

"Coming Out"

Twenty one years ago this Society celebrated the first Coming Out service here in Burlington. For those of you who have been here a long time, this celebration has become part of the familiar rhythm of congregational life. For me, and perhaps for others who are new to the congregation, this is the first Coming Out service I have ever been to. So it seems to me to be an extraordinary event. The radical blessedness of this morning's service is fully in my awareness. The blessings of being who we are, in all our human diversity, and the blessedness of being together in mutual respect and appreciation, are epitomized in this gathering. How much richer, more interesting, and more beautiful life would be if all places were free of the ignorance which so often smothers the blossoming of the human spirit.

I'd like to share with you a story from my own life about "Coming Out" - it's a story I'm still celebrating because I'm still learning from it. Several summers ago, a woman who has since become my close friend, BobBI Keppel, and I sat down together because she said she had something to tell me. I already knew I liked BobBI - I liked her sparkling eyes and glorious grin. I enjoyed her humor, and the fascinating stories she told of her long life and many adventures, her commitment to the struggle for social justice, her rich knowledge of folk music and musicians, the way she played the autoharp and sang in a warbly true voice. I liked the way she rolled her eyes when some unfortunate soul said something off the wall. I appreciated the way she really listened, and the way she didn't seem at all afraid to speak up.

But when we sat down for the conversation she had requested we have together, she was hesitant to speak. Her eyes sparkled, not with characteristic mischief, but with tears.

"I want to tell you something, and I hope you will still want to be my friend after I've told you," she said. I was already well on the way to opening my heart to her as a dear friend. I couldn't imagine what might give her such qualms. But I just said "OK - what is it?"

She told me about her life as a wife and mother, and how, 25 years ago, when she was about the age I am now, she realized she is bisexual.

I sighed with relief, because for me, it was a no-brainer. "Of course I still care for you!" I said. "It doesn't matter to me at all! I like you for who you are - whether you are straight, or lesbian, or bi - it doesn't make any difference to me."

"Ah - but it DOES make a difference to me," she said. "Because being bi is an essential part of who I am."

She didn't want me to care about her regardless of her sexual identity. She wanted me to care about her as a person with the sexual identity of being bisexual. When she said this, a light went on for me. I was humbled, because I realized how insensitive my way of being "accepting" had been before she opened my eyes. It was as if my ability to

appreciate the different colors of flowers in a garden had been heightened. Of course it matters whether the flowers are golden, or delicate pink, deep red, vivid orange. Of course it matters whether a person is bisexual, lesbian, gay, transgendered, queer or straight. And further, my friend opened my eyes to the fact that there are as many shades of sexuality as there are individuals - each one of us is unique. Because her essential nature as a bisexual woman matters, and she made me see that, my capacity to appreciate beauty in a multitude of expressions has been enhanced.

She has taught me much since that conversation when she "came out" to me and I "came out" of my bland and easy acceptance of sexual diversity. Some of what I have learned has been about what it means to be, as she puts it, a bi woman who is "gray-haired and above suspicion." Most of what I have learned through our friendship is what it means to be fully human - like all true friendships, we discover who we are as we see ourselves reflected back in each other's eyes - reflected back a little better than we are, often, so we have room to grow in spirit.

But I will never forget how her eyes looked when she first disclosed her bisexuality, or the passion in her voice when she said "Oh Yes, it DOES matter." She did not want mere acceptance. She wanted celebration - and my life has been made richer because of her insistence.

As we observe "Coming Out" Sunday today, I find myself wondering about the difference between acceptance and celebration as it plays out in the life of this congregation. Does this service signify that it doesn't matter what your sexual orientation is, you are loved and respected here? This is an important and healthy affirmation, I believe. Too often in wider society we are confronted with situations where sexual identity should NOT matter, but it does. It shouldn't matter when it comes to weighing the essential worth and dignity of a person; this is and should be a "no-brainer." We stand together as one people when we struggle against oppression. This Society is a beacon of hope and solidarity in the struggle for justice and equality.

However, within the safety of the loving relationships and mutual respect which characterize this congregation, we may venture to do more than accept one another. There are beautifully diverse ways of being and qualities of energy that are grounded in our sexual natures. How do we acknowledge that sexual orientation does matter, and should matter? How might we more fully appreciate all the colors in the beautiful garden that grows when the human spirit is encouraged to blossom?

May we look to each other for the answers, as we each come out, and come into our own. I pray each one of us will be blessed with courage gained from the sure and certain knowledge that we are loved, this day and always. AMEN