

Coming Out: Generation to Generation

Imagine that you're a parent. Your teenage son suggests that he needs to talk. That's odd. Conversations between parent and child aren't all that frequent at this stage, unless it's a request to borrow the car. You sit down and he tells you that he's gay. Are you panicked? Confused? Worried that perhaps you goofed at some point in the childrearing process? Or do you hug him? Tell him that you're proud? Offer your unqualified acceptance and total support?

Coming out means coming one step closer to a love that's unconditional—not limited by arbitrary categories or artificial constraints—and the closest I've come to that kind of love is as a parent. I remember attending a press conference at City Hall many years ago not long after we'd moved to Burlington. The subject was gay rights and somehow our childcare arrangements had fallen through that day, so Noah was with me. He was probably about two years old at the time. When it was my turn to speak, I introduced him as my son. I said that, being adopted, there were a lot of things I didn't know about him, like whether he would grow up to be tall or short, whether he might eventually be left handed or right handed. I also didn't know whether he would grow up to be gay or straight, but as a Dad I declared that I would love him just the same even if he turned out to be ambidextrous, and I certainly hoped he could count on being acknowledged and appreciated for who he was, never subject to bigotry on account of his sexual orientation anymore than he should suffer second-class treatment because he happened to be Korean.

I've always worried about my children. Worry is part of being a parent. But I think I've also always loved them deep down, never faltered—not even the night when one of them came riding home in a police cruiser. My heart has occasionally ached, but never been closed or hardened toward either of them. That's the kind of love that early Christians called agape and that Jesus pointed to in parables like the prodigal son, who is welcomed back to the bosom of his family not because of what he's done or failed in but because that's what families are for. Home is the place they have to take you in, regardless. That's why Jesus often referred to the Creator as father, a term not often found in earlier Hebrew literature and one that mistakenly conjures up images of a stern patriarch. But the Aramaic word Jesus used was "abba," better translated "daddy," more suggestive of a nurturing, kindly, protective presence, because a parent's love was the best metaphor he could find for the kind of compassion God bears for all earth's children. Real love doesn't judge. Genuine love doesn't discriminate.

Unfortunately, not all youngsters enjoy that kind of unconditional regard from their own parents. Unitarian minister Elizabeth Tarbox writes of working with a group of young people at a Safe Schools program in Boston. "They were discussing how to tell their parents they were gay or lesbian. Many had suffered harassment, brutality, and ostracism by their peers, and they worried about how to protect their parents from the sadness that often results from learning one's son or daughter is homosexual.

"Tell them you will always love them, even if they reject you," suggested one man.

"Talk to siblings first, ask for their support," advised another.

"It's rough," admitted a young woman, "but you stand to have a closer, more honest relationship with them once they know."

“One young man had tears in his eyes. ‘I’m scared of hurting them,’ he admitted. ‘I never wanted to lie to them. My parents are neat people, but I’m afraid they will be so disappointed in me.’”

If its true that gays, lesbians and bi-sexuals make up about ten percent of the population, it means that over 70 million people in the United States are either homosexuals themselves or the parent of a homosexual child. Even if the numbers are only half that, it’s still a lot of people. And it means that most of us know from firsthand, personal experience that it’s not easy being open and honest, not even to moms and dads who are otherwise neat, progressive, open-minded people. It took my sister-in-law Katherine years to come out to her folks, for instance. The fiction was that she and Alice were just roommates, even after they’d been sharing living quarters for over twenty years. It’s partly a generational thing. Older Americans simply came of age in a different era.

Polls show, for example, that the real cleavage in our country regarding same sex marriage isn’t between Christians and non-Christians, or between Democrats and Republicans, or between liberals and conservatives. The real cleavage is between the young and old. James Penning, a professor at conservative Calvin College and coauthor of "Evangelicalism: The Next Generation," says that "students at evangelical colleges today are more likely to believe that homosexuality is something you're born with," not a sin or character defect, while the Pew Trust finds that “people in their early thirties today have a relatively favorable view of gay marriage and their views are similar to those of younger generations.” Our children have much to teach the rest of us about tolerance.

And they can also teach us much about sex. Although I came of age in the so-called swinging sixties, I absorbed a good deal of the sublimation that surrounded sexuality. The playground and locker room were dependable sources of misinformation. *Leave It To Beaver* wasn’t much help. And my mother, who was a widow doing her best to raise two boys without a man in the house, was awfully afraid that her sons might grow up to be fairies, as she put it. Her solution was to send us away each summer to a boys camp, where we could learn to tie knots and paddle canoes and master other manly arts. So while I managed to learn the one hundred and twenty-eight parts of a sailboat, when it came to learning about intimacy and relationships and dating I was pretty much on my own.

I like to think that my own children are more enlightened and a little less neurotic than I was as a teenager. Neither one seems as obsessed with coupling or forming a pair-bond as I was at their age. Both manage to have friends male and female, and seem question gender roles as a natural part of growing up. It gives me hope to think that younger people may be able to surmount some of the homophobia and sexism and stereotyping that have so long kept men and women at war with themselves and each other.

Our culture remains conflicted and troubled by sexuality, which is visible everywhere and yet also remains veiled in shameful secrets and unspoken taboos. Ask yourself: How much of the violence directed against women in our culture comes from men who are uncomfortable with their own femininity? How many women learn to manipulate

because asking directly for what you want might be deemed masculine and overly assertive? How much of the billion dollar porn industry stems from people's inability to form real relationships, turning to fantasies instead? Coming out is not just about liberation for our GLBT sisters and brothers. All of us need to be liberated from a culture where images and innuendoes about sex are everywhere, but where sexuality has never been so aggressively packaged, commercialized and marketed as a product to be consumed, a status symbol to be flaunted, a tool for gaining power (even in the halls of Congress), rather than as a natural gift to be enjoyed and shared.

These past twenty years belonged to me and my generation. And despite being reared on "Father Knows Best" and "I Dream of Genie," we boomers haven't done such a bad job. It took courage twenty years ago, for example, when members of this congregation conducted our Society's first Coming Out Sunday, way back in February of 1987. The theme of the morning was "Living With Masks."

One of the men who spoke that morning talked about how hard it was coming out to his parents. He was especially worried about his mom. Planning to tell her at dinner, he prepared himself all day long; then dinner came and went. He was going to tell her over dessert, and then the last course was finished. Finally he blurted it out: "Mom, I'm gay." His mother told him that she would always love him, then started to cry, explaining they were tears of joy. She knew her son was bottling something up. She'd been afraid he was going to announce that he had cancer—or maybe even that he planned to enter the priesthood! What a relief to discover he was a homosexual.

Think of what those few people started by taking off the masks. Because they dared to speak up, others were encouraged to follow. Silence and living in the closet gave way to pride parades. But children who weren't even born in 1987 are now young adults helping to shape the struggles of the next generation. They will continue to influence America's attitudes toward homo- and bi- and transsexuals, almost certainly for the better. The next twenty years belong to them, along with the challenge: to make sure that every child is loved, has a home, and is treated as a respected member of the community, with no conditions attached. This morning we celebrate our youth: our sons, our daughters, our leaders and our teachers.