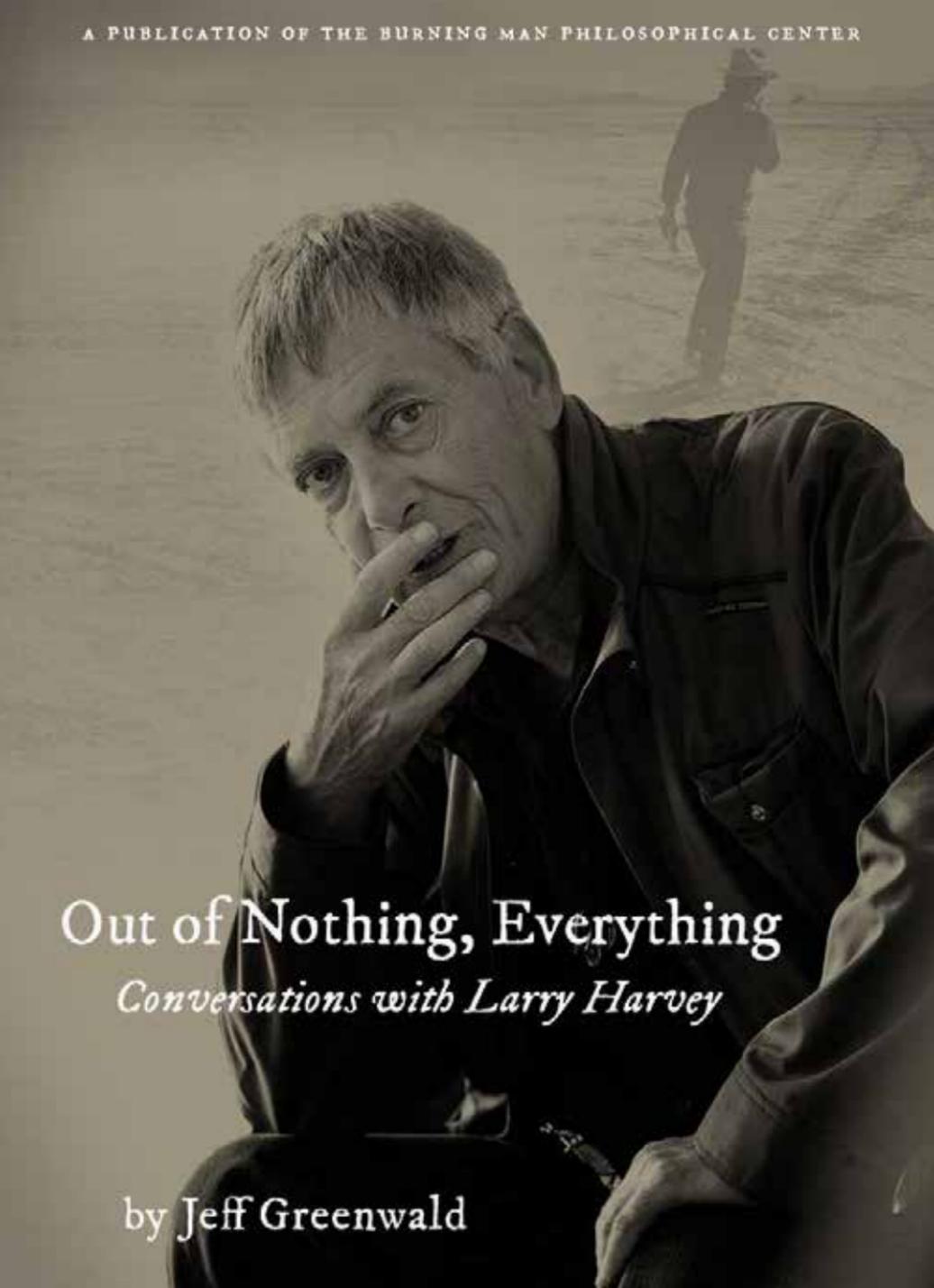


A PUBLICATION OF THE BURNING MAN PHILOSOPHICAL CENTER



Out of Nothing, Everything  
*Conversations with Larry Harvey*

by Jeff Greenwald

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## FOREWORD

Larry Harvey (1948-2018) was the founder of Burning Man, the celebrated and celebratory cultural movement that started as a spontaneous happening on a San Francisco beach in 1986. It has now grown into an annual pop-up city of 70,000 in the Nevada desert, and a year-round community of creative collaborators and passionate volunteers on six continents.

Starting in October of 2013, writer and monologist Jeff Greenwald conducted a series of interviews with Larry. Greenwald, the best-selling author of works including *Shopping for Buddhas* and *The Size of the World*, originally pitched the project as a feature-length interview piece for *The Sun*. His editors sent him back for another round of interviews in 2014, but ultimately decided not to publish the piece. Jeff then gifted his manuscript to Burning Man Project, the nonprofit organization that was established by Larry and his co-founders to operate the Nevada event and support the ongoing growth and extension of the culture. And that is how it has come into your hands today: in the spirit of a gift.

In 2015, Burning Man reached out to Jeff to conduct another round of interviews, this time as part of an oral history project focusing on the six founders of Black Rock City LLC. By this point, Jeff had developed a friendly rapport with Larry that I think shows in their dialogue, along with a rare talent for gently shaping Larry's sometimes loquacious musings into language as direct and impactful as his written word.

Larry was a prolific writer, and left us a rich legacy of essays. Through that body of work, one can gain a clear vantage into the man's mind, his thoughts and ideals, which he expressed in a way that was both elegant and accessible. I would argue that these interviews with Jeff give us a deeper understanding of Larry as a person, his heart and soul if you will, and not simply the ocean of ideas in which he swam. To that end, they serve to reveal the man behind "the Man."

**Stuart Mangrum**

*Burning Man Education Director*

*San Francisco, May 2018*

## INTRODUCTION

The first time I met Larry Harvey face-to-face was in July 2006, at a bookstore event in Corte Madera, California. Barbara Traub was discussing her newly-released *Desert to Dream: A Decade of Burning Man Photography*, and showing slides of her work. It was a beautiful Sunday summer afternoon, and the audience was sparse. Larry sat in one of the front rows, wearing his signature Stetson. The friend I'd come with, Tigg, recognized him first.

"That's Larry Harvey," she stage-whispered. "I wonder what he's doing after the reading?"

Tigg and I had been to Burning Man several times by that point, separately and together. I'd spoken to Larry five years earlier, on the telephone, while interviewing people for a book about getting out of your comfort zone – I was shocked to hear him describe himself as an introvert, more or less terrified by crowds.

As the slideshow wrapped up, Tigg turned to me. "Ask him if he wants to have dinner with us," she said.

"What? No. I'm sure he has plans."

"It can't hurt to ask."

“I don’t want to bother him,” I insisted.

“If you don’t,” she said, “I will.”

This was the kind of dare I could never resist. So when the presentation ended, Tigg I approached the man in the hat. By way of introduction I thanked him for our “comfort zone” interview, which he vaguely recalled.

“Mr. Harvey,” I stammered, “My girlfriend and I love Burning Man—and we’d be thrilled if you would let us take you to dinner.”

“I’m going out with my friends here,” he said. “But why don’t you join us?”

What I remember best about that small dinner was how intently Larry Harvey *listened*. I’d expected him to hold court, but it was almost the opposite. He was skilled at the art of conversation, and in learning what he could—even from the two interlocutors who had crashed his inner circle. He spoke of his plans for the coming burn, and confided in us about some of the political challenges he was facing from the federal government. We were fully included, and never felt for a moment unwelcome. It was frankly thrilling, and we bid Larry and his friends goodnight with a deep sense of affection and respect.

Six years later, I pitched the idea of a Larry Harvey interview to

a small and beloved literary magazine called *The Sun*. They gave me the go-ahead, and with the help of the Burning Man staff we set up a series of informal interviews at his apartment in San Francisco’s Alamo Square neighborhood, not far from the “Painted Ladies” featured on so many San Francisco postcards.

My first visit was of course the most memorable. I’d expected him to answer the door in his famous Stetson, but—as he explained during our interview—he had abandoned the hat about two years ago. He wore a button-down western shirt, and black jeans. His hair was a practical bowl-cut, bringing to mind a medieval page. Larry was loquacious and animated; he often waved and gestured with a lit cigarette, going through half a pack during each of our interviews. Larry was an avid and eclectic reader, and books surrounded us in small piles on the coffee table, on his lamp stand, and in his tiny home office. At the time he was immersed in a Paul Theroux novel, Margaret Atwood’s *Handmaid’s Tale*, and Thomas Frank’s *The Conquest of Cool*.

The one-bedroom apartment that Larry inhabited for nearly 40 years is small, and was furnished with lovely Buddhist and tribal antiques and wall hangings. After our first interview, he showed me some wonderful framed black-and-white photographs—of his son, Tristan: of his mother as a stylish teenager; and a snapshot of Larry embracing his older brother when they were farm boys in Oregon.

We got together on three occasions in 2013 and 2014, sitting in his living room with unsweetened ice tea and talking about the history and philosophy of the global event that he had

co-created. And we would meet again many times in 2016, continuing our in-depth interviews for the Burning Man Founders oral history project—the brainchild of our mutual friend Stuart Mangrum.

Now that Larry is gone, I find it deeply moving to read through these interviews and remember how elegantly, how precisely, he used language. Larry was a lover of words, and he knew we had this in common. It was a pleasure and a privilege to be on that sea with him, listening to him navigate through complex ideas and often ambiguous issues. From our first encounter at that bookstore to our last conversation on the playa itself, he gave me the sense we were traveling together, seeking a kind of philosophical Golden Fleece. This was his practice of Radical Inclusivity. Through his own writings and these collected conversations, it is a lasting gift that he gave to us all.

**Jeff Greenwald**  
*Oakland, California*

*September 2018*

**PART I:  
ON THE BIRTH AND GROWTH OF  
BURNING MAN**

October-November, 2013

**Jeff Greenwald: Not everyone is familiar with Burning Man. Is there a shorthand way to describe the event?**

Larry Harvey: I can reach into my bag of tricks and try to describe it. It's a lot of things at the same time. It's certainly a wilderness experience. It's a campout, in a sense, but it's also a cosmopolitan city. It's the largest exhibition of interactive art on earth, we believe. It has spiritual resonance for many. And the fun to be had is thrilling

**JG: The very first Burning Man celebration occurred in 1986, at San Francisco's Baker Beach. Do you have any clear memories of that first event?**

LH: When people ask, "Why did you do it?," I don't know. It was Radical Self-Expression. As a creative person, I know what that's like. Things just come to you. Any creative person knows that. It just comes out of the black water, and its features form, and that's it. Your heart says "I am that," and you're off to the races.

But to tell you the truth? At this moment in time, overlaid as it is by fathoms of impressions, I don't suppose I do. I recreated it for a film I did—And if I remember it at all, I remember it as pictured on the film re-creation that I shot.

**JG: Memory is a moving target**

LH: That's why writers keep journals! You see, I've told the story so many times that the representations now usurp the original impression. I have faith that I know what I'm talking about, and that I was there. I have witnesses! In fact, we probably wouldn't have done it again if we hadn't drawn a little crowd. There's nothing like strangers loving what you do.

So though I've described the events, I'm not sure if I recall any actual sensations. I always mention that there was a woman who came up and took the Man's hand, as the flames were shunted to one side by the wind. Do I actually remember? You know, I don't think I do. A guy showed up with a guitar and improvised a song. I did see that. There are only re-imagined images. It's a little unnerving.

Which is interesting, because people want stories. When my son (Tristan) was little, we would share a bed, and I'd read to him every night. When I'd run out of books, I'd start making stories up, and he would want them repeated. Over the course of time there was one in particular that he liked, that I was obliged to repeat again and again. In order to entertain myself, I began inventing new details. But he'd say "No, that wasn't in it."

There are lots of Burning Man origin stories. See, that goes back to the layers of myth. People have asked me to explain it, but then you begin delving into your motives, and delving into your own previous experience. I've come up with five origin stories that are all true. And they are all essentially mythic in nature, because they represent this mythopoetic way of looking at things. It assumes that the essence of the thing is to be found in the very germ of an act; in sort of a "Just So Story." And it's all true—but on the other hand, it's all made up. It becomes art. I could spend two hours on that single point. Eventually, it would turn into my whole biography.

**JG: So you have no truly clear memories of the first Burn?**

Okay, wait a minute. I do remember one thing. And this is one of the stories that people like. It's like Newton and the apple. It has something to do with the girlfriend. I've tried to exterminate that story, because it becomes too particular to myself. But in a way, told rightly, it could speak universally. The first Burn occurred on the anniversary of a very romantic episode, a passionate relationship, ill-founded, ill-starred. And I do remember being rather under the weather: depressed on the recurrence of this anniversary. I think I remember. (Laughter) That's as much I can commit to!

**JG: Was there a point during the first five or six years, at Baker Beach or in the desert, when you actually realized: "Wow, this could grow into something enormous?"**

LH: That, I remember. I can summon that up as if it happened in the present.

It was one of the first years in the desert. I was standing at the base of the Man. In that environment, anything of any vertical stature seems like the center of the universe. It was the tallest thing. It was a nearly four-story statue. And looking out from my vantage, I could descry three or four tornadoes of dust—a common thing there—rising into the sky. And to my imagination, it came to me that these were like dust clouds raised by a march of armies, all converging on the very spot I stood—because the man was so over-aweing in that emptiness. That’s the genius of Burning Man. Out of nothing, we created everything. And he seemed to invent all of reality out there. Whereas, were he standing here in San Francisco—no taller than the building across the street—he wouldn’t seem particularly pre-possessing.

Now it was a grandiose impression, certainly, that “the world is coming here.” Quite irrational. But at that point I felt so mirror-merged with that figure that it was like my soul. And it was for all of us, in some sense. To raise it, we had to merge all our efforts in pulling it up on this great hawser, connected to its solar plexus. Everyone would strain, and the tension of that line would come singing down the rope, and go right into our bodies. We were aligned with the Man’s spine. In a very physical and immediate way, we merged with it. Basic physics. And then, when it hit forty-five degrees, and rose high above us, it was appallingly large, and filled us with fear—because it could’ve fallen forward. It had no brakes! It filled us with awe. Everyone, to some degree: I uniquely, because I was the person who originated it, and at that point I was the person who designed it. It meant the world to me. My father was a carpenter. I worshipped him. He, too, was a tall man.

**JG: I know you grew up outside of Portland, Oregon. When did you move to San Francisco?**

LH: I moved in stages, really. When I was in high school, I hitchhiked to San Francisco. The longest stretch of that ride was with Nit Brown, the brother of Joe E. Brown, who regaled me with stories of show business. We arrived here, and I got out of the car somewhere in Berkeley. It was the Big City to me. I stayed with the friends of a friend in the Haight.

I was 18 then, so it must have been 1966. What I encountered in San Francisco was the Springtime of Love. There were these youth communes forming because it was cheap to live. And after all, it was San Francisco. You could do what you wanted in San Francisco—or so everyone thought. People were dressing cheaply out of Goodwill, and things like that. It was the tinder, it was the stuff that the Hippies were made of, but they hadn’t quite happened yet. It was before they got the name.

Back in Portland around that time— I was raised in a rural area just outside the city— a high school friend had found the word “hippy” in the newspaper, and had pasted it to his dashboard. But this was all word-of-mouth that reached us as callow youths, and it was spelled “hippy” because he got it from a weight loss ad. But he put that on the dashboard. We would look at it from time to time with great satisfaction, like we had secured the possession of a secret intelligence.

**JG: Can you tell me a bit about your early years?**

LH: My parents were immigrants to the West Coast. My father was a cowboy, born in North Dakota in 1899. He met my mother in Nebraska. He married her there, just in time to experience the Dust Bowl—and they, and many thousands like them, were almost literally blown west, or anywhere there might be a job. She graduated from high school; he got to the fourth grade. He was much older than her.

Half of my soul, my mind, is in the 19th century. That explains certain things about my point of view. He had come part way west as an infant, in a covered wagon. These are facts.

With the Dust Bowl, everything blew away—and they didn't have much to begin with. My childhood was lived in the shadow of the Depression, as experienced by people on the Plains. He would work on silos. He had the skills of a carpenter, which is what he became when he got to the west coast. He was working class. He wasn't blue collar; he was brown collar.

And my parents would work in the fields, too. It was a tremendous trial. Ironically, they had never bonded socially with the people around them so much as they did then, in the midst of this shared struggle and affliction. When they got to the west coast, my father's radical self-reliance took over. They didn't have many friends at all, because he was always self-sufficient. They really didn't need, didn't have much society—which conditioned my experience as a child.

They hit the coast just about right in time to get the benefit of the war boom. America was gearing up, especially on the

Pacific coast. He worked for others, but he didn't like it. As soon as he had the confidence, he worked for himself. It had a lot to do with his radical self-reliance, as we preach it. And they saved up enough money to buy an acre and a half, that's all. Today, it would be a boutique, artisan, organic farm! Back then, it was just Nebraskans, watering things by hand. That's what I've seen people in the Third World do, except we had kind of a tractor he made.

I was adopted. I was born in Salem, Oregon, as was my brother. He was adopted, too. I have no knowledge of my genetic family. We lived in a region of truck farming. People don't remember truck farming; it was like these new artisanal places. They were outside the city limits. They would truck produce and berries and anything they might sell to local markets—not even in the city, but on the fringe of the city. We had chickens too, and sold the eggs. My father built a lovely chicken house.

**JG: Did you learn your building skills from him?**

LH: No, not really. I wasn't any good at it. I was a complete failure in certain respects. I'm somewhat physically dyslexic. I can't repeat the same action the same way for more than 10 seconds at a time. I can't write in a consistent hand. Before I even get to the end of the line, it's morphed into something else. I can't dance. I won't dance, because I know that I can't dance. And I would never shut up. I talked constantly. That was my idea of action. And that meant I made a terrible laborer.

My father was a man who earned our family's living through

skilled labor. To be an effective laborer, you have to be able to repeat the same action, the same way, again and again and again and again. It's a simple matter of efficiency.

**JG: I'm curious about your adoption. Does the "radical inclusion" principle of Burning Man serve as an antidote to an upbringing you once described as "radical isolation?"**

LH: Of course it does. These things, in anybody's life, are very often compensatory. It was a combination of love and greed. I admired my father. I valued my father as he valued himself, as he portrayed himself. And among his traits was honesty, so his acts were him. He was authentic. He was one of the most moral people I've ever known. To a fault, in some ways. You can be addicted to morality, and it can lead you into self-righteousness if you're not careful.

He was both. We lived in a region full of Italians and Japanese and German farmers. We knew who they were, but we didn't socialize with anyone around us. My parents would never say an uncharitable thing about people. Nonetheless, I got the sense they thought we were perhaps a cut above those who surrounded us. They would never say that; It had to do with my father's high principles, really. Those high principles took us out of the orbit of our social surroundings. I couldn't know that as a child, but it cast a spell—if not in some way a curse—because there was this cone of isolation around us. It conspired with my temperament. In some way, I've lived my entire life as an outsider who's very interested in the inside of everything.

**JG - Did you serve in Vietnam, or anywhere else in the military?**

LH - I was in Germany. It taught me that I was temperamentally averse to an extremely hierarchical system. I had no particular zeal about Vietnam; many people in my generation did not. So it was like being put in jail. What you quickly realize is that—especially in the army, when you have to do so much—you realize that you're actually property. State property. They don't mess around with it really. You are treated purely as an object, as an instrument by which commands can be accomplished. So that's really dehumanizing. All your actions are regulated, and you are part of a machine that's of course dehumanizing. I quickly realized that the army wasn't interested in creativity. It wasn't interested in the condition of my soul; in fact my soul for all practical purposes didn't exist. Had it been something different, had it been a great crusade like the second World War, then I could imagine making a sacrifice. But in that context, I made a judgment that we were engaged in an immoral war.

**JG: Before Burning Man was writing your checks, how were you making a living?**

LH: I went through a bunch of jobs in San Francisco. I was a bicycle messenger. So as not to desert the transportation industry, I went on to be a cab driver. And I made a very questionable living doing gardens. I had a partnership that was not particularly real with a carpenter, and fell in with a builder who was also a painter and played flamenco guitar. He had salons at his house. It was a group called the "Latte Carpenters." Very West Coast. Carpenters with a liberal arts

education! We would sit around, he would play the guitar, we drank and joked and talked about philosophy and art.

So I took some classes at the community college. I learned how to draft, and enjoyed that a lot. Learned how to make models, and took horticultural courses. But, really, I didn't care much about plants when it came down to it. I mean, I love nature, but I didn't care about maintenance. I didn't care about irrigation. I just had visions. I wanted to make gardens that look like Mars. I always had a project. Somehow, if you could get the sky to be green, you could do wonderful things with red. I looked at it as theater.

Basically, I was a guy with a truck and big ideas. Trying to sell lower-middle class people slightly unorthodox gardens. I liked that clientele, because they were open to any idea.

**JG: Do you ever feel that society has changed so much since the inception of Burning Man that the marginal has become the mainstream in some ways? That what was considered marginal back then is what we take for granted now?**

LH: That Burning Man has gone "mainstream" is the hipster's lament. Hipsters have two great anxieties that they vibrate between. One is the fear that they won't get invited to the party, and the other is that they'll get lost in the crowd. And that's the history of pop culture right there.

I had come to San Francisco as a kid, and I came back after I got out of the service. That's when things were going pretty strong.

It was just past the famous Summer of Love. It all happened so quickly, you know. It was only about four or five years, but continued on for another 10, 15 years in various places. It was a scene, and it cooked, and people were collaborating, and new things were coming out of it. But a lot of new lies were being invented by it, too—to cover hypocrisies. Like any world a'borning.

What we did with Burning Man, coming out of the 1980s, was to become the first scene that turned itself into a city. Twenty-seven years later, Black Rock City is still alive and growing. That's the one unique thing I'll claim for us. What is really, historically novel is that we defied the supposed law of pop cultural entropy, and went well beyond. And scenes don't do that. But our scene did. That's something to think about. It says something about what we do.

**JG: Though your father was clearly a moral man, his principles seemed to be rather isolating. The Ten Principles of Burning Man, on the other hand—created in 2004, 18 years after the festival began—are very inclusive.**

LH: Well that's the correction, you see!

**JG: Burning Man was already a very successful phenomenon by 2004. Why did you bother even articulating the Principles?**

LH: It's very simple. In 1997, we had moved from the Black Rock Desert to a piece of land in Hualapai Flat, a little playa in Nevada. I'll spare you all the politics involved with that, but the result was that we were so hard-pressed by the commissioners of the Washoe County that our very existence was threatened.

So here we were, as David and Goliath. We were covered on national TV. I made a speech—standing on a hay bale—at the end of the event, asking people to give us money to pay our bills. And people actually left us several thousand dollars on the way out.

Well, that's got to tell you something. It said something important. I mean, have you ever heard of people paying the promoter on the way out? It meant that something had happened to them. They were inspired, they were moved, they were passionate. And that's how the "Regional" movement started. People spread out, and began to do things in emulation of what they had experienced at Burning Man. And they began sending us money, to help us stay alive.

This all happened quite organically. That was the beginning of what is now a global network of communities. And that's what begot the Ten Principles, because these communities wanted something to guide them. They didn't have the persuasive context of Black Rock City around them, to condition what they did, and they felt at sea.

They said, "Can you help?" You could feel it. There was demand. It was apparent and pressing. So I was "voluntold" to write some kind of guidelines: how people could do Burning

Man where they were. I went out to Mazatlan and stayed with my dear friend Rod Garrett, the urban planner who first designed Black Rock City. [Note: Rod Garrett died in August of 2011.] I sat in the zocalo (town square). I must have looked like a giant white termite, bending over my laptop, drinking one espresso after another. And that's where I wrote the Ten Principles.

**JG: The way you describe it here, it sounds as if the Regional communities developed, then came to you afterward requesting these Principles. But I've also heard that you wanted to make sure they subscribed to the Ten Principles before using the Burning Man "brand."**

LH: No, that wasn't it. If you'd asked us at the time what "IP" was [intellectual property], we wouldn't have known. Now it's part of our discourse. I think there were instances of people who said they were going to have a "Burning Man" party, and basically had a rave. The Regionals would have experienced that too, because some people were pretending to do "Burning Man" things. But the inspired, dedicated and passionate communities wanted to distinguish themselves. It all came down to them, not us. We weren't particularly worried, and we still aren't, about competition.

JG: I'm talking not so much about competition, as adulteration of your vision for the event.

LH: Well, that we were concerned about. And when we wrote the letter, the contract that the Regional people signed, I wrote a long, long screed to introduce the Ten Principles. I said that,

with the Principles, we were legitimizing Burning Man in a new way. I knew the Regionals felt the same way.

**JG: For the purposes of simplicity, I'll list the Ten Principles:**

- 1 – Radical Inclusion
- 2 – Gifting
- 3 – Decommodification
- 4 – Radical Self-Reliance
- 5 - Radical Self-Expression
- 6 - Communal Effort
- 7 - Civic Responsibility
- 8 - Leaving no Trace
- 9 – Participation
- 10- Immediacy

**Can you discuss a few of these, and articulate how they are expressed in the Festival?**

LH: I wish to first make the point that every one of the Principles was inherent in our actions, starting from our very first night on Baker Beach. They were there at the beginning, but they were only written down because of the need of other people, out in the world.

The most popular is probably Radical Self-Expression. Who doesn't like radical self-expression? And Radical Inclusion. And Gifting...I mean, the event was a gift. There wasn't any economic concern whatsoever. It was just made available to anybody.

And Radical Self-Reliance. well, it was Radical Self-Reliance, alright. It was just me and Jeremy James. We built the Man in our garage. Communal Effort? It was Communal Effort. We needed a few people to carry the Man. By 1990, it required teams of people to carry what had become a four-story tall giant. It required real coordination and preparation.

As for Civic Responsibility: Even that was there on the beach. Because in 1990, our last night at the beach. the authorities came down and said, "You can't do this. You can't burn this Man."

First it was a cop on a cycle. We talked to him, and we got him to bring in his Supervisor. When he arrived, they had stopped everything. We had the Man's torso halfway down a sandy bluff, a steep incline, and we stopped. We reasoned with the official and said, "We carried this all the way from the highway, please let us bring it down." And they said okay.

Once it was down on the beach, people gathered around it. It was a sophisticated structure at the time; a lovely piece of work. The supervisor took one look at it, and he was surprised. I could see that. It ached with craft. People were murmuring "What a shame, we waited all year..."

Then Dan Miller, who was my roommate then and came to be the person who supervised the building and raising of the Man for years, engaged the guy. I joined in on the conversation.

I'd like to think the supervisor was moved by what we were

doing. It might also be that he was very sensible, and realized that he had a crowd situation and didn't have the means to deal with it. But he did something atypical. He said, "Okay: You can raise it, but you can't burn it."

The other officers left the area as quickly as they could. This is when I first met people who were a part of the famous Cacophony Society, who played pranks and did guerilla theater. Some of them had shown up on the beach. They had kind of an underground sensibility. One of the Cacophony members came up and said, "Okay, we can burn it now—They're gone!"

But Dan and I had given our word. I'm my father's son; I gave my word. We wouldn't do it.

There's a saying in the underground: "It's easier to ask for forgiveness than beg for permission." It's a political perception. But we'd given our word, and we didn't burn it.

There was a riot. Half these people had nothing invested in it. We'd been going down there for four years, but they were demanding we "burn the fucker." It got profane. It got ugly. But that only hardened my resolve. We didn't go the underground way: toward Radical Civil Disobedience.

**JG: You once remarked that "People lead lives that are deadeningly passive. Everyone is sorted out in a separate stall, like cattle in a feedlot." One of the principles of Burning Man is the concept of "Radical Self-Expression."**

## **How do people define this, and what limits does Burning Man place on Radical Self-Expression?**

LH: It's inherent in the Principles, in the order they are listed. The notion of "Gifting" is threaded throughout it. It's a master concept. If you look at Radical Self-Expression, it's essentially a gift—a gift that everyone, even a 12-year-old, knows.

It's simply inappropriate to give someone a gift they can't possibly accept. You can't say, "My gift to you is that I'm going to harass you all night long with a bullhorn." Or, "My gift to you is that I'm going to burn your art for you." Or, "My gift to you is that I'm going to be publically obnoxious, beyond pranks and jokes." Everyone knows when that practical joke turns into something sadistic.

That's why the principle of Gifting says that a gift should take a form that respects the rights and liberties of the recipient. That's part of the unconditionality of gifting. There aren't many conditions, but this is not about, "I get to give this to you if I can humiliate and abuse you." That's not a gift. No one thinks that's a gift. No one in the history of mankind has ever thought that was a gift! We keep saying to people, and will keep saying to people, that the Principles emerge from immediate experience. They didn't pre-exist the action. They describe what is valued; they don't prescribe what you have to believe in.

We had a group early on; a bunch of kids from the San Francisco Art Institute. Good kids can go pretty bad, and they came out there with a chip on their shoulder and an agenda. They were

going to stretch Radical Self-Expression as far as they could. They set up camp, got a bullhorn, and started abusing their neighbors—abusing them, and shouting insults at them. They kept this up. And we were so liberal in our attitude towards expression, that we actually finally used rangers to protect them from their neighbors!

And this went on. We hadn't found the limits yet. But they had a leader, and he notched it up. A man came by with his daughter and the guy started talking in the bullhorn about the sexual acts he'd perform on the man's daughter if he got a hold of her. This violated the law of any land. Everyone knew this was indecent; everyone knew this was abominable behavior. So we kicked him out. We escorted him out of Black Rock City. He was heard to say, "You don't understand! I won! I won!" No. Nobody thought he won.

**JG: Have you ever participated in any of the Burning Man Regional events in other parts of the world?**

LH: I've visited the regions themselves, and I've talked to people there, and whenever we've travel we do that. But I have to confess to you that I've been to only one Regional event, in Los Angeles. But I'm very good at imagining what I haven't experienced, speaking as an outsider who's always very interested with what's going on inside.

**JG: You've mentioned that you're an introverted person.**

LH: Well, there are a lot of people like that: a lot of public people who are introverted. That doesn't mean that they can't speak for themselves. I can be quite outgoing; I don't have the habits of an introvert. I read a lot. And whenever you read, you take yourself out of society. I'm constantly reading. I have since I can remember. Early on, I discovered that any book is a portal into a new world. And new worlds, especially in my childhood, seemed like they'd be good places to go to. So there's that.

I do write, and that's the most isolating form of self-expression known to man! Your ego feels like Napoleon, and your brain feels like Mt. Saint Helena. You're never going to meet the reader, probably, and if you do they're just going to ask you to sign something. It's not like being a dancer, there's not a lot of narcissism... Except it's reserved for those who want to make art that will live forever. That's who writes. It's probably the most egomaniacal art form, in a way. You want to be the voice in someone's head. You want to be indistinguishable from their very thoughts. In fact, you want to disappear, so they don't even know you're there.

With my familiars, with people I love, I can tease and joke. I'm known at the office as the person who makes the room laugh. I love relationships like that—and when I love people, I love them passionately. But I have no small talk, and not a lot of patience for much of the small change in human affairs. As as Brooke Oliver, one of our attorneys, said the other night, "You know, Larry, you don't have a lot of affect, but you're very passionate." I loved her for saying that. It might not sound like a compliment, but it was very moving to me.

**JG: I do understand. In Buddhism, there's a term called**

**“Authentic Presence,” and it seems to me that you admire that quality. And yet despite your high ideals and the Ten Principles, I find that even smart people—if they’ve never been to Burning Man—often have negative impressions of what it’s like. What would you say to these people?**

LH: [Part of that may be] the result of growing up in a nation founded by the Puritans, which gives great scope to prurient imaginings. People tend to perceive what they look for. If you bring a little soul to the encounter, then maybe you’ll see something you didn’t look for; maybe you’ll open your heart a little, and see things that you didn’t imagine. In fact, you could go to Burning Man and just party and dissipate—as you could in a lot of places. And that’s what you’ll get. If you go there and you’re interested in taking drugs, then you’ll hang out with the people who take drugs. And as far as you’re concerned, everybody’s taking drugs. And if you lust for the naked people, particularly for erotic stimulation, then Burning Man is full of naked people. Since you’re always walking among the dressed in the normal life, just a few naked people will pass for a nation.

But those are very superficial impressions. There aren’t masses of naked people walking around. There is a fair amount of flesh available, and I won’t say that there’s never been a drug taken at the event. It’s not really an ideal situation for that. It’s really hot, and there are more federal police there than you can shake a stick at—and if shake a stick at them, that might be a chargeable offense! So it’s not really a fertile ground for that.

**JG: What is it fertile ground for?**

LH: There are two things people talk about. They talk about the art, which is extraordinary in its scale and its relentless interactivity. And you look a little deeper, in its potential to generate actual community. Not only in its creation, but in its advent, it creates instant society. People can play with it, they can interact with it. They play with strangers they don’t know, brought together by the sentiment of beauty. Who wouldn’t want that?

But even more deeply, I think, a lot of people who come for the art stay for the community. That’s what hooks them, that’s what makes them come back again and again. I don’t think that’s primarily because they love art; I think it’s primarily because they’ve become friends with so many people. And it is a city: a city designed to support communal values, and to be very civic—in the sense that this society of strangers can be so rewarding and available. That opens people up. That’s when they begin to talk confidently about the spiritual aspect of it.

**JG: I’m uncomfortable in crowds; they make me introverted. When I was at Burning Man in 2013, my project was to do very short interviews with as many people as I could – people who looked somehow intimidating or unapproachable. One morning, I was doing an interview with a new mother who was drinking a smoothie. I asked where she’d bought it; she told me she had made it herself: from coffee, a little brandy, and her own breast milk. She offered me a taste. In that environment, I didn’t hesitate to accept. It was intimate, daring and spiritual, all at once. And it sort of broke me open.**

LH: When people talk about being spiritual, it’s that kind of

experience they're talking about. We don't have the vocabulary [to describe it], because religion is still regarded as having a kind of copyright on the spiritual.

“Out of nothing, came everything.” That's our whole history, in a nutshell. [It even applies to] being introverted. You have people who—like me—love to read, and to talk about books. But who do you talk to? So you come out to Black Rock City, and create a Bookmobile: “Okay, I'll start a library.” And pretty soon, everybody who has the same notion that the book is something attractive will show up.

And there you go. You've invented a world: a world that you're perfectly at ease in. And as you discover the diversity of those people, you begin to think, “Well, I don't necessarily need this as the only context in which I can interact. Maybe I've just been telling myself a story.” The real story is not that they're standoffish—you're the one standing off from them.

**JG: Every year there's an inviting and inspiring edifice called The Temple: a spectacular, open-air structure sometimes built from lattices of reclaimed, die-stamped plywood. Who builds these Temples, and how do they figure into the community?**

LH: The first Temple, and the early Temples, were built by David Best. He originated the concept. In 2012 it was done by someone else, and it's been built by other parties in other years.

People submit plans for the Temple every year. Anyone can propose a project, and we reserve money for that in our budget. We jury the proposals, with particular care to see that whatever is created understands the function of the Temple. It should be read and responded to as a sacred space, without designating what sacred is—apart from the actions people will undertake, and the feelings that they will have, within it. But in practice, the Temple at Burning Man does have certain things in common with any temple, as you might classically conceive it. There were a couple that departed from that formula, and they didn't work as well.

**JG: The Temple always seems to cultivate the spiritual aspect of remembrance. Burners visit to share their memories of love and loss.**

LH: Yes. David Best put that stamp on it. And people say, “Well, why does it have to be remembrance, and why does it have to be about death, death, death?” Well, that's what that temple is. Memory has always been a very, very strong aspect. But that doesn't mean that someone couldn't propose another temple, for another purpose.

And people have come to rely on it. We give a grant, but even more comes from the community as a whole. Online fundraising campaigns are integral in doing it. Each year, the team responsible raises an enormous amount of money. People are so invested in the Temple—and so invested in its particular purpose—that more money is raised for that than for any other art project at Burning Man.

**JG: People tend to think about city architecture in an anthropomorphic way. In Mexico, for example, the zocalo is like the pulsing heart of the community. If you were to give metaphorical functions to the Temple and The Man, what organs would you assign them?**

LH: In 2000, we actually did a theme called The Body. I had a lot of fun with it. You entered the body through the anus. The Man was the solar plexus, and it went all the way out to the top of his head, to the Temple of the Mind. [Note - This was the first Burning Man Temple, built by David Best and Jack Haye].

There are three big social nodes in Black Rock City. One is Center Camp; one is The Man; one is The Temple. Those are places where some version of the totality of the community convenes, discovers and confronts itself. All three are designed to have a powerful centrality.

Center Camp is a place for conviviality. The Man is the one place where more people gather than any other. When The Man burns, the entire community is assembled for the first time. It witnesses itself, and witnesses something that seems larger than the center - the transcendent center. That's what it's for. But while The Man's in a major key, The Temple is in a minor key. It's explicitly spiritual—although I believe all three have spiritual functions. The Temple has to do with intense emotion; emotion which is normally experienced in private, or in a small circle. With a particular grief that often times isolates people, and can cause them trauma.

That was David Best's vision, really. The Temple's power is

that around that issue, perhaps the most agonizing that we face in life. At Burning Man, everyone together can share that emotion. That is why, when people visit The Temple, the decibel level goes way down. No one says "Shush, it's sacred!" It just goes down. And when the Temple burns, on Sunday night, it is surrounded by an enormous assembly that is absolutely quiet. That is often the most moving thing that people report about their experience at Burning Man, and the thing that stuns people more than anything else. I think that has to do with reaching down into pain, isolating pain, and bringing it out, and sharing that together.

**JG: There have been many imaginative themes for Burning Man – themes that inform and inspire the thousands of artists who participate in the festival. Themes have included “The Body,” “The Floating World,” “Metropolis” and “Fertility.” Where do you get the inspiration for these themes?**

LH: I've been thinking about that recently, since there is going to be a time where I have less to do with the event. I've been thinking about how to convey that task to the people who might undertake it in the future. What do they need to consider when choosing a theme?

I've got my own idiosyncratic creative processes. But I'm personally never happy unless I feel that the theme mirrors (a) what's around me in the experiential penumbra of my intimate experience, and (b) what's happening in our organization. A third ring would be what's happening in the greater community of Burning Man; and the ring after that would be what's happening in the great world. What I try to accomplish each year is to thread the theme through all of those; to connect

them like pearls on a string. That's what makes for a resounding metaphor. That's what can mean the most. If the theme expands: not just within me, but all the way out, to the great rotundity of the world.

**JG: Is it premature for you to talk about the theme for 2014?**

LH: The theme is Caravansary. We haven't settled on how to spell it! For me, in my personal creative process, I can't really work on it until I have a satisfactory title and a very real concrete vision of how the Man is situated, and how that Center is created. Because it's the chief way you express the theme. So we're going to use the Silk Road, and that system of caravansaries and souks, which were the product of a highly civilized effort to create these stations along that road. Along with the notion that any one of them was part of a great conduit, not only of trade—which flourished along the Silk Road—but also a vibrant flow of ideas and culture. Because that's what Black Rock City has become. It's a place where people come, assembling from all over the world, in the desert. It's an irresistible metaphor.

**JG: You've been staging Burning Man, in one form or another, for 26 years. Does the festival still have the capacity to surprise and delight you, or is it more or less a job at this point?**

LH: To a certain extent, of course, it's work; something that inevitably gets routinized. But that's not the same thing as going stale. No, it still has great power to move me. It's changed over

the years, in the last years; it probably registers my time of life. At 65, I'm less impressed by the grandeur of things, the scale, and more moved and interested in my intimate interactions with people. We often say that, as a general rule, "People come to Burning Man for the art, but stay for the community." I think that rings true.

Here's what's changed for me the most. In the earlier years, we were struggling just to hold this thing together, just to create some kind of order, to pull this flabbergasting thing off again and again. First Camp, where the organizers lived, was like the bottom of the Mariana Trench—there was so much pressure per square inch. I would go out and talk about community and villages, but it was not that way at home—not where we lived. It wasn't really that nice a place.

Then, over the years, buildings formed all over Black Rock City. Finally, as maybe the last significant village, First Camp started growing out. By this time we could take a breath, and First Camp grew into a village. It's now it's a wonderful little place. It's not particularly posh; some of these places have pools. But it's a blend of family and friends. It's a cosmopolitan place, and you meet delightful, brilliant, wonderful, interesting people in that mix. And there are children; there's four generations there.

That's the thing that's changed for me. I've never felt so connected to the people around me, ever, as I did this last year. It was humbling.

**JG: When people say they are “transformed” by their experience at Burning Man – what do you suppose it is that gets transformed?**

LH: It has a lot to do with doing, and being. The last of the Ten Principles is Immediacy. It speaks of removing barriers between yourself, your participation, and your innermost sense of being. Of taking out the middle of any relationship to people around you. First, the ability to identify with others; then the ability to identify with an entire community, or city; then the ability to identify, in some cosmic way, with the universe.

In speeches I've given, I've used this trope. I've said that there are three “feeling states” that, when conjoined, can lead to spiritual transformation. The first is called “I Am.” The next is “We Are.” The third is, “It Is.”

You can define that “It” however you want. “ I mentioned being a bit of an animist; for me, “It” is all of creation. Not necessarily a Creator; just creation. There's something about that space [in the desert] that, when it was emptier, was more compelling. But it's still there, and available. It can induce a kind of mystical state of mind. Take out the people factor, and just look at the space. When we were out there, in the beginning, the most compelling thing wasn't our society; it was this cosmic surround. I noticed at the time that if you just walked out into that nothingness, you'd experience the oddest thing. You'd feel two intense experiences that were sort of polar.

First—it was very humbling—you'd feel like you were the

merest speck in the universe, and infinitesimal when compared to everything around you. It was almost like a drug experience. Then you'd trip over, into feeling as if your face was pressed up to the seam defined by the meeting of the sky and the earth; as if you were a fetus in the womb. Then you'd switch back to the other feeling. And they'd start to happen together, until they became one feeling—and that's a mystical experience.

That is the thing the prophets have spoken of, and the desert Aramites preached about.

That's the environment. But equally powerful is the social interaction, and the way people's' emotional armor falls away. They experience immediate contact with people. We lead morally blinkered lives, but in places like the desert people get vivid feelings of mirroring and merging with what's around them—until we start to attribute an equally intense reality to other people, a reality usually reserved for ourselves alone. Suddenly, you are them—and that has the power to pry open the heart and illuminate the mind.

Anything that does that is spiritual. That's what spirituality is. Our soul is strung along our spine. It goes from our solar plexus, to our heart, to our head in its most essential form. It goes up and then flows down, up and down. If you're leading a spiritual life, you're willing to take that ride. You don't stop it and say, “I'll only live in my head, I'll only live in my heart, I'll only live in my gut.” And if you live like that, as far as I know, that is a spiritual life.

The gift that Burning Man can give to people is a taste of that

life. Many say that, on the playa, they feel more real altogether, in themselves and in the world, then they have ever felt before. That explains why this thing has spread so contagiously, and caused people to take it back with them, and apply it to ordinary life: Because it has engineered a change in who they really are.

Listen, if this was just a fad, it would have been over after three or four years. I think it has a power, in many ways, that's tantamount to many religious experiences. We say that we're not a cult, we're not trying to brainwash you. Or perhaps we're a self-service cult. You're responsible for washing your own brain. It has the kind of religious intensity that people mistake for the cultic. But this is all about people's own sense of their agency. It's not about being hypnotized by some kind of dogma, or some sort of propaganda.

**JG: Burning Man does feel like a genuine community, rather than a cult. And you've remarked that "people are not just following some guru or something." As the originator of this globe-spanning event, how do you avoid the "guru" role?**

LH: I've kept myself out of that pretty successfully. I've made a fair amount of public appearances, and I'm the front man, or the "bait." I don't want to challenge anyone—but if you try to discover a lot about my personal life, you won't find anything. I don't have a cell phone. I don't have a Facebook page. I don't have any kind of social media that even pretends to represent me. I don't have any of that. I'm surrounded by people that care about me, who I work with, who I depend on, and that's how I find things out. The human filter. They're all on the Internet. They know what's being said. I'll go on the Internet and spy out the world, but nobody's spying on me.

My personal life is perfectly normal. It's more normal than the normal standard today. I have my friends; it's no bigger than most people's array of real friends. It might be smaller than some, but that's because I don't have a lot of friendships that I maintain because of social obligation. Nobody really knows much about me.

For years, I wore a cowboy hat: an Open Road Stetson. Lyndon Johnson wore one, Harry Truman wore one. It was very Midwestern, the "go-to-town" hat. What real cowboys wore as a dress-up hat.

It was my father's hat. I kept it in a hatbox. One day, I took it down before the event started. Tristan was interested, and I put it on. He would have it that he ordered me to do it. I believe he just suggested that I do it.

And then, a year or two ago, I quit wearing it. I realize now it was sort of a plan. You can pull the rabbit out of the hat—but the rabbit can disappear into the hat. I took off the hat, and now I'm not there. It's great.

**JG: Where did that happen?**

LH: I was in Germany with Marian [Goodell]. We had adjoining suites at a hotel. I went in, tossed the hat on the bed and said, "I'm going to quit wearing this. I don't think I have anything

left to prove to my father.”

There’s a story behind this. For years, we [Burning Man’s organizers] have hidden behind the curtain. We’ve taken that almost too far, because now people think the festival is self-generating. What are we there for? To order toilets? No; we’re social engineers.

So I gave a speech recently to the Regionals, in order to tell them that we’re stepping back, and to let them know that we want them, as social organizers, to become like us.

When I came out to speak I said, “I’m wearing my hat today.” Everyone laughed, because they think I always wear it. And I said, “No, I don’t wear it; I quit wearing it a while back.”

Then I told them that, for years, people would come up and ask if they could try my hat on. So I’d give it to them, and let them try it on. I’d say to them, “You look great in that hat.” And I meant it. They always did look good to me. Then I told them that, one day, I was standing in my bathroom, glumly inspecting my hat hair. It’s a syndrome: you wear your hat to cover the hat hair, but it causes the hat hair. And I said to myself, “Everybody looks good in this hat—except me!”

When I got to the end of the speech I said, “We want you to be like us.” Then I took off the hat, and threw it into the audience. The first person who got it, realized that it was a gift— it was just passing through him. So he tossed it around.

It went back and forth for ten minutes.

In fact, they’d forgotten about me. I’d made a pretty good speech, and really connected with them, but I am shy. So as soon as I’m done with a speech, I’ll go back to being a private person.

I just got off the stage. No one even looked at me. And God knows who has the hat now.

I bought another hat this year, but I haven’t worn it. I think I simply just keep it on the shelf, for my father’s sake.

**JG: You have observed that “Instead of doing art about the state of society, we do art that creates a society around it.” Have you found a way to define the society that evolves around the art in Black Rock City?**

LH: Perhaps I could do that by describing how it actually works. We distribute art grants—but in order to make the money go farther, and to serve a larger community of artists, we never give artists all the money they need. That causes art groups to go to their own communities for funding and benefits—and they invest their own interest in it. It expands the number of volunteers available to them which, in turn, expands their society as they craft the work.

Of course, we put a high premium on interactivity. But it’s not a commandment. There’s always a place for the pure object of beauty—and all good art, I think, should read that way. But we’re looking for art that generates society, because that’s

been lost in our world in many ways, and its exhibition in the desert not only draws people in (because everything out there is a public landmark), but also invites people to engage in an action—often, an action that’s dependent on the actions of others. That itself, then, becomes a form of society. People share a sense of autonomy and mastery and purpose that unites them with other people. That is indeed an ambitious social agenda. That’s why I say it’s art that actually generates society.

**JG: What’s your definition of “society?”**

LH: I guess it mainly relates to social behavior that’s consciously organized, often framed by institutions or venues. Whereas culture is a different thing; that’s a phenomenon that happens within social constructs that are less conscious, and often very spontaneous — yet self-organized as well. Society organizes a greater self that people can inhabit, so they can be themselves within it, and discover others.

**JG: In his “Cyborgology” blog, the thoughtful writer PJ Rey says, “By elevating gifting as a virtue, Burning Man distinguishes itself from the default world which is dominated by transactional relationships between people who have no personal connection to one another.” How do you make the distinction between a barter system and what is often called the “gift economy” of Burning Man?**

LH: Well, barter is transactional. It’s a little more cumbersome in that it’s based on material goods rather than money, which makes it possible for transactions to be more wide-ranging

and more fluid. And there’s nothing wrong with markets or necessarily wrong with economics. I don’t think capitalism is wholly evil, either. But the premise behind Gifting, as we practice it, is based on the perception that the value of a gift is unconditional— whereas the value of a transaction is conditional.

And anyone knows that a gift should be unconditional—that if there’s a condition put on it, it’s not really given. It’s not giving of yourself, if the object is to control you or oppress you.

I think you can see that the essence of a gift is love. As a spiritual proposition, say, the love between a parent and child - that should be unconditional. When it is, it works wonderfully. That doesn’t mean you have to like them or improve them, but it means that you’ll always love them. That’s what every child needs to know, and that’s what we seek in our intimate relationships. If it’s at all conditional, it is because the world itself is conditional.

But the soul of the proposition is that a gift is in some way sacred, and sacred things have always been held to be unconditional. Priestcraft is based on conjuring up that perception. Always has been. Everyone understands that in, say, just in terms of religion, the priests have a sacred place, that absolute respect must be shown because you’re in the presence of an unconditional reality. I think that what people yearn for, beyond or beneath our desires and ambitions—what every being yearns for—is to be unconditionally real.

**JG: A lot of the gifts I’ve received at Burning Man were indeed given unconditionally, and with great affection –**

**everything from grilled cheese sandwiches to massages to enameled medallions.**

LH: The evolution of that perception, of our gift society, is interesting. In the beginning, many people—perhaps even the majority—had a little trouble grasping it. They tried to approximate trade. They said, “Oh, it’s a barter economy.” And we said, “No, it’s a gift economy.”

The phrase “gift economy” is self-contradictory in a way. But it does relate to the passage of value, so I guess you can call it an economy. The next phase was, people would come with trinkets. Not everyone is talented in craft, so people would buy dime-store trinkets—if there are dime-stores anymore. They’d go to Chinatown in San Francisco and pick up things. If they had wonderful taste, those gifts might be amusing ... or not.

But then there was discussion about even that—in our community, on our lists, and so forth. Because, in practice, it had begun to entrench upon another of the Ten Principles: Leaving No Trace. All this stuff generated MOOP (“Matter Out of Place”), as it was getting sprinkled everywhere. Then it became socially obnoxious, not just personally awkward.

So we started a discourse, and suggested that the essence of a gift is that, first of all, it be authentically from you; something that comes from your heart, your soul in some sense. And second, that it be given in contemplation of the other’s being, the other person’s unconditional value. Everybody knows those are the great gifts, the ones you never forget.

But how do you do that? The idea developed that it didn’t have to be a thing. Maybe you’re not good at craft. Maybe your taste isn’t that great. Yet, surely, everyone possesses gifts within themselves. It’s my faith, our faith, that they do. There are things that you do well that—in doing—embody who you are. It could even be an action. Well, then! That makes gift giving available to everybody! You could be a Lamplighter (One who helps illuminate the lights suspended above the playa at dusk – jg), that’s a gift to the community. It could be an act of kindness. Then there was a sort of drift, and people began to give gifts that really considered the other person. They came up with very practical things—like lip balm, or socks. Clean socks! Always popular there! Even though you don’t know the recipient, you can be pretty sure that—as a kin in sharing these difficult desert conditions—they’d appreciate it.

Other people realized that they could create things that were meaningful and unique to them. And everyone, at some level, can possibly realize the gift of decency: decent concern for others, in whatever way that might be. That just requires the courage to reach out to a stranger, as you might reach out to someone who was personally closer to you.

So that was the evolution of it. In its practice, this philosophy deepened. People are capable of philosophically pondering things, if you make those things practical and tie them to action.

**JG: Despite the gifting and sharing that occurs on the playa, Burning Man has spurred a huge market in everything**

**from goggles to glow sticks, from freeze-dried meals to pee funnels. What are your thoughts about the anti-capitalist paradox the surrounds the festival?**

LH: I think that, like a lot of paradoxes, it exists for want of making distinctions. First of all, we've never been opposed to commerce. That would be to oppose civilization itself. Hunter-Gatherers actually trade with other Hunter-Gatherer clans. A man unaided is the most pathetically abject animal.

We've never been against commerce. We have been opposed to commodification, and that's another concept. It's been our position that in a consumer society, many things become mere articles of commerce—reduced to commodities, or subject to transactions—that shouldn't be. There are examples everywhere. I've lived long enough to see this create a degradation in American social life. It used to be that the local baseball stadium was named after a sports hero, or someone that everyone loved in the locality. That was about identity. Now they're named after corporations. That sort of drains the soul out everything right there.

And it doesn't end with that. The entire advertising apparatus that inundates us with manipulative messages, well-crafted and cunning, is essentially the latter phase of capitalism. All the development has been on the marketing end. We no longer associate the industrial revolution with industrial manufacture. Advertising becomes more and more sophisticated. In fact, it's a kind of perverse caricature of what poets or artists used to do. Artists simulate states of being, in order to make your own being and the beings of others more available to you. That's

why one reads novels. Advertising simulates states of being, but not for the purpose of making anybody more present to anyone. It's merely for the process of selling something. What it does is generate simulated states of being that associate a product with a spiritual need.

That becomes creepy fast. Not only is it not effective; identifying with the brand doesn't give you one iota of real identity.

**JG: But Burning Man itself has become a kind of brand, with all kinds of apparatus marketed for its value specifically at the festival.**

LH: Actually, we're very pernicious in policing the world for that. Marketing "Burning Man" gear will get you, first, a very candid letter from an attorney; and if you persist, we've always been ready to take action. We have access to a lot of attorneys who often give us their legal skills as a gift. We're criticized for this, I know, but we're actually conscientious about that.

**JG: They can call it "playa gear"....**

LH: Yes. They can do that. We live in a commercial society. If people call something "Playa Gear," and people know that has to do with Burning Man, I still think—that by taking our name out of it—we've inhibited the tendency to equate the Burning Man experience with a Burning Man product. If somebody is looking for goggles, and they want cool goggles such as they've

seen people wearing at Burning Man—and they go on the internet, and they find those things, and they tell their friends “This would be perfect for Burning Man” ... Well, it would be churlish and bootless to interfere with them. It would yield no effect. So we don’t do that. That would be taking the principle to a Calvinist extreme.

I’m not against commerce and markets. But I think Burning Man is very much needed in our world as a place for rehearsing things that have a deeper spiritual value, and that nourish the foundation of identity: the feeling that you’re at home in the world, and at home with yourself.

Think of what it would be like to live in a society where in order to get those things you need—whether they’re existential necessities or things to express yourself—you had to form a relationship with someone. The beauty of the Capitalist system, or any market system, is that you don’t have to form a relationship, and that allows you to serve your individuality. This is a good thing. There’s no point in romanticizing what it would be like if we just all consumed things that were made within 10 miles of us. I know what it would be like; it would be like medieval Europe.

I live in this apartment building, and I know many of the people who live here. We have very cordial relationships. In fact, we have friendships. But none of us, by an instinct, invite the other into their apartment. We don’t want to come home to a family of 50 people in their separate apartments and put up with that. We want to lead individual lives, with people whom we’re at liberty to select.

On the other hand, if you live in a world that’s wholly defined that way, you lose the things you gain through common association—through identifying with others in a way that allows you to drop your ego and passionately merge with them, to some degree.

**JG: What you seem to be saying is that Burning Man is an antidote to normal society; it’s the flip side. You can live with you hand in one and your heart in the other, as Emerson said.**

LH: It can be amphibious and it can be correct. A lot of consumption is compensatory, in the sense that we resort to consuming. “If you’re disappointed in love, go home and eat a quart of ice cream.” We do that all the time. We’re disappointed in fulfilling very basic core spiritual needs, and we medicate ourselves by consuming. If we lived in a world where there was a market—but also a widespread culture of authentic gifting—I think consumer demand would be moderated. People wouldn’t be driven to consume as much.

People point to us and they say, “See, it’s a consumer extravaganza!” But consume towards what end, is the question. If it’s toward an end that has an essential spiritual value, that can be good. I think that overall people would get such satisfaction from immediate contact with others, they would so re-order their priorities in their practical conduct of life, that they would consume less.

**JG: While it’s active, Black Rock City is the 3rd largest**

**metropolitan area in Nevada. What do you get from having many thousands more people at the festival that you didn't get before, when the event was much smaller?**

LH: A number of things. There was a time, in the very beginning, when Black Rock City was sort of a very distant suburb of San Francisco. Now it's an international city. That means that it's a cosmopolitan place. I see things that have been lost with the ghost, but in my experience it's more than balanced by the things that have been gained.

It started with a little bohemian/underground culture in which people were riffing off one another. I don't want to romanticize the past, but there was a charm in it. Now you have people who are more conformist in some ways. If it's the fashion, you wear fluffy leggings. Back then, you did astonishingly eccentric things and you were cool. But what we've gained .... My God, in terms of creative power, we've attracted brilliant people from all over the world. It's like a global pilgrimage center.

Now, if you don't like that, it probably means that you don't like cities. I like cities. Within the spectrum of Burning Man culture, if you don't like the big city, then hold a small event. And there are smaller Regional events, and there are groups within the greater society of Burning Man that are just the size of a theme camp.

But if you like Paris and London, if you fancy going to Istanbul, you might find Black Rock City rewarding. And that leads to the third thing I think of. I've always wanted to grow and

work— demonstrably work—and produce great social good so that it can be a persuasive model for other experiments and other events and other diverse activities in the world. If you can say, "Here we have organized a model of civilization at a scale that can pass for one of the larger units of civilization," that means, to me, that maybe the world could be like what we are.

But we're very, very practical. We've always been practical. People forget that. In our venue in the desert, we're limited by political circumstance and logistical constraints, given the fact that we're at the end of a two-lane highway. It would probably functionally top out at about 100,000. Above that, I don't think it would work.

Of course, the solution to that is twofold. First of all it's already going, in many places all over the world. And secondly, the Burning Man event organization has been actively trying to find at least one other venue where activity could happen—an event that is like, but is a little different from, what happens in Black Rock City. That's an ongoing project.

**JG: You're not a high-tech person; you say don't have a Facebook account, or even a cell phone. Is there some way to explain how the tech world and Burning Man conjoined? It seems such a natural synergy at this point.**

LH: I confess, I was deeply puzzled by this. In 1997, Marian Goodell joined with the five other LLC partners. She came from the tech field, and was familiar with websites. She took

over the website, and many other responsibilities. That's when we all became more aware of it.

It was hard to fathom, at first, but they were coming before we even knew they were coming. They were a little bit more discreet in their activities than some of the more extroverted types. I have a few ideas about it. First of all, going back, the California countercultural and tech scenes overlapped from the very beginning. There was a whole crowd back in the 1960s—like Stewart Brand, and Steve Jobs, who were very much aware of technology. A lot of the early innovators. So it's not surprising that they were aware of us, and that they were aware of us somewhat slightly before we were aware of them. And look at the nature of what they're doing: They're also working on a kind of frontier. They're inventing markets that didn't exist, and inventing technology, the potential of which nobody fathomed.

And the new workplace culture. There's an academic down in Stanford, Fred Turner, who wrote about this at length, comparing what we do to project-based learning. We've always been about project-based learning.

There's another recent theory that particularly applies to Silicon Valley and to us. That would be by Daniel Pink, who talks about the need for workplace Autonomy, Mastery, and Purpose. That's characteristic of Silicon Valley, especially when one is working within an expanding frontier that just keeps getting bigger. And look at Google. Of course, everyone knows of the famous connection between the Google founders and us and the employees. Sergey and Larry were coming to Black

Rock City early. The very first Google “doodle,” in August 1998, was a Burning Man—to signify they were going. It was an inside joke at the time, though it's become well known.

In 2012 one of the Google founders gave an interview saying, “We'd like to have a country, or an island, where we could try new technology without having to thread through politics and bureaucracy—something like Burning Man.” So you can see their love of innovation, and their love of the freedom to create, and their love of how that's socially generative. In fact, they base their whole economic model on the fact that you give things away—and the social activity around that creates the market. You can see how that economic logic that parallels their experience.

But the biggest boost we ever got was in 1996, when *Wired* did a cover story. That had a huge impact. People from Silicon Valley began flooding in, and have made manifold contributions.

**JG: There's been much negative talk about the recent spate of pay-and-play, “turn key” camps, where you pay a lot of money, and everything's taken care of for you. Do you find this practice to be at odds with the principle of “Radical Self-Reliance?”**

LH: If you live in a tent, you can say the people who camp in cars aren't engaged in truly radical self reliance. And the people in their cars can say the people in the RVs are less pure. The people in the RVs can say that about the people in the buses, and the people in the buses can despise the people in the bigger

buses that come out.

What we have at Black Rock City, in a sense, is a replica of the world—in that it goes all the way up from the mansion to a tenement room. And, yet, of course, if you talked to somebody, and you said “Well, if you grandmother came out, would you put her in a pup tent?” “No!” Of course they wouldn’t. “Well, do you think older people should hitchhike in and backpack...?” “Well, no...”

Radical Self-Reliance doesn’t mean you do everything unaided, with no social contact or help. That makes the principle into a cartoon. It means you use your resources, whatever they might be, to meet not only your existential needs, but your expressive needs. That’s the way the normal world operates, and always has. And unless you’re looking for a Marxist utopia, it always will. It has to do with how you use the resources available to you. It also has to do with Radical Self-Expression and Gifting, which suggest that the purpose to which you put those resources should have a spiritually authentic connection to who you are, and your relationship to society.

I live in a “turn-key camp.” I started out in a Montgomery Ward tent, and camped that way for years. But I wanted more comfort, and learned to use my resources more intelligently. I took my salary—I didn’t charge it to the company!—and bought an Airstream trailer. It’s tight as a can of tuna. It insulates me from sound, heat and dust.

These are existential calculations. Indeed, I’ve been fortunate

enough to make a better living—as everyone hopes to. That’s part of the American Dream. Now I live in camp that’s set up before I come. Is that a “pay and play” camp? If anyone thinks I’m coming out there to play, or engage in debauchery, they’re out of their minds! We work out there. In fact, until recent years, First Camp—where I live in Black Rock City—was like some kind of dismal command compound. You can’t imagine how grotesque it was, talking about “community” while we lived these incredibly stressful lives out there.

I’ve got nothing against comfort—and especially nothing against amenity, which is a very civilized concept. That means not only comfort, but grace. And social grace. It applies aesthetic values, too.

**JG: I personally believe that anonymous “turn key” camps have the potential to overturn the spirit of the event, by thwarting inclusivity and promoting a sort of class system.**

LH: The most obnoxious manifestation of what we think of as “pay and play” would be people being followed around by butlers carrying camp stools. People who have help that they house in pup tents, and that they treat as being invisible. The number of people actually doing that is miniscule. Because the vast majority of people don’t have a bad intention. But if you lead a certain lifestyle, you can be insulated from the world around you, and insulated in the way you live.

And something can be done about that. What’s needed, really, is just a little education.

I believe in capturing people's hearts and minds. I also believe in reaching down and finding their balls to squeeze, just to get their attention. Then we'll say, "Well, first of all, you've got to be responsible for how your vendors behave. Secondly, Welcome to Black Rock City. And by the way, can we tell you something about how to build a camp? You don't create a wall of RVs, and wall people out. You don't create a gated community. That's unattractive. It's not civic-minded."

We can talk to them about a lot of things. And the majority of them will discover that, once they become more aware of the world around them, and its values, it will enrich their experience. They'll escape the cocoon that makes them look like ugly Americans, like tourists abroad in Black Rock City. I guarantee, 95 to 99% of them will say "Thank you. You changed my life."

**JG: I understand that Burning Man generated about \$25 million in ticket sales in 2013. Where does the money go?**

LH: The money goes, first and foremost, into producing the event. Those expenditures are all tabulated on our website. We make that public every year.

It also goes to our new nonprofit. Black Rock City LLC will soon become a subsidiary of the nonprofit The Burning Man Project—a greater organization of which The Black Rock Arts Foundation, which we also founded, will become a subsidiary. For four years we've been working on this. It's laborious, but fascinating.

So we're shuffling resources—not only money, but staff—over in that direction at a good clip. That money doesn't go to the event at all; that goes to the expansion of our culture. This is all in preparation to merge the two organizations. And a very large amount of money goes to the federal government!

We don't publish our income figures. There are various reasons for that. But I will say this: All of that is going to be public, including the income. And what people are going to see is what a lot of people have known all the while: What we take in, goes out. We're not amassing the millions of Scrooge McDuck in his vaults.

**JG: How many employees are in the organization?**

If you count both organizations now—the merged nonprofit and the event organization—it's getting up towards seventy. *[Note - it is just over 100 as of July 2018.]*

**JG: Many people do have the sense that someone is making a huge amount of money from Burning Man. Do you have any kind of a profit-sharing, or salary structure?**

LH: Not formally, but intuitively it has been that way. Four or five years ago, we became more sophisticated at taking care of everyone. Our Human Resources person did a survey, as

near as you could compare, to other comparable organizations. We're bringing ourselves up to those standards. We compared ourselves to organizations in the Bay Area—because this is, outside of Manhattan, the most expensive place to live. So we brought all our salaries up.

And this is actually true: The directors didn't think about ourselves until we'd done that. It wasn't a policy not to think about ourselves, it was a habit. And when we looked at our own salaries? We were like that guy who buys an apartment building, then lives in a trailer and does the maintenance! Our salaries were disproportionately low.

So having done all that, we raised our own salaries. The difference between the lowest paid person and the highest paid person, at the scale we're at, is really fair. Unlike even the Ben & Jerry's model, I don't make "five times" as much as anybody. In fact when we finished raising the employees' salaries, in a couple instances, we had [some members] of that group making more than a couple of the founders!

So as for me making a whole bunch of money, it's not true. Yes, it's a business, and it requires discipline. But at the same time it's overlaid around family values. It's a community.

**JG: Some critics have seen a "Tom Sawyer" aspect to the operation – that it's a for-profit organization using the free labor of volunteers.**

LH: I've heard that. Yes, that would be the cynical view. Of

course, an awful lot of people want to volunteer—and I think a very great majority of them feel that it's spiritually and socially rewarding. It makes them feel more purposeful. Frankly, I wouldn't want to come to Burning Man if I didn't have work to do there. Torpidly lying on the beach is my idea of hell.

**JG: How do you compare Burning Man to other social movements?**

LH: If you want to think of us as counterculture, we're not quite that; we're different. The Rainbow Gathering is an obvious comparison, as an event. You can certainly compare Burning Man's development to growth of a lot of avant-garde or Bohemian movements. Those were, classically and historically, the centers for hatching new culture in the modern world.

Nothing's entirely unique. There's only thing about us that I think is unique is that we're the first "scene," the first artistic experimental and innovative social scene, that turned itself into a city. You could claim that for the Paris Commune, but that would be sentimental.

**JG: I understand there were more than 100 local, state and federal law enforcement officers on the playa in 2013. Has this changed—to borrow a word from the Ten Principles—the immediacy of the event?**

LH: Not particularly. We probably are one of the most policed events in public America, and that's because we—in the most fundamental way—have a reputation for creating radical,

unpredictable liberty and freedom for people. Any established power is going to be suspicious of that. That's the way the world works. So we get all this attention.

But law-enforcement will always be around. Even if we didn't have to have law enforcement, we want law enforcement. We have the Black Rock Rangers, but they do non-confrontational mediation. It would be wonderful if the world-at-large had that!

Everybody wants a cop when they want them—but the rest of the time they're kind of fearful of the cops and they don't want to see them at all. We don't have a lot of violence—there are fights and so forth, but there haven't been any incidents I'm aware of where a lethal weapon was involved. It's a remarkably pacific community.

I've dealt with a lot of policeman to know that it's a very difficult job. I'm also experienced enough in the world to know that when someone has that kind of power it can be abused. We've all seen instances of that. It's always an uneasy alliance—but hopefully it is an alliance.

But no, I don't think that has the power to squelch people. I mean, if your notion is you're your freedom should include having sex in the middle of the road, or taking drugs in public, then I suppose that squelches the party for you. But I've never thought those are essential experiences there. I don't know why anybody would have sex in the middle of the road. Different strokes for different folks, you know. That's not my kink, anyway.

**JG: Is Burning Man trying to buy its own tract of land, a place where police oversight won't be imposed on the Festival at all?**

LH: We've been trying to buy land for years. It's a project. Some of it is a little delicate, but I think a lot of people know about it by now. In Hualapai Valley, where our work ranch is, there's property adjoining a playa which is federally controlled. We see possibilities there. We wouldn't clone Burning Man; that would be uncreative. We'd do a different, scaled-down thing that would allow for more variety, and would satisfy different tastes and sensibilities. If we acquire private property in a playa, we'd be out of a federal jurisdiction.

We could do interesting things. We couldn't do the large event. But we could do smaller events. Some of them, over a longer period of time, could eventually draw the number of people who come to Burning Man for eight days.

**JG: Can you shed some light on the numbers of deaths at Burning Man every year, and why that's such a hard statistic to share?**

LH: I suppose we haven't been very forthcoming, but we're not concealing anything. How many? In all these years? I believe five. There was a death in 1990. It wasn't at the site, but someone who was coming to it. There was an employee that was killed in an automotive accident. There was a suicide.

There was a heart attack. There was a plane crash.

We scare people on the ticket – we say, “People have died here.” Well good lord, they die everywhere on earth, in every city. But it gets their attention, which is to say: “Be aware of your surroundings, and be responsible.”

I go back to what I keep claiming. It’s inherently safe in some ways. Burning Man is a world without pavement, and a world without cars driving at high speed. That eliminates two big things that cause death in a normal city. And it’s really kind to fools and drunks, because it’s soft. You can fall down on it—unless you fall from a height. But gravity works everywhere.

**JG: In 2013, Marco Cochrane’s *Truth is Beauty* was a sculpture worth traveling halfway around the world to see. Can you recall some of your own personal favorite artworks?**

LH: It’s like choosing your favorite niece, child, or lover! I love the work of Temple architect David Best; he’s one of my closest friends. I know about the big things. We give honorariums and grants, and I go out and visit as many artists as I can. I’m on the art committee, and help jury it. But that’s only a fragment of what gets done. So every year I look around for the little things I couldn’t possibly have known about—and then I dote on them, and tell everybody, because they’re always a great surprise to me.

And I’m attracted to things that are funny. In 2013, I loved the “Church Trap.” A perfectly realized, multi-valenced metaphor.

It was just sooo good. There are a whole string of funny, satirical things like that that I really like a lot. And, of course, I love monumentality; I tend to identify it with high civilization.

There are so many artists, and if you start naming them, you leave somebody out. We’re now a showcase for art, and people come out and scout artists. Burning Man has created a whole new market for art. There are a lots of art groups that make a living—and I’m big on artists making money—and since they show in our context, this furthers our values, too.

And here’s another thing. Often people become famous, but ordinarily if they come from humble beginnings they often want to gloss that over. Ours don’t. Even when they succeed, and they’re getting good commissions, they keep coming back. Our poster child for that, of course, is Leo Villareal. He’s the artist who did the lights on the San Francisco-Bay Bridge. He started at Burning Man, out of the New York camp. They wanted a light to find their way home, so they put up a pole and he put LED lights on them. This is when LED lights were just coming out. Now he’s doing huge public pieces around the world, and bless his heart. He’s always speaking about us, and valuing our connection.

David Best is now working internationally; I’m sure he wouldn’t mind me saying he was an established, collected artist. But the attention commanded by the Temple boosted his career enormously. The people who have really benefited are the people who were disciplined, and who were able to transform their Radical Self-Reliance into a social work force.

**JG: Do you hope to evolve Burning Man into a permanent community?**

LH: The permanent communities that interest us have nothing to do with the event. We're interested in the reach of our culture, out into the world where people actually live and work. The Burning Man Project's mission is wrapped around the Ten Principles. And they're just a description of the ethos, the cultural dynamic that has grown organically out of our immediate experience. We have interesting ideas about how to keep that alive and renewed over time, and not ossifying into dogma. That's my baby, and I hover over it.

But our mission is to disseminate our culture, or anything that acts like our culture—and to connect that into a global network.

Because our ultimate goal is to raise global consciousness. We wanted to think long term; we said 100 years. We wanted to think on a larger scale; so we decided to make that place our home in the universe, Earth. You can't say we lack for ambition, or vision. We think the way to do that is by doing what we've always done.

At one time, people would have called me a lunatic for that. They would have said, "Oh, that's grotesquely grandiose." But now we see the fruit of our efforts. Plainly, Burning Man is known worldwide. And it's not that big, so it must be terribly meaningful in some way. Secondly, just look at its geographic spread. There are communities all over the world now. If we

can't do something further, with that resource—something analogous to how we developed the City—if we can't work that at a larger scale, then we've failed.

I don't think we will. I think we understand, as a result of our experience, the nature of this task even on a larger scale.

Of course, we'll make many surprising (if not dismaying) discoveries in the process— but that's the world of striving.

**JG: So Burning Man, with all of its utopian strengths and dystopian weaknesses, serves as a sort of laboratory for how a deliberately imagined culture might evolve.**

LH: We've learned a lot from Black Rock City. It's been a kind of husbandry. Sometimes our role is minimized, and people think that all we do is order the Porta Potties. That's nonsense, of course. Black Rock City is a complex and arduous undertaking that requires the work of many people.

What we have essentially done, you can't express in a homely way. We have taken vital forces of culture, and found ways to ferment them. We've created a vessel, or Petri dish, in which culture will assemble itself. I think this is a naturally occurring thing. We're adapted to create it; we're culture-bearing animals. Culture will appear and announce itself spontaneously, but only under certain conditions. Those used to be dictated by the limits of time, and the limits of space, in a world where

Man's power was much less than Nature's. Now it's just the reverse of that. We've got to find a new way to hatch culture; let's put it that way.

**JG: How will you continue to nourish this process, outside of Black Rock City?**

LH: We think that by using everything we've learned, we can assist the Regional communities, beginning at the event level. And already, they're doing it. The fastest-growing one is in South Africa. It's starting to double. We know that exponential curve. That's why I'm traveling so much, and why my partners travel a lot: to build relationships with these communities. Community organizing is very labor-intensive, but if you do it long enough it pays off in some remarkable and extraordinary ways—rather rapidly in the end.

We've said we didn't want to franchise Burning Man, we didn't want to make cookie cutter clones. We're not McDonald's. You have to organize with the community you have. It has to have deep grass roots. But we can help you in creating such events, and we can be consultants to the Regionals.

People say Burning Man is a big event. We aren't a big event. We're a fraction of the Iowa State Fair . Or the Nascar Races. Or the Kumbh Mela! True, we're bigger than your Mom and Pop festival, but not that much. Yet we're known around the world. If you paddle up the Sepik River in New Guinea, a tribesman with a cell phone will likely know about Burning Man.

If that's true, and if our culture can authentically reproduce itself... I imagine that old RKO Radio Picture animation, with the tower broadcasting the electricity. (Laughs) I date myself!

But imagine 50 of those, though, broadcasting on every continent. What people will then begin to see—and we hear countless stories about this already—is how people apply the Ten Principles to their personal lives, or to their neighborhoods. How they apply those values they have internalized. How they've "done Burning Man," as it were, in all kinds of ways that have nothing to do with the festival per se. We're in Eastern Europe, Africa, the Far East; it's on every continent. There was even a little Burning Man in Antarctica, so we can claim that continent. But that wasn't a very big event. It was very small. And very cold!

Milton Friedman said that change only happens in a crisis—real or imagined—and the actions undertaken all depend on the ideas that are just lying around. I don't claim to be a sage, but my guess is that things are sort of headed to a crisis point that could result in great trauma—or, perhaps, great change. People will have to face things, probably about midway through this century.

Now, I've never agreed with Milton Friedman, but he had a point. In fact, if you look at the arc of American politics in the last few decades, that's exactly what has happened. Groups got together and founded think tanks and grassroots organizations, and so forth. As are we, at the Burning Man Project, with our 100-year scale of planning.

What I hope to see—when that crisis comes, and I can't see

any way to avoid it—is that the values we promote at Burning Man are validated in a million ways, and carpet the ground like leaves. I want those ideas to be in the eyes of thousands, or even millions, of people. They'll reach for those ideas and say, "Hmm, why don't we try this? What we've got doesn't work very well. We all know that now."

And this isn't just Burning Man. We're looking for anyone who's like us. I see change happening not necessarily because of economic reforms or political reforms per se (although I'm for these things), but because we have to learn a new way of reinventing and generating culture. That's the wedge to go forward: You can change the culture and create a world with the values we value. I think the solutions in the economic world, the social world, the political realm, the environmental realm, will all come forward. Because there has always been genius everywhere. It's just that in the world we're living in, no one can get near the levers of power. So let's change that.

**JG: You're the co-founder of the festival. What has become of the other co-founders?**

LH: My partner initially was Jerry James. However he dropped out in 1990. I've always credited him as being the co-founder, because origins are important. And when you start out alone, whoever helps you, or works with you, is perforce an important person. But he left in 1990, after the Man got butchered - cut up in little pieces -- through a mischance, two or three weeks before we were going to take it to the desert. He hasn't been involved since then. I think Jerry is still a carpenter, and has his own firm now.

You know, you can say that the Amazon starts at the trickle of water farthest from the mouth of the Delta. That's one way to look at it. The other way to look at it is more rational: that there's all these tributary streams that, in their confluence, swell into that great tide of effort. Of course, in any collaborative environment, there are so many contributions that are made. Sometimes they're ambiguous, and that's good, because that's magic. As they say, success has many fathers and many mothers, and poor failure is a lonely orphan. Many, many people feel that they've had a seminal influence on Burning Man at some point, and rightly so. The only thing I claim myself is that I've been in a position of leadership from the very beginning.

And then there was another generation of leadership. That was with the Cacophony Society and there was a partnership in the form of Michael Mikel, John Law, and myself. That was dissolved, eventually, and succeeded by a succession of LLCs. Today we talk about the founders— and rightly and justly so— as the six people who are still the members of Black Rock LLC— because that was the year when we founded the recognizably modern Burning Man; Burning Man as we know it.

**JG: Can you tell me the names of those six people?**

LH: Michael Mikel, sometimes known as "Danger Ranger;" Harley Dubois; Crimson Rose; Will Roger; Marian Goodell, and myself.

**JG: If you could donate something to the Smithsonian Institution to represent Burning Man, what would it be?**

LH: My Stetson hat! Though I don't wear it anymore. But it wouldn't be the original, because that one blew away in the desert. But I wore iterations of it for years and years afterward.

**PART 2.**  
**MEANING, ART, BURNING DOGS,**  
**AND NONSENSE**

February, 2014

**Jeff Greenwald - Can you talk a bit more about the creation of the Man?**

Larry Harvey - It's really interesting. People really want to know what it represents, or represented. But it didn't represent anything—except itself. An artist would understand that explanation. “When you did this painting, what did you mean it to signify, and represent?” Unless they've been debauched by an art school, they'll probably say “Something just came to me, and I did it.”

It's embarrassingly bald. But that doesn't mean that it was meaningless; far from it. Indeed, I've spent the last 27 years slowly figuring out what building the Man meant for me, and trying to observe what it means to other people. I can't say that I can yet hazard a definitive answer.

**JG: When you're in front of the Man every year, watching it burn, do you have a personal experience of catharsis? What**

**gets released, or expressed, in you?**

LH - I'll tell you a story. Back in the early 1990s, I was a self-employed landscaper. And I would take down trees once in a while. Once, working with my ground crew, I took down a pretty big pine tree. A very big one. That involved cutting off all the limbs—but not completely. Now, the branch structure of pines is such so that doing this forms a sort of ladder of protruding branches. Then, we cut the main trunk down in segments— because it wasn't in a place where we could just fell the whole thing.

It was quite the adventure. I remember when we got to that point where the first, top part had been shaved off. It was a big tree, and this was high up. The cut formed a little circular platform that you could actually stand on.

By that time, I had been using my own arms and legs to negotiate the dismembered body of this tree—until it felt like I was the tree, merged with the tree. Now, I'm not a daredevil. I'm made uneasy by heights. But that passionate engagement with the tree had given me such confidence that I scrambled up to the little platform at the very top, holding the chainsaw. I put both my arms up in the air, and experienced something like exaltation. No; it wasn't like exaltation. It *was* exaltation.

That is the gesture of the Man when he raises his arms: Exultation. Everyone knows what that means.

When I was young, I lived in a rural neighborhood. I spent much of my time alone roving in nature, and I became a little animist. Just transfixed by the advent of nature. It seemed greater than me, but intimately like me. It was a mystical kind of feeling. A few times, staring up at the Man with his arms fully raised—that is exactly how I feel. That's my very personal answer.

**JG - What is being exulted?**

LH - That depends entirely on one's self. What was I exalting on that tree? In rough and somewhat abstract terms, I suppose it was my identification with it. It was a being with a trunk and arms—like myself, only immeasurably bigger, and into which I'd poured all of my energy and skill. That, precisely, is what it meant. It didn't represent some other idea; it was the action that invested it with meaning.

**JG - In building the Man, were you trying to evoke the spirit of the tree?**

LH - No. We were trying to make something that was representational. Aside from the fact that it obviously represented a human form. And clearly that was a happy invention, as the human form is probably the one figure that people can most readily identify with.

**JG - Was it at all an autobiographical effigy?**

LH - No. You see, it wasn't an effigy of anything. It was what it was. If you're asking what it means, that's just too reductive. We don't tell people what it necessarily means. There is no "elevator pitch." We say that you have to achieve that meaning for yourself, through your actions and immediate experiences (at the event). Now, that's not a refusal of meaning. That's an invitation to meaning - to make meaning. I can talk about the aesthetics, and the form of the thing, and the rituals around it. But I can't say "It means or represents this but not that, or some other thing," We've deliberately refrained from doing that. If you understand why that is so, you understand Burning Man.

**JG - When the Man burned the very first time, was it a happy event?**

LH - Of course it was! Jerry James and I had spent the afternoon building it with our boys, and that in itself was meaningful: to build something with your sons.

**JG - Your two sons were involved?**

LH - Yes—we took them to the shop with us, gave them glue guns, and carefully watched them. They were about four at the time.

The other thing that made us happy was, here was a chance to take delight in this human figure that we could identify with readily together. That was meaningful. It certainly involved and reinforced—as meaningful activities tend to—a sense of autonomy. It was a figure like us: We controlled it, we created it. It reflected us. Meaningful. It was a product of our immediate effort. In some sense, it was us. And it was a very, very simple piece of slapdash carpentry: Anybody could do it. It was just scraps that we tacked together. We had to figure out how to span maximum space with as few materials as we could. We didn't have a lot of materials, so we created a framework that would span space economically.

My sons had their own inspiration: a notion that they would build a dog. Because every boy or man should have a friend, and a dog is a man's best friend. So they created the Burning Dog. And you can well imagine that when people came to witness it, they were witnessing the Burning Dog as well as the Burning Man! That would fill any child with a sense of mastery.

See, I'm talking about the conditions that give rise to meaning. The meaning of meaning. Making the Man and Dog took great effort on our part. We had to cart them to the beach, and install them in the sand. We were men—and boys—with a mission. So there you've got the three states of experience that encapsulate the meaning of Burning Man: autonomy, mastery and purpose.

People would like to say is that Burning Man represents the aspirations of all mankind toward peace and love, but it wasn't that. You have it on my authority that it didn't "represent" anything other than itself. It was imbued with meaning by the actions we undertook in creating it.

That is as condensed an explanation as I can create, true for boys and men alike.

**JG - When did art become a centerpiece of the festival?**

LH - I think it was there from the beginning. Really, arguably, we made a statue, didn't we? It would be considered, in sophisticated circles, "outsider art," because there was no mandate at all for doing it. The art came in the early years on Baker Beach. I was the one running around, and I didn't know that many artists. I had been in the scene with the carpenters. That was sort of a Bohemian scene. It was taken for granted that you could take simple gestures and, with no more impetus than that, generate expressive activity that you could present to others without fear of embarrassment.

**JG - Thinking back to the earliest events, were there any stand-out art pieces that you specifically remember?**

LH - Let me tell you how primitive was in the early days .... I remember in the second or third year, desperately trying to get a guy with a gong to come down! It took me two years to get that gong. A gong! You can call that art if you want. It was a musical instrument, I suppose. It set a mood. You played it. So I got the gong guy down there. That was it! There wasn't any art on the beach, really.

When we went to the desert in 1990, we were joined by the Cacophony Society, who did performance art. Most of them didn't even conceive it as "performance art." Some did; some related it to Dadaism. Some related it to Surrealism. Some of the more elaborate productions were fairly well-produced. But in that milieu, it was mainly looked at as play. We were playing, creating environments entirely of our own invention and inspiration.

**JG - Pick out three interactive art pieces that you thought were especially successful.**

LH - Well, I'm kind of like any artist; I like what's happening lately the most. One thing that thrilled me in 2013, from the moment I saw it as a proposal on paper, was the "Church Trap," created a California artist named Rebekah Waites and her crew. It was a little engine for creating interaction. And it was very provocative; it made you face deeply held feelings and beliefs, yet it gave you the reward of "going to church" in this subversive way. You could be the preacher! Or the organist! It was beautifully expressed in its artistic form. I thought that was a superlative work of interactive art; it was actually my favorite all around.

So many things! It's like picking between children. Back in 2003, I loved Zach Coffin's "Temple of Gravity"—those enormous slabs of suspended granite that people could actually climb up onto. That artwork combined a delicate, delicate balance with massive weight. Like a mobile. Something that anyone with any imagination could imagine could fall, and annihilating anything underneath it. The elixir mixed into

that brew was the sheer elation people felt at climbing up and playing upon those massive slabs, like children at a playground. That was lovely.

Many pieces are not really art, even; but I think they're funny and they move me in some obscure way. One year, for example, a somewhat diminutive couple made a model of the solar system, using the Black Rock Playa for scale. The Sun was about the size of a basketball, and the Earth came down to the size of a marble. Jupiter was more the size of a softball.

Walking out on the desert, I happened to transect a line that should have been the orbit of Neptune. The makers of it were standing there. They came up to me and said "We're sorry, this is where Neptune should have been. But it was wet and muddy here, so we've put Neptune in a tent. Would you like to come and see it?"

God bless you, I thought; you've found a purpose here. You've found a vision. And I said, "I would love to see Neptune, in all its glory."

**JG - How did the playfulness of the art evolve into social utility?**

LH - It always had social utility. There wouldn't have been a circle of people running to join us and gathering around that fire if there hadn't been a statue of a man burning. Had it been

just a campfire, it would have just been one of half a dozen campfires down there on the beach. There wouldn't have been anything particularly remarkable about it.

The fact that it was a flaming figure attracted attention. In the desert, artists who were engaged in the Cacophony Society—which conducted improvised events in urban spaces—began to show up. It was one of my primary jobs to recruit them and say, "Look, I've got a canvas for you. I have an adventure in store for you. I have a place where your work will have instant impact on its audience, and seem for all the world like an astonishing thing. I don't have any money.... But come on out! Join us!"

San Francisco being what it was then, and has been historically, there were enough people who would take that proposition seriously—because they were all engaged in that scene in the 1980s, producing what some people would call "happenings."

In the first two or three years, it is hard to even remember the artists because they were so few. There was a guy who did neon. He created a giant pictogram, raised about two inches off the desert floor. It was asymmetrical. It had a great effect on me. I went out to it at night. And as I moved around it, it created the illusion, or feeling, that it was reconfiguring itself in response to my motion. Because there was nothing there but me and it. Again, this is in the context of no context—there was nothing in the desert to compare it to. I thought, "Oh my. This place has possibilities." I realized that in that vast space, even a simple gesture could have a world-engendering effect.

That's hard to imagine until you've seen how powerful nothing can be. Anything that is, in the midst of nothing, is just more intensely so. I thought, "My God, with just these tubes of neon you can create this animated form that seems to literally dance with me, to move in immediate response to my initiative!" Which was a thrill.

There was another guy who built showers—and this goes to the question of utility. He built showers because, of course, we needed showers. He was a good craftsman. He built two showers that were turned away from the center of the settlement in such a fashion that they captured a magnificent view. So you could go repair to that shower, and get cleaned up while viewing nothing but absolutely pristine wilderness. The following year, I convinced him to build a sort of sluice box, where circulating water flowed through chutes and formed a geometric pattern.

Later, there was a gal named Serena De la Hey, who just turned up from nowhere. She was out of England. She was doing willow work in England, which is an old English craft, but turning it into contemporary sculpture. So she was authoring these figures that seemed to be moving in animated ways against the great, vast scrim of the empty desert. Again, that traded on the idea that this "stage" made anything look uniquely present. Serena came back and worked another year, perhaps a third, and afterwards went on to a career as an artist back in Britain.

Those are examples of early works—but they were few and far between. They were just a handful of things that were initially done.

Three years into it, more artists began to show up. We began to think in terms of arrangements of art that would affect public behavior on a greater scale. I particularly felt that there was a need—since there was no context, and things might easily have gotten dangerously chaotic. If we could create purposeful movement through the space along intentional paths, it would engender a sense of collective meaning-making.

Once you're doing that, you're creating similar conditions to what we had on the beach with the two boys. You're creating some sense of autonomy, and mastery. You can move, and the world moves with you. When you perceive what works in sequence, you can become part of a narrative flow—and if that narrative tells some kind of story, there's a sense of purpose. The art feels, and acts, as if it means something. What particular meaning you decide to select from that experience, as we always say, is up to you. But it is possible to actually create a context that engages people with art in socially constructive ways.

That we understood. We also understood that putting a lot of energy into a space that has no meaning can easily become the opposite of enchanting—it can become dangerous and frightening. That's a mob.

**JG - Do you see the art of Burning Man as political or apolitical?**

LH - Generally the community thinks we don't do political work, although we have granted money to political pieces over the years. It's not a dominant note. Not that anyone has said

you can't do it, really. I think, in some sense, Burning Man's profound removal from the world at large may make political issues seem to shrink a bit, seem less relevant.

But I can think of several things. One year we took a group from the BLM (Bureau of Land Management). There was a guy visiting from the White House staff at the time, and we took him out on one of the art cars. We passed right by a huge rendition of the Capitol building in Washington, DC—with a biplane stuck right into the dome, as if it had crashed through. No one said anything. I think that's implicitly political.

There have been other things—very moving things. One person collected all these shoes, and related them to the shoes of people who died in Iraq. That really conjured a spirit, a feeling. I thought that was well done. There are a lot of socially satirical things that you can say are implicitly political.

### **JG - Do you have a spiritual credo that drives your thinking?**

LH - I have some basic ideas, yes. I suppose they've been formed from my experience with Burning Man, as well as drawing from my own life experience. That started to crystallize some years ago when I read *The Gift*, by Lewis Hyde. He came to San Francisco, and we had a lovely lunch. I started to think about the part that gifting played in the culture that had coalesced around our event.

What struck me about gifts—and always has—is that they have an unconditional quality. Anyone knows that if you put conditions on a gift, it ceases to be one. And then I thought of the range of gifts in my life. I thought about what my parents gave to my brother and I growing up - that was a gift. It seemed to me that the unconditional value that pertains to gifts has a lot to do with the nature of spirituality. When you think about it, religions all appeal to unconditional sources of reality—usually supernatural ones that are outside of our world, that are more real than our world, and that affect people in a way that feels unconditional, so that their belief, their faith, is absolutely founded in the perception of that reality. It trumps anything conditional, anything political, anything that has to be bargained over, anything that has to be compromised in our world. That gives many people a source of security in this chaotic world. I've always been fascinated by that aspect of religion, and the building of temples and so on.

Then I began to relate the unconditionality of a gift to the unconditionality of a Truth that is perceived in a religious context. In *The Gift*, Hyde uses examples in the life of artists. And I thought about everything that I've experienced working with artists: They live by their gifts, their work issues out of their gifts, and they often treat the work itself as a gift. And it's all tinged with this unconditional kind of value.

I'll give you an example. If you know artists and hang out with artists—let's say painters—and you go to their studios, people are drinking, smoking, carrying on their lives, they're disputing their ideas in the midst of art while it's being created. It's a very heady, very exciting experience. And it's not uncommon in such a circumstance that if you eye a piece of work and keep looking at it, a dynamic will be created. The artist will notice,

just as a parent would notice if you were you looking at their child with an approving glance. They've got a radar for that.

And if you have a robust relationship with the artist—if they enjoy being with you, and you enjoy being with them—they may look at you and say, “You like that? Take it.” Just like that. What they're really saying is, “That came from my gifts; now it's a gift to you. Your response to it means that you commune with its essence, that the being it's imbued with through my creative act amplifies your being. And therefore it's yours as much as mine. So take it.” Artists will do that.

I came to think that being is an unconditional reality. I don't believe in supreme beings as religion does, but I think being is supreme—and that has become my spiritual attitude. It's not unlike Buddhism in some ways. I see creativity as a way to achieve a sense of intensified being, and therefore identity.

I wasn't raised around sophisticated taste, or any social prestige attached to art. My people had no sense of that. My idea anymore is that what people want the most isn't really recorded by their desires, or by their need to acquire or possess. Those are substitutes for what people most deeply want... and that is to be—to really be. And to see it mirrored in their environment, and to be able to express that as a gift that others can accept.

**JG - That brings to my mind the Temple. What goes on inside of you when you're in there?**

LH - When you go to the temple, you're affected by the people around you in a powerful way. If only by that sudden intake of breath, that instant silence that surrounds you, and that gets your attention very quickly. It's very difficult to ignore. And those that don't have the wit to see it are hushed by their friends, and in the ensuing silence even they begin to realize that this place has a kind of sacredness, a kind of unconditional value.

Really, people come there just to be. It's devoted to grief. Losing people to death in this world is a moment that does put you up against being, itself, in a way that leaves you few defenses. That's a powerful motive to think deeply. Birthdays are tinged with that as well, where it's sort of a summing up of your being somehow. Your past looks right through you into your future—and there you are in the present. That is hard. Being is pressed right up close next to your nose.

I'm hinting that there's a certain mysticism in those states. It was inherent in the desert from the beginning. You could walk through that emptiness and alternately experience two very powerful things. You'd begin by perhaps feeling that you were the tiniest mote in an infinite space—as we are to the universe. And then moments later, without any intervening thing between you and the horizon, that seam of earth and sky would start pressing up right onto your nose practically. It was closer than close. You were becoming intimate, like a lover, with the cosmos. And it was really big. And then—if you're out there long enough—the two states start alternating, like a sine curve— and you have just crossed over the threshold of mystical experience. That's immediacy. That's the 10th principle. I've always said that's the most important one, and the least well understood.

### **JG - Have you had a personal catharsis in the Temple?**

LH - I wouldn't say a catharsis. I've been affected by it. When you look around you and see people sobbing. When you start reading all those inscriptions, and many are heart-wrenching. Amid all that silence? It's profound. Everybody knows it. Yet there isn't any definite meaning there. No one says "this represents that." That's why it's so effective. If we did say that, we'd alienate all sorts of people who would say "Well, I don't believe that." Or, "I don't like that."

What we do say is, "You don't have to believe anything. Go there. Be there. See what happens." We get testaments from atheists who say, "I don't believe in any of that crap, that supernatural stuff!" And I don't either, personally. Then they come back with, "I had a spiritual experience at Burning Man." If you can get an atheist to say that, you're getting to the root of something.

But as soon as you put something between you and that immediate confrontation with things unknown—with things greater than you—you begin to lose the sense of it. That's why we won't tell people what the Temple represents, or what the Man represents.

### **JG - How is the Man different in this year, 2014?**

LH - This year, we've made the Man 10 stories tall. It will be immense. You'll have to crane your neck so that it'll hurt. The great cathedrals, they all do that. It hurts you to look up. You put your head back, and it begins to hurt, but you can't take your eyes away. It puts you in a strangely insecure posture, a form of discomfort. For a moment your eyes lock on what's high overhead, and it's a giddy thrill. Then you pull your eyes back down, but you come away feeling lifted far beyond yourself.

### **JG - Are there things that have happened during the 25-odd years of Burning Man that were dark moments for you? Encounters or events from which you've chosen to distance yourself?**

LH - Well, there was conflict over how we should organize the event. It came to a crisis in 1996. But it's not that I wanted to disassociate myself; I just wanted to create another kind of world. I can't say that I was a witness to a vast kind of evil or anything, but I didn't have much respect for some of the more hooligan-like behavior.

Without a sense of belonging to a greater world—and therefore being responsible to people you don't even know—if you fill people with passion, and the fashion is to blow things up or burn them, that can lead to reprobate behavior.(laughs) You bet it can!

One year, there was an artist who didn't like somebody else's work, and they had a giant flame throwing mobile apparatus. They went over and started burning it down. That isn't right!

**JG - Why did this culture of violence prevail, even for a short time?**

LH - There was a faction within the Cacophony Society that regarded renegade events as an opportunity to practice what the anarchist writer Hakim Bey called “aesthetic terrorism:” The artist finds the chinks in society, does expressive things, and runs away before they can be caught. They thought our city was one big autonomous zone, where you could get in, get out, and get away with transgressive behavior, without regard for other people. Without even thinking of other people as real. That put them, myself, and the people standing with me on a collision course. They had a T-shirt that said “Burning Man: Woodstock or Altamont - You be the Judge.” It was clear what side they were rooting for.

So there was a war about what Burning Man was for, and what it meant. It came to a head in 1996—at the very time when more and more artists than ever were coming in and doing creative things. A man died riding a motorcycle; he was playing chicken with a truck. He was known in underground circles as a daredevil. He had come to the desert proclaiming that he’d heard someone was going to die out there, and he wanted to make the scene. Little did he know he was going to be the fatality. He was hit by the truck’s side mirror, and killed instantly.

That night, the Black Rock Rangers started burning the lamp posts along the Promenade to the Man, because they thought it was an apocalyptic moment. I ran into them, and

reproved them. They were feeding the lamppost into a fire. I had designed them; they’re built to look elegant, and suggest transcendence. The Rangers were burning them because they were filled with some neo-anarchistic attitude. “We don’t need no badges; we don’t need no rules, we don’t need no respect for anything.” This was our police force! When you see your police force burning public property, it gets your attention. I was told I should get out of town; that they wanted to lynch me or something. I didn’t take that seriously, not for a moment. But there was hard feeling, and it all started when that fellow died out there.

Well, that fellow’s death shook everyone up. Most of these people had never seen a violent death before. They just *talked* as if they had—pretending to be desperados in the wild west. When it came to it, they had no stomach for it.

I went out to the accident scene, haunted by the idea that we’d caused it. I was dressed in a tuxedo; I had been at a birthday party. When I arrived, I was told that it was reckless behavior by the biker; the fault wasn’t on the event’s side. No more than if he had climbed up on a mountain and jumped off a cliff.

The question was, “Are we responsible here?” And I finally said, “Well, there’s no blood on our hands.” But the Black Rock Rangers took that phrase, and repeated it again and again; and their interpretation was, “all that Larry cares about is liability.”

But I wasn’t thinking of liability for one instant. It was about moral responsibility. With all those cars zooming around at

night with their lights turned off, and all the guns, and the fact that we were giving a party under conditions which we knew we couldn't control—well, that implicated us. And that was wrong.

That's why I invented a sense of superordinate civic order—so there would be rules, and structure, and streets, and orienting spaces, and situations where people would feel a common purpose together; where people could become real to one another! Because now we were dealing with thousands of people, and most of them didn't know one another. It had gone beyond a bit of pranksterism in the desert. We had made a city, and no one wanted to take responsibility for it.

And that's what the battle was about. Will it be a city, or will it be a failed scene, and everyone should go home? So my response was to say to the law enforcement people, "We're going to build a real city. We're going to make people responsible. Everything will be as it should be, and it's going to be a place where decent intention rules the day."

### **JG - What is your definition of community?**

LH - Fundamentally, it means a society in which people are real and present with one another. A society in which you are able to imagine that others are animated by the same vital urges as you are.

When that's a widespread feeling, it makes constructive politics possible. Whereas, if groups within a society are looking at one another as profoundly alien, that isn't a community. And the political result of that is mayhem.

If people can achieve that feeling of common being, shared together, it makes possible all kinds of tolerance. If people who are in many ways utterly unlike you, if they are essentially like you, it's possible to live together amicably.

The American Grange used to have a slogan; they put it over the entrances of their meeting halls. It was "In essentials, unity; In non-essentials, liberty; in all things, charity." And if you just do those three things, politics works. And if you falter in any of those steps, society is not a workable proposition. And that's when people treat others in sadistic, mean ways. That's when people start down the road to lakes of blood.

Look at Rwanda. Those people lived together for generations, and after all that time, when the tinder was ready, half the population looked at the other half and said, "You aren't human."

When you say that, every anger, suspicion and fear comes forward. And people turn into monsters. Anyone who's been in a mob knows what that's like.

But community doesn't mean that everyone's kind, really, or that everyone has to love everybody else. But if you think that I'm just as real as you are, it's possible to be charitable and

decent and kind. And out of that can grow love, and out of that can grow trust.

**JG - You're now 66. When you said you might have less to do with the event in the future, did you mean because you're getting ready to retire?**

LH - No; because I've got work in other pastures. The majority of my work is shifting. It's slower than I'd like it, but it's shifting so my work will be outside the event in the greater world. The seeds of our culture have been sown, and now—just as we've treated the city as a garden that we've cultivated—we want to treat the world. We want to see our culture grow up to affect many more people. So that's going to take me afield. I just got back from London and Germany; we might go to Russia. This is triggered by the event, because we get influxes of people from outside the United States. The big trend now is for people from outside the U.S. to come to the event, and they're coming from everywhere; it's remarkable. It's very exciting, these freshets, these streams of people. They're coming from Russia, South Africa, Spain, and throughout Europe. A trickle out of China, but that will probably change—because Taiwan is starting to stir, and Singapore. We're even seeing some stirrings from the Middle East: Israel, even Tunisia.

**JG - Is there a permanent encampment at Black Rock City?**

LH - No, there are no resources there. Everything has to be brought in. It's an incredibly severe natural environment. And the government wouldn't permit it anyway; it's public land.

**JG - Because of its temporary nature, can Black Rock City really be a persuasive model for other cities—or even for other societies or communities?**

LH - We think Burning Man has great application to the world, but a larger iteration can only occur as people incorporate the essential ethos of it. The Ten Principles are meant to describe that ethos, that way of life; and then, by their own inspiration and by collaboration with others in the everyday world, people will find applications that are as various as the many gifts they bring to it. It has to be culturally transmitted that way.

If somebody wants an example of an attempt being made—not by us, but a corporation—you can look at what Tony Shea, the founder of Zappos, is doing in Las Vegas. He came to Burning Man, and had his own little epiphany. Now he has acquired a huge amount of property in downtown Las Vegas—separate from the strip, which is its own colony. He started installing a lot of public art which was featured in Burning Man. They designed the spaces very well, he wants to increase population density, he wants to bring life to the street, he wants to perhaps turn it into a little Paris, with interactive art. He's trying to make that a permanent settlement in Las Vegas; a sort of city of its own. He's got his own vision.

**JG - And what's your vision beyond the desert?**

LH - We have a plethora of projects; not just specific works.

The Black Rock Arts Foundation is now incorporated into the Burning Man project, and is sponsoring large-scale interactive public art in many cities, nationally and internationally. So that's certainly penetrating the world at large. I think that the application is more manifold and more profound than that.

I met a well-known director, a man who made a film I admire greatly. He talked about his efforts to heighten awareness about emergency preparedness in a disaster. We started talking and I said, "why not make it radically self-expressive?" And he knew what I meant. Survival would be a collaboration and communal effort. It could be pretty expressive, too. As we started ticking down the Ten Principles, it turned out that, if you combined all of them, it would really work as a strategy for organizing yourself and our neighbors!

**JG - You talk about yourself and the other five architects of Burning Man being "Social Engineers." I'm intrigued by that term. How do you mean it?**

LH - At most festivals, there is social engineering that takes place—and it's designed to increase consumption. The producers make their money by featuring headliners, targeting demographics, vending at scale, and through commercial sponsorships. We don't do those things. What we've always done is form the context of society—whether it's engineering the physical layout of the city itself (the urban space), or by propagating customs, like the Lamplighters, that are socially constructive. We also create rules that help strangers get along with one another. And all of this is not in service of the bottom line, or of commerce as we know it, but is aimed at generating

greater social interaction.

**JG - What are some primary examples of how the social engineering of Black Rock city promotes social engagement?**

LH - Well, there are some obvious pieces of urban design. First of all, the city is designed so that the cynosure of all eyes—the ceremonial and symbolic center of the whole experience—is the Burning Man. The streets are all aligned with the position of the Man, so that they form the spokes of a great arc. Whenever you walk down these radial streets, the Man hovers in the distance. People use him as a kind of lodestar, as a way to navigate and to find out where they are, wherever they might be. That instills a powerful sense of centrality. So that near the end of the event, when by ritual custom we burn the Man, a phenomenon occurs. For the first time during the event, people gather around a common fire. They surround the eponymous effigy that is larger than them, that gives its name to the event, and that by now feels transcendent. And in that act, the entire community—tens of thousands of people gathered in a great, great circular swath—witnesses itself.

This is a deliberate example of social engineering, and it has an enormous effect on people's moral experience.

But we've done other things, as well. Black Rock City has a front street, called the Esplanade, that faces out onto the great theatrical space of the open desert playa. It's one giant plaza. It may be the largest public plaza on earth. It probably is, now I think about it!

We noticed that many people had assembled camps right along the Esplanade, because they wanted the view—just as people build by the sea. But we wanted to enliven the whole city. Now, Black Rock city is laid out like a clock face: There are great radial streets at 3 o'clock, 6 o'clock and 9 o'clock that penetrate into the city. And we decided we'd "zone" them.

Normally, that would be like commercial zoning. In our case, we invited theme camps that offer a shared experience. We decided to widen those streets and build them back, as a way to build the interactivity back into the body of the city.

If you look at what we do—if you just substitute collaborative creative communion for commerce — then you have a fair sense of it. We engineer Black Rock City in service to values and experiences that create the whole tone and feeling and spirit of the place.

Another example is Center Camp, with its areas to rest, its coffee bar and various small performance stages.

Yes. It's a place where the stranger can fit into society, and feel like they are sharing a "living room" with people they don't know. As a tourist, in a large city, you migrate to such spaces. I was inspired in part by the *zocalos* I encountered in Mexico: public places where people can sit down, drink coffee and take their ease. The beverage that you sip is just a convenient foil to give you occupation while you watch the world go by. And so we created a *café*, which was first known as the *Café Temps-*

*Perdu*, which is lifted from *Proust: The Café of Lost Time*. I've always been sorry it lost that name. I want to sneak it back in if we could!

So that's our civic center, and it functions as it would in any city. Our city services are situated around it. We have our Post Office, the Lamplighters, the Burners Without Borders camp, and the various other offices that serve the city. We hope. That dignifies civic identity. It asserts that there is a higher order, an order that is devoted to our connection to people with whom we may not be communally related, but with whom we share a common identity in the form of citizenship.

**JG - So Black Rock City is sort of a Petri dish, then, for experimenting with community initiatives.**

LH - It always has been. The stories we hear, constantly, are of people who have applied the Ten Principles, in idiosyncratic and successful ways, to all of life's problems or pastimes. So we have plenty of empirical evidence that it has a wide application. She's trying to create a city within a city; The Burners Without Borders did disaster relief, using all Ten Principles. When you looked at everything they did, their strategies included using Radical Self-expression in disaster relief—and it worked marvelously. They did that down in Mississippi. You can see it as urban renewal, or see it as disaster relief, or as community organizing or an approach to education. You can see that in all of those terms. It just depends on what people want to do. We create the platform, they invent their own "apps."

**JG - What will it take to scale the Nevada event to a larger number of participants?**

LH - We'd have to change the logistics. The event site is now reached by means of a two-lane country road. That's a pretty narrow aperture! We'd have to engineer the traffic differently. We're imposing a vehicle tax this year to influence people to think of other means. At the same time, we're promoting a bus service that we think can be scaled up so that people could leave their cars in, say, Reno. They take all of their belongings with them via bus. That would help. We've talked to traffic engineers; we've always got a huge supply of expert professional volunteers.

**JG - Do you see the event in the desert enduring, even as the numbers grow and the ethos spreads?**

LH - I think there'll always be a place for the event in the desert. There will always be a great center like Rome, or Paris, where everyone from everywhere comes together. It's inspiring. And that only promotes the global dispersal of the culture. There'll always be a place for that. We're looking at other prospects, too. There's another site that we could perhaps acquire for smaller events—but over longer periods of time—in a desert playa environment. And if we look at the practical problems of moving people, I think we can solve those, too—without changing Black Rock city too drastically. We can probably get up in the vicinity of 100,000. That's not that big, really.

**JG - The “Leaving No Trace” Principle is remarkably**

**effective in preserving the environmental integrity of the Playa. Still, the event draws criticism for the considerable carbon emissions it produces, especially from the burns themselves. Is Burning Man doing anything to reduce this impact?**

LH - Well, we do at least one thing! If people go to the Grand Canyon for a vacation, they're burning all that gas to get there. That's true of any place that you'd have to drive a long way to get to. I don't think we can do anything about that until the world comes up with all-solar cars! But with Burning Man, once people are there, they can't use their car. They actually go a full week without using their cars! Now, it's true that some people have generators out there. And we have a little power grid around our headquarters, because we're working and need that service. But there is no big power grid, which means that the vast number of appliances and things that are usually run by electric power aren't being used. People are camping.

I think this often gets brought up because we're known to burn things. And that's seen as air pollution. And though that's true, even our burning is less prevalent now than it used to be. That's because so many artists now have an opportunity to go back to the world, and display their art in other places. So not as many pieces are being burned.

**JG - Was the “Green Man” theme in 2007 a success?**

LH - The figure's lighting and so forth were powered by a fairly large solar array. We've not found it practical to invest in a

solar infrastructure because it's only an eight-day event, so to amortize those costs is not really doable. If we were in a settled place, I imagine, we would go solar. We'd make the investment.

**JG - "In the world we're living in," you've said, "no one can get near the levers of power." Can you talk a little bit more about that?**

LH - That's a hard one. I don't know if I can give you a satisfactory answer, but one thing that most people notice is that people in many disciplines were more apt to talk to one another in a less professionalized world than our own. Now no one talks to anybody who's even a few degrees away from their specialty. And that means that we know more and more about less and less. That's equally true, in some degree, on the Internet too.

Everyone thinks someone has the power, and I think it doesn't really look like governments have the power much anymore. People say corporations have it, but I'm not sure if they have it, either, because they think in very narrow terms. The discipline of business can certainly focus your efforts and hone your organization as you compete with other businesses, but I'm not sure it really gives anyone a very broad worldview. I don't think anybody is much in charge, as much as they perhaps were in the 20th century.

We live in a very complicated world, and I don't know if we're able to see its complexity very well. I think it's harder to think broadly, and there's not much incentive for thinking deeply.

I tend to think that progress can most surely be made on the cultural front. I think we have to reinvent culture.

I sometimes think that what we need is nothing more or less than a new Axial Age; that's an idea that theologian Karl Jaspers had. He talked about the conditions under which, independently in different zones of culture, in vastly geographical contexts, the monotheistic faiths arose: Buddhism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism. And it happened in one circumscribed piece of time. And with that came a new idea that wasn't present in the ancient world. It all boils down to variances of the Golden Rule. Because in the tribal world, or even in the pagan world—which was based on slavery, of course—that didn't make any sense. Half the world was deemed inhuman to begin with! The neighbor tribe wasn't human. You were. Suddenly, there arose conditions of sufficient social complexity in the world that you needed an ethic like that. Suddenly, it made sense—and Christianity and Buddhism spread really quickly.

It seems to me that, given the problems we're facing on every front—economical, environmental, political—what's needed is a kind of ethical, cultural revolution. This movement would inspire us to take the next step forward from what that monotheism achieved, when it first allowed us to identify with the lives of others. I think that this movement has to have something tantamount to a religious intensity. It's got to be something that inspires passionate faith, and suggests a new way of being together with others. I'm not saying what we're doing is the answer—but what we're doing and what many others are doing will coalesce.

Short of that, I don't think anybody has any idea of where to go. We can't persist in these high levels of consumption, we know that. What does the 21st century hold? Resource wars? Who makes the decisions?

**JG - So you don't believe there's a sort of hidden cabal controlling society's direction.**

LH - I'm not a conspiracy theorist. I think people move, gang-like and tropically, toward common interests. I don't think anyone has the power of foresight to create a world plot. People think they do.

The history of the modern world is the history of mass society. That's really recent. I'm 66. When you get past 50, when you get into your 60s, you can imagine 300 years as just a breath! It doesn't seem very long. That's about as long as "modern" is. And the problem we've been contending with all that time is, what do you do about the masses?

I don't think we've solved it. I don't think mass consumption solves it; it makes it worse. The 20th century was given over to political movements that were secular substitutes for religion. Fascism, Communism, they were all essentially notions turned into utopian political schemes. They acted like religion. We believe in the West that democracy wedded to market capitalism, is the way; but that doesn't seem to be working out, either!

It comes back to the problems that come with mass consumption, and the problems that come with the inability in mass society to individuate—to find a usable identity. It's degenerated into addictive behavior. If you talk to young people now, and explain to them that back in the 1930s people would give their lives for an idea, they don't know what you're talking about. Because communism and capitalism and fascism are gone. They've been replaced by another great movement with a lower case title: consumerism. And it's not working.

We've got to look at the conditions of mass society, and figure out how you can generate identity in a way that can relate people to their deepest feelings, to those communally around them, to those that inhabit broader society, and indeed to the world and the environment as a whole. Anything that can do that might hold the key to ways of thinking that will be far more relevant and useful to us in the coming decades.

Otherwise, I think that we've got lots of expert knowledge, but less culture than we ever had. You talk to an engineer in Silicon Valley, and they're absolutely innocent about what the Humanities are. No one factors in the knowledge from the next silo into their own thinking. A different kind of culture would stimulate and reward that approach.

And maybe that's why people come to Burning Man. But I don't want to pose as Nostradamus; I can't tell you how everything's going to work out.

**JG - I find it ironic that many of the people fascinated by the ethos of Burning Man are the same well-to-do people who work in those cubicles, and ride Google buses to work every day. They've been accused of using San Francisco as a home base, as a sort of commodity, while not really creating community or engaging with their city—and that's the goal of Burning Man, isn't it?**

LH - I agree. I mean, the busing of the employees was a decision made by their corporate bosses. It makes them the object of annoyance and derision, but they're more or less along for the ride. The funny thing is, if you look around, there are hospital buses and all kinds of institutions with private bus systems in San Francisco. The reason people are looking at the people in these tech company buses is because they're perceived as the "haves," as opposed to the "have-nots." Their market clout affects the whole fabric of the city, it's true. But it's not a new thing. I find it annoying, and they're not particularly friendly. But why would they be, in the context they've been put? It's not a socially organized space that would make them outgoing or interested in anything around them, is it? They've all got tinted glass! It's awful!

**JG - A large part of the constituency of Burning Man, critics say, is made up of "white males with discretionary income." I would think that would make it harder for the event to have global relevance.**

LH - First of all, I don't know if it's all white males. And I don't think it's an all male monastic work scene down in Silicon Valley!

Anyway, a lot of that is nonsense. The fact of the matter is, there have always been bugaboos. It started when the "fat frat boys" were the menace; they were going to denature us. Then it became the ravers; they were going to suck the meaning out of everything. They were going to rob us of authenticity. That didn't happen.

There's a strange feeling that pertains particularly to Burning Man, because it fills people with a great yearning for authenticity, and it seems too good—and everything these people ever had that has felt cool has been taken away from them and commoditized. It even infects their dreams. People have told me they've dreamed that Burning Man was happening in a Walmart parking lot. That Burning Man was somehow happening back home, with their parents, who are nagging them about cleaning the toilet. And the bugaboo du jour is the millionaires, billionaires and celebrities who, by their very presence, will suck all the reality out of Burning Man, by alchemy unknown.

I have a somewhat more seasoned outlook. I saw the techies when they first came in. After we hit the cover of Wired in 1996, waves of nerds began falling on our shore—those hated nerds, those techies. People knew they didn't like them—they were white, they were male, they were patriarchal, they were probably not nice to their girlfriends. Although what I noticed was that they brought in a whole new younger generation that weren't part of our underground scene. These people valued—unlike my generation—hanging out with their buddies communally. Maybe because they inherited a less secure world; I don't know.

The techies came from an economic sector where there was a lot of excitement about facing unknown problems, and working in a collaborative way to create innovation. They came out and, in 1997, when we revamped the city, it was as if we designed it for them. The number of theme camps tripled. Whole neighborhoods sprang to life because of the energy that was being poured into new model that we created. Suddenly, Black Rock City experienced a civic flowering. And we saw an outpouring of volunteers out of that new group, as well.

And now the people who said it was going to be ruined by the techies say it's the billionaires. They're the ones who are going to denature the event and rob everyone of authenticity. And another common trope, that has grown over time, as we've grown—is that we—the organizers—are the enemy! We're a corporation. "You mean they're not just running this out of their pocket? Then it's a corporation!"

Well, we are running it out of our pocket. We don't have any investors. We don't have any outstanding loans. We're not driven by capital, and never were. At the end of this year, now that we're a nonprofit subsidiary of the Burning Man Project, the books will be completely open: the income as well as our expenditures. Everything will be out there. People will see where the money goes. I'll be paid by the project now. I'll be making slightly more than I have been on the event side, but it's going to be work. Still, some people will say..."What, you're making more than \$50,000? You monger!" But by becoming a nonprofit, we just gave away ownership of this income stream, forever. So I'm a little jaded by these accusations, because I've been hearing them for years and years

## PART 3: OUT OF NOTHING

June-July 2015

### **Jeff Greenwald: What is your superpower, Larry?**

Larry Harvey: One of my superpowers, or so I thought, was the ability to explain people to one another. I had my own techniques, which worked pretty well—up to the point where they didn't work at all. And that led to a huge change: a change that was ethical for me, and crucial to our way forward.

Because for years, everybody would complain to me about the other partners. My technique was to say, "Oh I know what you mean." Because nobody wants to hear, when they're complaining about someone, "They have good motives." They want you to hear that they're angry, and why. They feel injured, essentially, and want to tell you that.

So I would always say, "Oh, yeah." Until they felt confident that I was listening, hearing them. And I would begin to suggest—slowly, by degrees—that it might be a sense of injury that was driving their feelings. Because what *really* enraged

them was the thought that the other person *wanted* them to feel that way—wanted them to feel bad. So I'd start by suggesting, "Well, I don't know, they've got problems of their own... I doubt very much they're driven by this villainous urge to make you feel bad, or undermine you."

Then I'd start telling them what I knew about the insecurities of the person they were complaining about. It helped; because what was really hankering them was this notion that this person had said to themselves, "I want to make X feel terrible, so I'm going to say this to them." No! It was inadvertency, and insecurity.

Hearing this let them off the hook—because the truth is, they didn't enjoy feeling the way they did. And they were all good people. We've gone through so much together that it doesn't take much effort to open a window onto another soul. And once it gets to that point, you can actually talk in rational terms. Because emotion overwhelms rationality *fast*.

So I explained each to the other until—at a certain point—it became dysfunctional, both for me and for them.

One of the first inklings I got of that was when, at one point or another, everybody except Michael—who was doing his best to hang onto his position—threatened to quit. One day I said, "Well maybe *I'll* quit." But they just *looked* at me, and someone said: "You? You can't quit."

I realized they were right. And *that's* what was making it dysfunctional. They didn't have to talk to one another; they'd just talk through me. Because up to that point, I was the one who set the pay. It was all centered on me, and that was the problem. I was isolated. I thought, "I'm isolated because I'm doing this kind of work—but my isolation is infecting everybody else." It takes a long time to comprehend a thing like that.

And then I got sick. Half of it was from worry, and feeling like I wasn't doing my job. It wasn't working. When I saw them, it would be like a dump truck was backing up towards me and about to drop the gate, and submerge me in all this emotional garbage. I couldn't absorb it anymore. It literally made me sick.

Then I figured out that I had to surrender power—and I had to do it in the right way. That led me to do a lot of practical things, like equalized pay. It had rightly *not* been equal. But going into the future I could see, at a pretty early point, that Burning Man had to be a nonprofit. The group had to let go of control, but still feel secure.

**JG: How would you describe the superpowers of the other five founders?**

LH: Will [Roger] as always very loyal. He has a work ethic, and a passion about what we're doing that is quite real. And Crimson [Rose] and Will share a characteristic: They're both pretty down to earth.

Will's soulfulness is often very helpful. He has a way of speaking about subjects in a remarkably eloquent and soulful fashion. And he readily adapts to the tasks assigned him.

Harley [Dubois] and Marian [Goodell] were the workhorses. They were the administration.

Harley has a great talent for managing the scatter. She's now the "transition officer." At first, there was some talk about that being a limited position. Now that we see our future, the transition will never end—so it's open ended for Harley. She would be remarkably good at that job at any place.

Harley is very good at managing people—including her family. When I was her boyfriend we would lie in bed at night, talking about how people's personalities affected their work. In very generous and insightful terms. She really stopped and thought about the psychology of the people around her.

And Marian had the most ambition. She'd been raised by an industrialist, who raised his daughters the way someone else might raise their sons: "You go on and shape things, create things yourselves." She has the most determination. Marian was *made* to be a CEO. She understands anything to do with business.

Marian was the oldest daughter, and led her sisters around. She emulated her father, for better and worse. And was able to see a larger vision. Marian could see the future. When she was my girlfriend, the others called us "The Larrian." Because they knew that when they weren't there we talked, planned things out, agreed, came to them and said: "Let's do *this*."

And they resented that. It's natural that they would. But we were the executives—two executives, thinking in different ways.

Marian's very good with money. We're sitting here now because Marian had the nerve and the insight and the confidence, as we went along, to deal with real estate and all that goes with it. And she educated herself. And she's really good at that. She's good at moving parts. You'll hear her use the word "Tetris" as a verb: arranging everything as a system.

While Harley excels at arranging things as a family, Marian organizes things as system: as an engine that can do work. She had more insight than anybody, certainly than me. I could see her value. I mean, I knew she was doing things that I wasn't fit to do.

During Burning Man's transition into a nonprofit, the company in Hayes Valley that arranged it spoke with everyone separately. The guy asked me, "What do you want to get out of this?" And I said, "I'll be frank with you. I just did a rundown of everybody in our history, and Marian needs to be chief executive. *That's* what I want."

And at the end of it, everyone stood on their tree and said, “Okay, Marian *should* do that job.” Which took a lot, because there was much stored resentment. Early on, Marian had stepped on everybody’s foot—because she was the one who was ambitious, impatient and masking a lot of insecurity. She doesn’t have to mask it now; she knows how to express it in a way that works.

But I did manage that process, and in the end it worked out.

Hence, she’s the CEO. And she can think in very large terms, gauge our relation with the world, and take a stance to understand politics. She gained that. I’d always been sort of a political creature, and we still worked together at the highest level around political things. But she runs the team—and they’ve become, in their specialized ways, more able than we are. So it’s all immense success.

Maybe the key reason Marian’s become so masterful is that she’s now capable of *exhibiting* her anxiety, instead of hiding behind a facade. She made a decisive switch in her outlook at a certain point, maybe three years ago or so, and started talking about collaboration—because she had trapped herself as the know-it-all who couldn’t be wrong.

**JG: So she created a workable path out of that perception.**

LH: She found a way out. And *everyone* we’re talking about found a way out. Michael [Mikel], the most awkwardly; he sued us! But he found a way out.

Harley and Marian used to fight like cats and dogs. And when we finally announced that Marian would be CEO, Harley said, “Okay—on the terms that I never have to report to her about anything.” Well, that wasn’t functional, and I knew that wasn’t real. And now they work really well together like hand and glove.

Will also had many problems. He was an alcoholic, and found his way out. I supported him when it came to a crisis, and he went dry. Crimson Rose has mellowed a little bit, and found a new career. She’s going around the world, addressing people on our behalf. She’s had practice with public speaking, and is actually doing a very good job representing us. She let go of the Art Department, which is like a miracle. That’s one of the duties of the partners in the new regime: to do a certain, stated amount of work like that.

So things are working really well—and I can’t say it’s always been that way. So everybody’s been on their own journey. But it worked out in the end, because we were all we had.

And another one of my strengths is that I know how to lead; I know how to persuade people. I know how to keep faith with people. I have a pretty strong empathic intelligence. Even when I’m talking to people, from moment to moment, I’m aware of how they move, how they look, how they respond to every

word and thought.

**JG: Have you developed that ability over time?**

LH: I was an alienated kid but I had that talent, yeah. I started out organizing my classmates to do theatricals; talking the adults into letting us do things they wouldn't normally permit. And that's what I do today. That I'm good at. And the reason why I'm "revered" in this organization is because I've been consistent. I've been true. And I know how to bring people along; how to inspire them to put aside their egos and collaborate. I was sort of patched that way.

And I joke a lot. I hardly ever go through a meeting without joking. And I have a very low tolerance for hypocrisy and bullshit. The older you get, the more direct you become! You're saving time, essentially, is what you're doing.

**JG: Part of your collective heroism stems from the challenges you've faced, and the way you've dealt with conflict. It's corny, but talking to the founders—hearing about everyone's wild contributions to the event—makes me think of Marvel's Avengers, or the Justice League of America; that DC comic with Superman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, and so on.**

**Let's start by discussing how you resolved the lawsuit with Michael Mikel.**

LH: It started when Harley balked at some spending Michael was doing. Everybody was kind of irritated with him at the time, because he would just go off and do what he wanted to do without reference to us. He did it with such regularity that they started to feel like practical jokes at our expense. I probably made a mistake. Harley said, "I'm going to cut his credit card off," and I said "Okay, do it." That's what frightened him. Angered him, but also frightened him. Because he was *always* afraid that he'd be cast off.

**JG: How did you resolve it?**

LH: Well, circumstances resolved it. He sued me, and there was this horrible conversation on the deck at First Camp, after that had come down. And Marian said to me, "Well, that's your problem. "

Eventually, he sued us all. But then there came a day when John Law caught wind of this. Then *he* sued. I was the office one day for the founder's meeting. I got news there was a call. I left the room, and was informed that John was now suing Michael and me. He had a suit that was calling for double and triple damages.

He said we were morally abhorrent; he actually said we were evil. (This says something about his counsel!) So I went back to the room—I actually enjoyed this a little—I went back to the room and gave them the news. And then I sat down next to

Michael, put my arm around him and said, “I guess you and I are in the same boat now!” And indeed we were!

That changed everything. Now Michael was in a position where he could best serve his interests by hauling in with us—otherwise, he’d have to pursue his own independent course in a little canoe with a lawyer that was sort of a mountebank. He needed representation that, well, wouldn’t cost him anything. So he tied in with us.

So John did us a favor. It was the best thing that could have happened.

We finally settled with John Law, for an undisclosed sum. But that incident righted everything, it helped to right things between us. It was a long process that lasted quite a while, but finally we all surrendered our ownership and became what we are now: employees of the Burning Man Project. Except for Will and Michael, who have different roles.

**JG: Tell me *you* did something impossible; how, working with the other founders, you overcame great odds to make the event happen.**

LH: Well that would be 1997. You’ve probably heard that by now. Up until then it had become, at a certain point, a partnership between myself, John Law and Michael Mikel. We co-trademarked the name. It was their idea; I never even

thought about that. I was actually very innocent. Oh, I could have copyrighted it myself and spared myself a lot of grief.

That was the year that we moved it to Hualapai Flat, We were determined to rectify every defect that had affected 1996. There we’d been at an event where there were no public boundaries. People were shooting guns; they were driving at random, speeding at 100 mph or more with their lights turned off. It was just havoc. And the anarchist wing of the organization had crushed or drowned, of all things, the Black Rock Rangers. I learned that if you scratch an anarchist, you’ll find a closet cop. They like carrying guns around—a lot. Maybe they “don’t need no stinking badges”—but that’s because they have a gun. They were your nightmare version of a cop.

And that’s where certain parties—like John Law’s girlfriend, who was in charge of the dissident faction—got a real dose of mayhem. They got a real dose of lawlessness, and it made them queasy. It frightened them. They were appalled. Suddenly, there were emergency evacuations involving helicopters. Somebody got run over. Somebody got *beheaded*. And they were all, “Well, it’s time to disband the event.”

The underlying motive in all of that was that we’d emerged from an underground in which people could be famous, in their little circles, for their derring-do. They could be legends—legends in a world about the size of an aquarium. But when greater seas overwhelmed us, and the whole world came, it didn’t seem romantic at all. It frightened them. They just pretended to be tough guys with guns. They were poseurs. But they were genuine when they were frightened by it, and tried

as hard as they could to scuttle the 1997 event.

**JG: And from those ashes...**

LH: Right. 1997 was the year when the current founders formed a new LLC. [Crimson] Rose was already working with fire, and I recruited Will, her boyfriend, at the event. It wasn't a job search; it would have been hard to find anybody who wanted to take such risks. None of us *had* anything to risk at that point; we had less to lose. That's also when I recruited Harley. She had been working that year, but she became part of it as well. Marian and I met in 1996, briefly, and I started dating her right after the event. So she came in, and that's when the founders of the contemporary Burning Man were assembled. That's the year, 1997, when we worked on civil reforms. It took faith—and we *had* faith. All the mayhem had happened at the outskirts, out by the Rave Camp. Near Center Camp, where I was, people were behaving very civilly toward each other.

**JG: So you all made the decision to continue together?**

LH: We'd be sitting around. There would be a lull in the conversation, and somebody would start saying "*Community, community, community, community.*" And everybody would laugh, because we were saying it so often.

But we believed it *was* a community. And that if it were redesigned, and all the faults remedied, it would become a

much, much stronger community.

It would have been hard to find many people who thought that. But the founders thought that. That was our whole effort. "Let's get them to park their cars. Let's create a barrier around our city, so they can't just drive in." We had to be very inventive about that. And we figured out how to do it, with just a trash fence, night vision binoculars, and a patrolable shape. Rod [Garrett] figured out how to do that: Make it a pentagon, so you have long stretches where you can watch that line. It was really interesting work. So we figured out how to do that.

We banned guns, definitively, that year. I fought and fought for that. We made the center of the city into not just a tent with a coffee urn in it, but a huge, handsome place of public assembly. It defines Black Rock City as a place of civilization, where people can feel communally related to one another.

All this meant that suddenly we had a grid, and people had a place where they lived. They could find one another. Neighborhoods could form. And once we had a grid, we could zone. Once we came close to a city, we had a gate. Then we began to create the theme camps, which had just informally happened. They began to settle down in sectors of the city, so that they formed arterial streets and centers where people could interact with other campers. And they, in the way of contributing their gift to the city, created interactive environments that were available to everybody.

We grappled with everything. We established ourselves as

economically viable. And we did all of those things in one year.

**JG: Were there aspects of having a formal entrance gate that people disagreed with?**

LH: Not really. By now, you see, the people we had assembled into a real staff were not would-be anarchists. When those people walked out of Burning Man after 1996, they didn't leave much of a gap. None of them were particularly competent at what they were doing. So when they walked out the event, like an organism, sealed itself around that breach. We finally had a proper office. And everyone was brought into this shared vision.

Marian is the one who, in 1997, brought us into the age of the Internet. I understood the importance of communication, but she understood the importance of *organizing* that communication. She stepped in, and just came into her own overnight. You could hardly praise Marian enough; there are so many things she's done.

So everybody was on board for it. Everybody. We were obsessed by it and immersed in it. That's why we'd sit in the meeting room and say "*Community, community, community.*" Because we were convinced it was there. That it was seeded in the heart of the event, and always had been. The best part of what we've done since has been based on that: on trying to determine how we could organize it on a larger scale in a way that people would accept and value. And they do!

**JG: Much has been said, by all the founders, about the huge transition that took place after 1996, and how that seeded the event's growth. What was the next milestone?**

LH: When we returned to Hualapai Flat in 1997, the county tried to drive us away. They did lots of things; some of which, fortunately, were *illegal*. *Nightline* covered what happened. It was the story of David and Goliath. Then it got political, and I made a deal with the Sheriff that helped us a lot. Because his people and our people had something in common. He wanted a helicopter, and we wanted him to stop seizing our money. And so we did one of those deals where you don't say what you're actually doing. He was ambitious and we were ambitious, and it worked out.

But politics and politics, all along the way. We had to get so worldly, so fast. And 1997 was the year I made the famous speech on the hay bale: "Can you give us some money when you leave?" And people did—which was remarkable, because I'd never heard of that happening at a concert: "We're in the red on this one, do you wanna give us some more money!?" "I don't think so!!"

That told us that people really believed, as we did, that it was a community—and that it could be made into a *bigger* community. We'd been persecuted out there, and everybody identified with us. That's also when the Regional movement started. People started doing fundraisers for us, and sending us money. And that grew up over the next few years until, by 2004, Burning Man had spread all around the country, and

beyond.

The next big thing—which that affected our whole future, and will continue to affect it—came in 2004. That was the writing of the Principles. Because people told us, “We want to be like you are. We want to do things together. But we can’t agree on what it’s all about.”

“Give us something,” they were saying, “that will help us communicate with one another. And make sense, together, of our experience.” And the Ten Principles are that framework.  
**Up to here?**

**JG: Have you ever thought about an 11th Principle?**

LH: My line is that *everybody* has an 11th Principle. I have one; I won’t tell you what it is. It’s very private and secret and closely held.

**JG: Do tell.**

LH: It would be “Humor.”

But I don’t think we need to start adding on Principles. It won’t help.

People just inhaled those Ten Principles. They became the basis for the nonprofit. It was an inspiration to write those. And I’m proud of that. They were written very, very carefully. I know how to communicate with people, and I understand politics. They’re not written in the imperative. It’s not **Leave No Trace**; it’s **Leaving No Trace**. It’s behavioral. It’s what we do—and what we do is what we are.

So now, even our enemies—our opponents in the world—cite the Ten Principles when they criticize us. Oh? But that means that you’ve actually persuaded them about what’s essential. When you use the Ten Principles to knock us on the head or slap us around in public, I think it means we’ve won that particular argument.

But they had a huge effect. If it wasn’t for the Ten Principles, we wouldn’t be contemplating a global reach today.

**JG: When you’ve spoken about people who criticize Burning Man by citing violations of the Ten Principles, are you referring to criticisms of the plug-and-play (aka turn-key) camps?**

LH: Yeah. I went public in a 2015 *Bloomberg* article. I actually used the first person pronoun, instead of “we.”

“It’s my job to reform the 1%,” I wrote. “Wait. They will watch, and they will learn.” We’ve got things hatching this year. I also worked on an essay for the website: a list of practical reforms which I’m very pleased with, called *Equality, Inequity, Iniquity*. Give it another year; people are going to read it and say, “Hey—they actually used their own little petri dish to experiment, and to solve the problem in Black Rock City.”

When people get angry on the Internet, it looks like it’s a mile wide—but it’s only a quarter inch thick. That’s how you can raise waves on it so easily. It looks like the whole world is talking, that everyone is united into a mob, a giant mob, a *nation*, and they shout and shout and shout until they’re tired of shouting; until it’s not so much fun anymore. And all that time they’re keeping people with real opinions and responsible views from talking, because they’re afraid the mob will attack them.

So you wait until your critics have blown themselves out. *Then* you step in. And you pay attention to everything they’ve said. You judge what’s worthwhile, and what’s not. What is petty and what is generous. What’s *right*.

Compose your thoughts and hit those notes. And then, suddenly, the natural leaders start talking. Suddenly it’s all reversed. Some of the provocateurs will come in and say things like “Oh you think that? You’re *stupid*.” But everyone in the room just looks at them, and they slink away. Then it gets into real ideas, by people who care.

Burning Man is going to go forward, and become what it’s going to become in the world. Yes, we have to deal with the problems, the perplexities, represented by issues about money. If we can’t make sense of that in our community, then we’re not going to go anywhere.

When I started out, I knew nothing about money and didn’t care about it. Today, wherever I go, whenever I move into a scene, one of the first things I ask myself is, “Where is the money coming from? How is flowing through this scene? Where is it going after that?” Because as soon as you see that, it defines things: the moral landscape. You actually see more of humanity in what you’re looking at.

As a kind of heuristic tool—a way of discovering knowledge—asking that question can tell you a whole lot. People want to pretend that they’re beyond mere greed and so on and so forth. And no, I don’t think most people are particularly greedy. I think the things that people seek can’t be purchased. The things that matter most in life have an unconditional value. You can’t buy them. You can’t buy a friend. You can’t buy a lover. You can buy the *semblance* of those things—and you’ll live to grieve over that.

But people are wrong if they think that Burning Man is independent of money, or that it has nothing to do with money. That they can go there seeking absolution, and come home cleansed of their consumer sins. Simply because they had a good time without spending any money—ignoring the fact that they spent hundreds of hundreds of dollars to get there, and we spent 30 million dollars or more. A lot of fantasies

about Burning Man have arose from people who have been so debauched by the consumer world that they can only think about magical solutions to the problem.

We think we can format a durable culture that can be in the world, *coexisting* with money, and not be corrupted— that we can in fact do good things.

That's one of the reasons for our 2016 theme: *DaVinci's Workshop*. It's inspired by Florence, at the height of the Renaissance. We see a lot of parallels between Black Rock City and Florence. And this will be a means by which we can address the issue of money because the great patron Lorenzo de' Medici—*il Magnifico*—was a banker, a poet, and a politician.

**JG: Is this era a period of special interest to you?**

LH: Well, I read a lot of books about Florence in preparation for this. One, *Medici Money* by Tim Parks, is a history of the family and the bank. It's beautifully written. It's witty. It's short. It sounds like a conversation—with an enormously sophisticated person.

So it will be an educational effort, to recondition the way people think. DaVinci's Workshop, and the blog, will give me a chance to inform people that patrons have been supporting some of the world's most beloved artworks for years. And that they've been very *humble* about it. Very modest about it. (Also,

they don't want everybody and their brother holding their hand out!) I want to see ten essays that keep deepening the theme. In a way, it's the most ambitious thing we've ever done.

We have to go through that door before we can realize our mission. Because people are primitive in their understanding of money. The public, especially the American public, has been so affected by consumerism that all their thinking is bound and directed by it—even when they're protesting it. That has to be examined, turned inside out, recontextualized so that we can go forward. Because if they don't, we won't. As a community. We'll just be a countercultural phenomenon.

**JG: Are there any good spokespeople on that theme in American society?**

LH: Some, like Robert Putnam. He's done marvelous work: I'd just love to get a chance to talk to him. Three books about consumerism were very influential to me. *Bowling Alone*, by Putnam; *The Gift*, by Lewis Hyde; and *An All-Consuming Century*, by Gary Cross.

But when it gets to solutions, some of this begins to sound like a moral Jeremiad. An exhortation. A call to virtue. I think there's another way to do it, which we're only stumbling onto ourselves.

**JG: The last time you and I spoke was in 2014, when**

**Burning Man was becoming a nonprofit. What's changed in your inner landscape around the event since then?**

LH: I didn't know what the future would hold exactly. We organized, and worked for a long time with Brooke Oliver: a brilliant attorney who worked with Cesar Chavez to create his whole legacy infrastructure. Brooke helped us put together an organization within which we could function, contribute and be secure. And it's worked. It was designed exactly right. A lot of that we owe to Brooke. I feel that her achievement is not sufficiently appreciated. Intelligent and soulful she was. She had her faults, but I could always deal with her.

So, for me, it's all working beautifully. I've reached the point where everything I do I *like* doing. I feel secure; no one's going to push me off my seat. (Though they'll always be people who think about it!) And my abilities and my responsibilities are perfectly matched. I'm still *needed*.

**JG: Well, you're more or less the visionary behind the event.**

LH: I've always discouraged people calling me a visionary, because that's one step away from saying that you're head's in the clouds and you don't really know what you're doing; that you just spout ideas. Because the other side of me, that I got from my parents, is that I'm pragmatic. I'm *very* pragmatic. That's the great gift I got from my family.

So everything I do in my job fits my nature, to quote Henry James, "like polished ivory to the palm." Henry James' felicitous line. And who wouldn't want that? Who wouldn't need it in our time of life, when you're beset by anxieties and fears that you will be disregarded? That you will be subtly sidelined, especially in our youth-centered American culture?

**JG: I think that the point it came back for you was in your "shop" at Caravansary. You became a full participant again. Because when we were talking in 2014, you felt removed from the event. You wanted to be back in the thick of it.**

LH: I got that back. And I did something in 2015, which I'm going to write about. I had an idea that I would join a freak show, and be the "Incredible Human Bookworm" and thereby exhibit my secret life as a reader. And as an intellectual who, deep down, maintains a kind of contempt for those who don't read. Or think! I thought, I could show my secret self, my secret weird self, turn it into comedy, and mock myself in doing it—but also present (in sublimated form) my feelings about the unread public. And just have a ball with it. But I knew it would kill me, being in that worm costume—all hot.

**JG: A *worm* costume?**

LH: Yeah, we ordered a worm costume. It was pink and segmented and hilarious. So I put that on and went around. I went to all these theme camps as a bookworm, with big round glasses, to see if I could get a drink. "Would you serve a lowly worm?"

*politic responses are. And something in me said, I just don't want to do that. I really, really don't want to do that.*

So I told him I think it had something to do with the collective experience of slavery. I just dove into that pool. I don't like to dive, I've never liked to dive off diving boards, but I knew I was diving straight into the black water.

**JG: Did you read the piece he wrote?**

LH: Yeah, I didn't mind it at all. He was attacked for writing it. It was sort of absurd to ask "why aren't there more black people?" —as if we could furnish much of a solution to that.

After it was published, I read all of the commentary on the *Guardian* site. Then I found a black-run website for a black constituency. And I read what *they* said about it. And most of them said, well this guy's right! The only people who *didn't* like it were the white liberals.

I wish there was more discussion about that issue. Deeper, broader, realer. But it also means that the subject will not come up again. I killed it. They won't ask me that again.

So I'm reading *Bury the Chains* and *Our Man in Charleston*, both about the slave trade—and I'm also reading a Dickens

That was fun. It made me go around and interact. Because I'm a shy person, and I'll withdraw into an isolation in which I'm miserable. My whole career has been a sort of compensatory project, to herd my nature in the right direction. It's taken years to do that. But a lot of achievement, I think, is based on compensatory behavior.

**JG: What are you reading right now?**

LH: I've been reading about slavery for years. I'm fascinated by it. If ever there was an example of commodification, and the potential evil of it, it's slavery. And I think Americans just lie to themselves about the power of it to affect generations of people. They'd rather not think about it. Black and white alike; we'd rather not think about it.

**JG: I read recently that the smallest demographic of burners – only 1.3% – identified as black.**

LH: This year at Burning Man, a black reporter from the *Guardian* asked me, "Why aren't there more black people?" I told him everything I felt. I said, "Well, I don't think black people like to camp as much as white folks." Which is statistically true, in fact. I have a unique perspective, because my family is half black. So I started talking about that, and attacking white liberalism! The *Guardian* correspondent was crouching down at the stage, and my face was in close proximity to his. I was looking at him and thought, *I know what the three or four more*

novel I never got around to reading before: *Martin Chuzzlewit*. It's all about greed. One long, unrelenting dilation on greed. Maybe that's because we're asking questions about money now in reference to the turn-key camps, and how that situation has developed. So maybe by some obscure instinct I'm reading about greed.

**JG: This oral history project that we're immersed in, right here and right now—what, in your mind, is the purpose of it?**

LH: It's important as part of our efforts to perpetuate the project for a hundred years. Because as you get to be older, you can imagine a world without you. It's not hard. So if our story can be told, good. But I'm anxious that it not sound like hagiography That does as much harm as good. On the other hand, we don't want an "exposé" that showcases all peoples' little fallibilities and vulnerabilities and follies—that's the kind of thing that can be used to *distort* the story, too.

So you've got to be somewhere in between.

Because people need to look up to somebody. People look up to the Ten Principles that are holding it all together. Using that as the charter of the nonprofit? That was Brooke Oliver's idea. We named a street after Rod; let's name something after Brooke!

Let's be humble and respectful. Then people at least can see

the essential nobility of the people who founded it. All the challenges they went through. All the risks they took. All of the opportunities for self-enrichment they consistently refused over all these years. I want it understood that we're talking about people who are very ethical and remarkably devoted, and who should and *can* be admired. Not because one wants to look good after one's dead—but because people need someone to look up to.

And in the old fashioned sense, I want it to be conceived that people could regard us as heroes. But they don't have any information to base that on. They just think we're big shots.

**JG: If you were to go to a Buddhist meditation retreat, on the final day you'd hear everyone asking the same question: "How do I bring this state of mind into the real world?" That's the same question people ask themselves when they return from Black Rock City.**

LH: That's the problem. *How do you take it home?* That is the crucial question. The most practical question. It needs to be answered for us to actually go forward and accomplish our mission.

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