures—what it did to architecture, to public design—none of that worked. Those are becoming embarrassments we’d rather forget, just like social realism. No, I think the kind of art we see here [at Burning Man] will become the norm in public settings. It’s already jumping from here to music festivals, so we’ve had a huge influence that way. And now we’re looking at ways to insert it into city gathering spaces—in real cities.

FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COLLECTIVE: BURNING MAN AS A RADICAL HOME AND CULTURAL VISION

FLO How would you explain that Burning Man creates a sense of community, yet it is triggered by very unique individual experiences? Like, the desire to change the world begins with the individual, but it can only be realized through this collective sense of community.

LARRY Well, in prehistoric times, the model was—and the social myth was—that identity started with myths and stories. Myth worked down through social structures and ended with the individual. [In those times,] individuality as we know it didn’t quite exist. But if we’re going to [build community] in our era, you have to start with the individual and then work out to the collectivity, whether it be here [at Burning Man], in your neighborhood, in civic spaces, or in the city—and then expand outward from there.

It’s the only route I think you can take. You can’t pretend to be tribal—that’s foolish. So, you start with the individual and radical fellowship. Because there are people coming here [to Burning Man] who live in



“The new standard is interactive art—art that generates community in its creation, in its unveiling, and in its ongoing presence.”

America and don’t even know what civics is. They’ve grown up in the suburbs, and it’s all one big, never-ending machine. They have no sense of civil society. Maybe they’re united by a brand or a lifestyle, but that lifestyle is loose compared to a natural ethos.

They internalize values instead of just consuming things dictated by their desires. But that process [of consumption] tends to isolate people. The demographics are different, and the science behind it is fascinating. Marketers have demographics figured out: if you make more money, you can separate the generations by their consumer habits. It’s almost antithetical to the formation of community and culture—it isolates people into little consumer groups.

FLO Would you relate that to this place we call Home here [at Burning Man]?

LARRY Yeah, I would relate it to that. People can come here, and they’re cut off from the rest of the world. They’re thrown together with all these other people, and the world [around them] is limited in a very moving way. So, we’ve given that back to people. In our ritual practice, I think we relate to the Man [Burning Man’s central effigy] as we once related to our parents when we were very small. We reenact that connection.

FLO Do you connect that back to Freudian lectures?


LARRY No, it’s connected to all my reading in psychology and psychiatry. You know, now the world doesn’t have coherent spaces, and the continuity of time is broken. But here, we give people a powerful, primal sense of [coherence]. This is a pre-modern model. We can’t live in the past, but we can reinvent something that supplies what the past unconsciously created. Today, with the internet and all that, there is no past. The past is just pavement—we walk on it, but it doesn’t inform us much. I think that’s what we’re doing here: creating something ancient in a radical way.

FLO You mean for people to feel more grounded?

LARRY Yeah, for people to feel coherent within themselves and connected to the continuity of time as it moves through them.

FLO So, we’re back to your definition of radical as being grounded while also pushing boundaries.

LARRY Right. Everybody talks about the tech industry as if it’s radical, but it’s this other thing too. If you



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look at an aerial view of [Black Rock City], it looks like a Neolithic temple complex. We didn’t plan that—it just felt right. We acted out of aesthetic intuition, philosophy, and deeply moral experience.

This wasn’t theorized ahead of time, but the theory is good for looking back and understanding it. We’re more radical than people realize. Over time, these experiences [at Burning Man] could create a movement. People have these

convergent experiences where their being feels enhanced. They feel more real inside and more real in relation to others.

Now, you can’t live this way all the time, but it’s already been shown that you can internalize these values. They help you reconnect with your animal awareness, with what it means to be human—and it’s portable.

FLO And eventually, this becomes part of mainstream culture?

LARRY Exactly. I’ll know we’ve succeeded when people... when something appears on the nightly news and embodies our values. When a newscaster, by their manner, conveys what we’re doing—not just through words but through body language, signaling what’s normal and human. When they start reporting on our emergent culture, and the message is, “Well, of course, everybody knows this. That’s common sense. That’s what human beings do,” then our work will be accomplished. I won’t live to see it, but I think it can happen. Now, you’re talking to a visionary here, but we’ve got a pretty good track record. We’re pragmatic, practical, and this is a good start. Of course, the world is full of vicissitudes, so you never know.

BEING ON BOARD: STRESS, SUCCESS, AND THE FULFILLMENT OF CHILDHOOD DREAMS

FLO Is it stressful to be on the board sometimes?

LARRY Yeah, it’s really stressful. The stress is good up to a point, until it doesn’t feel good at all. It’s good then to get away from it probably. It’s crazy; this has been a stressful event for me because we had a couple of

crises that had to do with our greater aims [Burning Man’s overarching goals], and you have to be kind of careful. But it’s good, because I’ve got all my friends around me. And their families. And interesting people. It’s really interesting people we get to come across every year.

FLO Is it more stressful as it grows?

LARRY Well, I thought it would get less stressful, but you just exchange one kind of stress for another kind of stress. And I don’t want to retire, because I can think of things I still want to give to it. And I don’t want to let go of that. I mean, I’ll give it

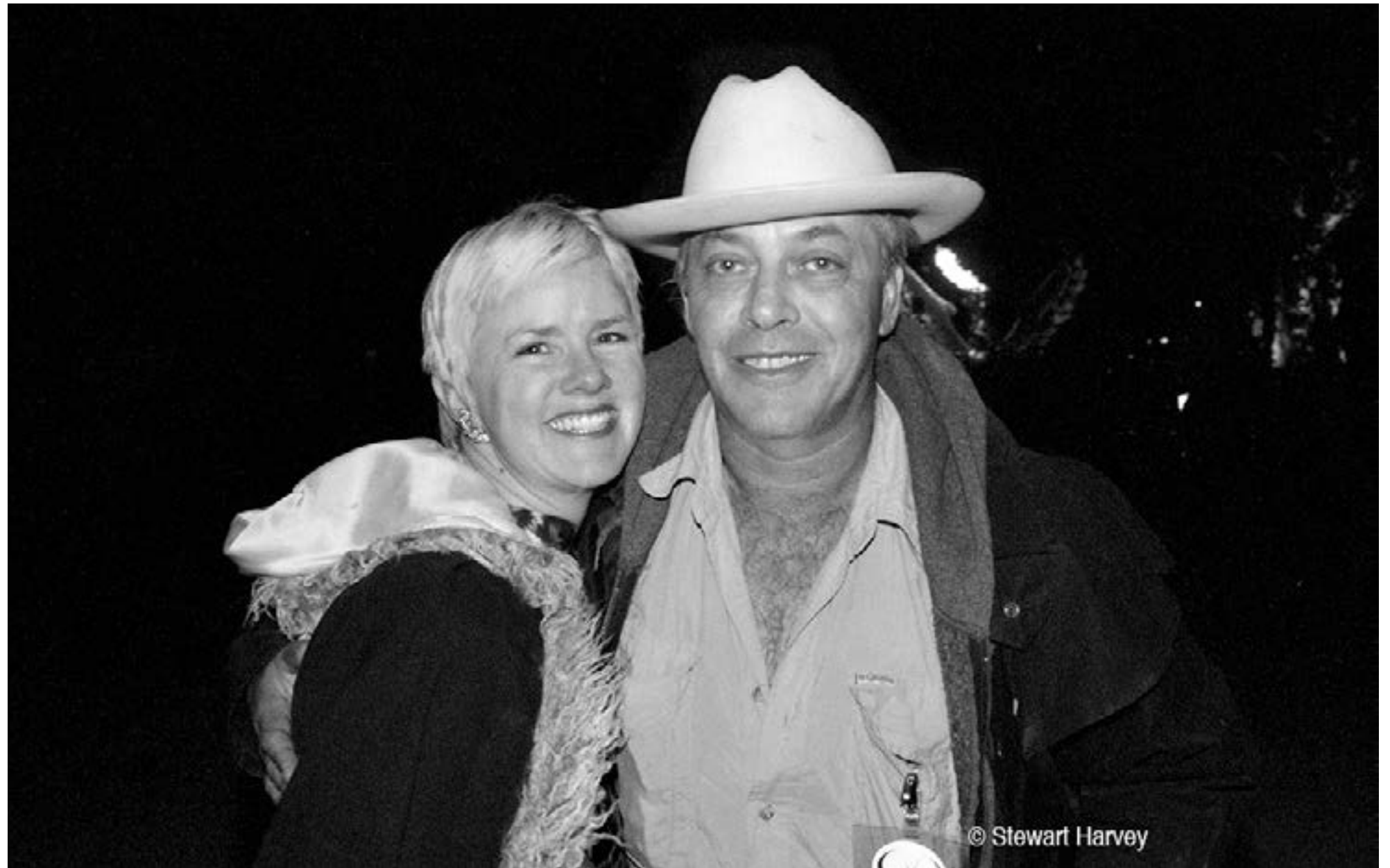
until I die. My energy is less than it was. You get to the point where you’re measuring not cups, and not tablespoons, but little teaspoons measuring our energy. Because you can’t just throw it at things anymore. Yeah, this has been a rather stressful event. But, you know, everyone’s different. I had some [years] where I could be, and I was relaxed, I could take pleasure in it. A little less this year [2015]... but, that’s because of what we’re doing. If we accomplish what we’re trying to do right now, then I think maybe I can relax. But, then there’ll be a little interval where things will flatten out and I can relax. It’ll turn into a little garden. That’s

what I used to do. I made gardens. This is not unlike that. It’s just environmental design.

FLO You used to make gardens like designing them?

LARRY Yeah. For a little while. And when I was a kid, I would organize in grade school. I would organize students to do shows. And I would recruit them and try to get them to do... I’d sort of hit the wind and paint a picture for them and... I was doing exactly what I was doing now. And I had to convince the adults that it was okay. It was politics. It was basically a little template of what I do now.

And it goes back to something Freud said. He said, “There’s no happiness in life except for the realization of your childhood wish.” I think he was right. But, in some cases, if you’re doing something that’s not ordinary, you may have to just persist in doing things for reasons that you don’t fully comprehend, and that don’t obviously have any place in the world at all and don’t necessarily guarantee you any wealth. But it works out. And it’s turned into quite a success. They think we’ve all become multi-millionaires out of this, but this isn’t true. But I’m comfortable enough. And I think I’ve worked enough that things are going pretty well.



Larry Harvey and Marian Goodell. Photo credit: Stewart Harvey, 1998. Source: [BurningMan Journal](#).