

II. COMING OUT

For most gay men, whether or not they are fathers, the experience we call "coming out" — that is, telling someone else that they are gay, inexorably casting the die — is the pivotal experience of their lives. Once "out" there is no going back; for few gay men will return willingly to the closet. The reason for this reluctance is that self-respect at whatever cost feels better than fear in the closet.

Common to all the coming-out stories is a sense of a long, difficult struggle within one's self, of much energy devoted to keeping the secret, of much energy wasted denying one's true self. This struggle may be going on within you now, as you read this. At whatever coming-out stage you are, the coming-out stories make strange but fascinating reading. However different the stories are we may think they all sing with John Lennon:

I am he
as you are he
as you are me
and we are all
together.

A Gay Father Comes Out: Terry's Story

When I stop to contemplate what has happened to my life over the past few years, I can hardly believe all that has occurred. I was constantly hit with waves of depression and sadness then by waves of elation, excitement, and happiness. I suppose if I had not married Joan and had come out as a single gay person, I would have only felt the relief, joy, and excitement of self-discovery. When I look back over my life, I realize that there were many incidents where my homosexuality "seeped out." My earliest recollection was an erotic attraction to a cute boy in my grade two-class behind whom I made it my business to line up at recess time in order to enjoy being pushed up against him. I had not any concept of it being right or wrong, just enjoyable. This was the only guilt-free incident of the "gay" life that I can recall.

At the onset of puberty I had erotic feelings towards other boys but felt it was somehow wrong because no one else spoke about similar feelings. All my masturbatory fantasies were about men or boys at school or on television. Gradually, like so many other gay boys and girls, I picked up the signals from the rest of society, the family, friends, and schoolmates that there were people called "queers," "homos," and "fruits." I somehow felt that they were talking about me and I wasn't having any of that. I was not one of those queers. Like every child I wanted to be liked, loved, and accepted and queers weren't accepted. I was one of those gays who hid their real sexuality early and did a pretty good job of it. I think that the early hiding was partly responsible for my shyness. I was a loner and my interests were not those of my friends or family. But those interests and the internal growth helped to sustain me through most of my life until I was ready to come out, not only about my gayness, but about many other things that a Canadian male wasn't supposed to do or feel. I couldn't play the part of the Mountie who won't leave his horse but loves Rosemarie.

I hardly ever dated girls. There just wasn't the motivation, and yet in my twenties I thought I had better get a move on or I would end up lonely with no wife or children. Heterosexual singles were portrayed as unfortunate and desperate to get a man or woman like another Rosemarie — the one on the Dick Van Dyke Show. After all, you couldn't live a full, useful, emotionally-balanced life being single, could you? Of course I considered myself heterosexual even though my sexual fantasies were always of males and despite the fact I had often during my teens tried to get my hands down the pants of boys on the street.

At nineteen I was working at the Steel Company of Canada in Hamilton and was interested in politics and economics. At one point I wrote my personal "manifesto" of how Canada should be run. One emphatic section stated that all homosexuals should be imprisoned, so strong was my self-denial. After all, if I could make such a statement, how could I be a homosexual? And so it went up to the time I met my wife, Joan.

I had dated one girl for six months, and I was temporarily shattered when she wanted to stop dating. I suppose I thought my one and only opportunity to affirm my straightness had slipped through my fingers. Six months later I met Joan, who had been a teacher with my former girlfriend. I fell in love with her, and we dated for three months, at which point we became engaged and planned to marry the following July. We had a great rapport and sense of belonging together that continued throughout our nine-year marriage. I had tried sex with a woman once before meeting Joan but it wasn't very successful, so I had some anxiety just before our wedding. I wondered if I would be able to perform sexually. I was turned on by Joan; we kissed and were sexually stimulated by each other, but we hadn't had sex together so I thought the years of denial would be exposed once we were married. However, my anxieties were for naught because we had, despite my preference for males, a good sex life. I did not have to fantasize about other males during intercourse, although in retrospect I was not able to make our sex life very imaginative, as I do freely with a man. Everything about my self-denial seemed to go well, but several forces acted against me as I fought to deny and hide my gayness.

In the first place, I am a reader. I consume books by the car-load and in particular on some specific subject that catches my attention. I bought, begged, and borrowed books on the environmental movement and become a part of it with my wife. As a result we became members of Zero Population Growth in our area, probably the most unpopular group of what was then an unpopular, non-establishment movement. Environmentalism taught us about vegetarianism, a dietary regime which we willingly and gladly adopted. Once again we added another seemingly strange facet to our lifestyle, one which we didn't feel needed defending, but which we had to defend on many occasions. As a result of these two changes in our lifestyle we moved to the country to have a large organic garden. We had an outhouse, a pump in the kitchen, we heated with wood, and took baths on the kitchen floor in a galvanized tub with water heated in a kettle. Once again we stepped outside the norm of the mid-nineteen seventies. Finally an interest in oriental art led to Buddhism and an interest in world religions and philosophy. Binding all this together was the anti-Viet Nam war movement, the Flower Children, Black Power and the Women's Movement. We had adopted non-establishment ways at a time when the establishment of the late sixties and early seventies was under attack.

I realized being different did not make one bad or hurt people, nor did the sky fall. I felt the freedom that comes from breaking old and restricting icons in every part of me but in my sexual orientation.

In 1973, after three years of marriage, Joan and I took a two-week trip to England and France. It was on a channel ferry that I had my first homosexual experience. Several times before this I had been in a position to have sex with another man but had panicked at the last minute because to go ahead would have meant I could no longer deny my homosexuality. I even phoned the desk at the YMCA where I was staying with my youngest brother to complain of a man making a pass at me, even though I realize I was probably more the *agent provocateur* than he. Once I had had this ship-board experience, I could no longer deny it and began thinking more about human sexuality. I started to have quick sex in my hometown and had a six-month affair with another gay man who was married. I was more positive about my gayness by this time, though afraid to let heterosexual society know.

In the summer of 1977 I first became aware of the Anita Bryant campaign and had awakened enough to my own gayness so I was no longer afraid to follow stories about her in the newspapers. I soon realized that what she was saying was totally wrong. She was narrow-minded and said things about me that were not true. I was not a child molester; I was none of the things she incorrectly said gays were. I began to watch carefully for more articles about gays and began also to borrow library books. Newer, more positive books were appearing on the shelves such as *Out of the Closets: Voices of Gay Liberation* and *The Homosexual Matrix*. My self-awareness was growing. I was beginning to come out of the closet, at least to myself.

I might mention at this point that I am the oldest of five boys and at least three of us are gay. The middle brother is four years younger than I and has been out as a gay person since his teens. There was no gay-positive support in our area then. The fact that I had a gay brother did not help me to realize that I was really gay. In fact, it probably scared me further into the closet. He always seemed so upset emotionally and I didn't realize that most gays did not fit his manifestation of gayness.

In March 1975 our son and only child, Dean, was born and in the Spring of 1978 I noticed an article about a gay father in the *Globe and Mail*. This was the final catalyst. I began writing to him and had reply mail addressed to the post office where I work as a letter carrier. That April, 1978, a long-time friend of mine came out to me because I spoke so positively about gays. I came out to him about five minutes later. I was then introduced to gay friends of his, some of whom I had known as "straight" people from previous jobs. I realized that gay people were not freaks but were, for the most part, nice people. I began going to the one gay disco in Hamilton and for the first time danced with and touched other men with no fear or guilt, but as a free man.

The following June I told my wife I was bisexual. I was keeping one foot on dry land by saying that to see what her reaction was. Joan read nearly everything I did about homosexuality and thus I felt she was getting ready subconsciously for the day of my "coming out." She knew I had at least one brother who was gay and so suspected my new interest in things gay was because I was concerned about him. I then contacted all my older brothers — except the youngest because I wasn't sure how he would react — to tell them that I was gay. Just prior to this, I had begun to suspect other brothers may have been gay. The second-youngest reacted calmly and didn't reveal a thing about his gayness until months later. The middle brother, who has always been "out," said he always knew I was gay and suspected that the second-youngest was gay also.

The first two months after coming out to Joan weren't too bad. She was never anti-gay and had never really thought much about it. We talked often about human sexuality and homosexuality in particular. Joan began asking me questions about the way I viewed men and women and what being free

from the hiding and fear would mean for our future. In most cases she had already anticipated my answers, but just wanted them verified by me. For Joan fear, jealousy, and depression set in as I began spending some time, at least once a week, with new gay friends. At times I got angry that I had not been able to come out before we were married and thus save both of us the pain that we were going through. On the one hand I was depressed and unhappy that an ideal nine-year marriage might very well be ending, and yet I was elated at having accepted the fact that I was gay. A great burden was lifted from my shoulders. However, my anger culminated one evening when Joan was crying and saying that what was happening hurt. I wanted to lash out at someone yet no one person was to blame. It was a homophobic society that scared me into hiding and denying my homosexuality until I believed I was heterosexual. Thus I stumbled into a marriage. I went wild with anger that evening. I threw furniture all over the house and wanted to drive my car at break-neck speed — not caring whether I got killed. Joan calmed me down and from then on, although we were often upset, we began to face the reality of what was to happen to our marriage.

The previous October we had sold our house in the country because the isolation under the circumstances was intolerable. We bought a small bungalow in Hamilton and moved there with our son Dean who was nearly four years old. Joan began looking for a job; she needed the sense of security and independence it would give her if we had to live separately. In February of 1979 I came out to my family, Joan's family, and some friends. To say the least it was a shock and upsetting to everyone. There was no overt homophobia on the part of the parents, although they knew little or nothing about homosexuality. A few members of the family were secretly hostile and refused to learn or understand, but the two mothers listened and learned and are supportive of gays now. The really upsetting fact was our probable separation but we realized that it would be unavoidable. We began discussing how we would relate to each other. Fortunately we had reached the stage where we could deal with my gayness and with coming out to others, so planning the near future was manageable. We agreed, as we had before my coming out, that Dean would be raised in an open, non-sexist home. Joan began working at a local car-rental company and started the search for an apartment in late Spring of 1979. We agreed to separate and did so just at the beginning of July after I returned from the Seventh Annual Gay-Lesbian Conference in Ottawa.

Dean has adjusted quite well. He has two homes with his own room in each. Nursery school introduced him to new people and places, which helped him a lot. He never questions why we live separately but will some day. He knows the word "gay" and associates it with certain people, even though he doesn't know its meaning. Joan and I want him to grow up knowing his father and some uncles are gay and to understand them as people and not the shadowy freaks they have been falsely portrayed to be. Joan has come to understand what it means to be gay, the oppression, the fear, the myths, and the authenticity of gay feelings. She is now a strong supporter of gay rights.

My way was first to educate myself about human sexuality and especially about homosexuality. Then I was able to educate others too, if they were willing to learn. I am convinced that these are the major steps required to end the fears of gays among heterosexuals and to end the self-dread felt by closeted gays like the one I used to be. Thus we hope that fewer gays will marry out of fear of loneliness and rejection by others or simply because they never could believe they were really homosexual. I realize after much pain and years of hiding that gays and lesbians can live a full, happy life and that they can love and be loved by another person of the same sex. They can also be loved by heterosexuals who have been educated by the example of open gays and lesbians who clearly show the stereotypes about them are a lie.

I have no fear of my son being gay. The heterosexual dictatorship we live in has not stopped us from being gay. We cannot make a child gay, bisexual, or heterosexual. Whether my son is gay or heterosexual or somewhere in between I will not honestly care. I just want him to be happy as the person he is and to know he has the support of his family. He will face difficulties with other people because his father is gay, no doubt, but so do the children of Pakistani parents in an alien land, or of other parents who somehow are different from the mainstream of our society.

Coming Out To Yourself

The first step in emerging from the darkness into the light is the winning of the struggle within yourself. This step into self-awareness, the joyful acceptance of your homosexuality, we call "coming out to yourself."

Coming out has been defined as "the act of identifying and accepting oneself as a homosexual."¹ But it is more of a process than an act, although the end of the process may be symbolized by a single, simple act that comes to take on great meaning for the individual. Many of us, for example, have had the experience of trembling before we walked into our first gay meeting. Some of us who finally called that gay counselling line hung up the phone after talking for half an hour and then wept uncontrollably. To some it is walking into a gay bar. For one of our members, it was seeing a man across the street and knowing that if he crossed it to be with him again his life would be changed unalterably. He crossed it.

Don Clark writes with sympathy and insight about gays generally and about gay fathers in particular. He views coming out as a process in which the individual tries and ultimately fails to conform to a social mould that does not fit:

The first massive effort to conform is motivated by the reluctance to admit to a deviant identity. It ends in failure. The second struggle to conform is motivated by hope that the deviant identity while true and privately accepted, can be changed. After this second long stage of trying to change has drained emotional and financial reserves, most of us are left with seriously lessened self-esteem and confronted with despair.²

It is, therefore, a conscious and sometimes painful process that brings homosexuals to identify themselves as homosexuals and to accept that fact. In some people this process of acceptance is relatively quick; in others it is accomplished only slowly and often with great anguish. The gay father is usually someone who strives to deny his homosexuality. Acceptance of his gayness comes slowly and during that time of struggle he lives in fear that others will discover his secret. His life carries all the hallmarks of the "normal" heterosexual: wife, responsibility, children. He therefore tries to hide a part of himself. The fear of discovery is usually so great that he denies his homosexual feelings and as he succeeds in hiding, his fear grows with the continuing denial. To overcome this fear, the gay father must first accept himself and his sexual preferences.

The first step towards acceptance requires the gay father to recognize his homosexual fantasies, desires, and actions for what they are. Only then can he end the horrible isolation to which he otherwise condemns himself. Only then can he begin to share meaningfully with others (possibly with his wife and children) a hidden part of self that is deep, powerful, intense, and (yes) unalterable.

"Coming out" now means more than it once did when the words described the debutante's transition from child to woman. It now marks the dawn of self-recognition in the gay person. After gays come out in this way, the next step that many take is, of course, to come out to others — at

¹ Peter Fisher, *The Gay Mystique* (New York: Stein & Day, 1972), p. 24.

² Don Clark, *Loving Someone Gay* (New York: Signet Books, 1977), p. 18.

least to *some* others. Indeed, more and more gay men and women are coming out to friends, family, and co-workers. In a few very special cases some of this coming out may be caught and broadcast far and wide by the media, for example in a sympathetic television show or newspaper article about gays. Then those who live with a painful secret realize that they are not alone. They see that others have done the impossible. They may now see that gay people are not the monsters some people say they are; they may even come to see that gay people have made contributions out of all proportion to their numbers.