

### **WHEN TWO WORLDS COLLIDE, OR TELLING MY WIFE ABOUT IT: DAVID'S STORY**

It was not my decision to tell my wife that I was a homosexual. I could not decide to tell her because I had hardly faced the fact myself. Instead, I lived in two worlds: one a secret world that I escaped to more and more frequently over the years; and the other the normal, everyday world in which I led an apparently happy married life. The everyday life was the more important one to me and I could not conceive of leaving it, as I would have to do if I told my wife about the secret me and the secret world I lived in. I came to tell her about that secret part of me, about the me I tried for so long to suppress, only when the two worlds finally collided. It was a collision she was totally unaware of, but I had watched it happen and — after first refusing to believe it had happened — I told her about it, too. And then my married life fell apart and I had to build, slowly and painfully, a new, honest, but basically better world around the homosexual me.

If I thought about it, I knew I was gay, but I chose not to think about it. I knew it from some of the earliest memories I could recall about myself. The strongest early memory I have of childhood is being put to bed and waiting in the dark for the images to appear in my mind. The forms I saw were masculine only, beautiful, the muscles hard, the bodies nude except for the small, tight cloths around the loins. I saw these forms floating upwards with outstretched arms through blue water to a bright light above them. Then I would see myself looking just like these other figures and following them.

All of this sense of self and sexuality I ignored when I came to consciousness as myself. I suppressed these images and my homosexuality more or less successfully for many years. My experiences with sex after puberty were limited largely to fantasy and masturbation. One of my friends told me recently that he thought of me at that time as being asexual. In my late twenties, the strains began to appear. My friends married while I had almost no contact with women my own age except as wives of my friends. I began a career after university and settled into the role of eligible bachelor. With some money saved I went back to university for graduate training. Although I did well academically, the strains of the new life made me ask what I was doing it all for and why I was so much alone. I had spells of feeling that I was crazy, mad, perverted, sick. I thought I needed to see a psychiatrist, but I wasn't sure about what. I would stare at the list of psychiatrists in the phone book but lose my nerve before I could complete a call. What would I use as a reason for calling them? I used to hint to psychologists I knew in the university counselling service that I would like to talk to them professionally. Despite their encouragement, I never did so. I would stand in the stacks of the university library completely alone on a Saturday afternoon and tremble as I reached for a book on homosexuality, petrified that someone would see me take it from the shelf and know the truth that I could not accept about myself.

This drift towards self-destruction was halted abruptly when I was invited to a party that included both students and faculty members. It was not the kind of circle I usually moved in. It was fast and open in ideas and attitudes. It was stimulating on many levels. Afterwards I agonized over whether I could phone that girl I'd had the argument with and that I felt attracted to. Weren't we just arguing to have something to talk about? Although I waited until the wrong moment to call, I got a date and everything fell rapidly into place. She seduced me and we were engaged to be married. To the amazement of family and friends, we were married less than six weeks after we met.

My marriage solved my problems. I no longer thought I was falling apart; I no longer woke up in the morning and found I was too dizzy to stand up unless I lay without moving for an hour or so. I began to think of myself as a happily married heterosexual, and this state of affairs continued for more than two years. I'm not sure what happened in our marriage to change things, but there came a time when the old images started coming back. It was as though marriage had released a block that enabled me to be sexual in reality, not just in fantasy. And then I began asking myself what kinds of sexual experience I really desired. Marriage for me let the sexual genie out of the bottle and once he was out there was no way of putting him back in. And there was no doubt that this genie was male and that I wanted him. Although I struggled against these feelings, I rationalized that they could be justified on the grounds of experimentation. In any case, my wife was less interested in sex now than I was and I simply had to find additional expression for my drive. That's when I began to create the secret world where I could give expression to my fantasies.

Moving to Toronto in the middle 1960s gave a practical opportunity for the creation of this hidden and exquisitely desirable world. And that's when the double life, the lying and duplicity, began in earnest. Before my marriage the fantasies were my problem only. Now I knew that they involved others and that I was playing with fire. My job was a particularly good one, visible in some degree publicly, and one where the solid virtues of monogamous marriage and family were the expected public norm.

My slide into the secret world began with buying beefcake pictures in magazine stores on Yonge Street. These I bought and carefully concealed at home or in the office. For the practical reason that secure hiding places were small, the size of my library never grew much. I simply tossed out the old magazines as I bought new ones. Then the guys who sold the magazines became more interesting than the pictures in the magazines and I visualized doing mad things with them. But where could I do it? Then I thought of another image that had haunted my youth: the steambath. I walked into the Romans on a Christmas Day when I had gone out of the house to buy some item that had been forgotten for dinner. I simply had to see what was behind that door. Stairs were behind it and at the top of them a mirror in which a face appeared as soon as I entered the hall. I fled, terrified. But it was not too long thereafter that I returned and went up the stairs on what was to be the first of many, many visits.

The baths perfectly embodied my childhood fantasies: the men drifting around half-naked, the anonymity of the relationships, the muscles, the concealing and revealing steam, and above all that sense of sanctuary from society and its rules. And all of this was cleverly concealed from the other world and yet so easily accessible to it.

Beyond all these pleasures, there was also the blinding flash of orgasm with another male, the feeling of satisfaction and exhaustion too deep to express or even think about. And everything shut in this tiny, self-contained world. One could walk into it for two hours and out of it again into the other world with no fear that the two worlds could possibly collide. But keeping them apart became more and more difficult for me. First, the secret world began to take more and more time; and it required more and more elaborate lies to explain it away. Then came the shock of recognizing people in the baths. I thought I was the only person from the real world I lived in who would ever go to such places. Where the other people in this world came from in reality was something I didn't care to think about. But then I began to meet friends, colleagues from work, even neighbours. Besides these meetings there came also the anxiety of dealing with social diseases and groin bugs.

But I still could keep it all balanced, I told myself, as I sank deeper and deeper into the gay reality. At the same time, however, I was also strengthening the straight facade. If a child had not come into our married life, I might have faced the lie on my own. Earlier in our marriage, I had wanted children, but my wife did not, as a career was more important to her. When she had established herself in her career, she then decided we should have a child and I went along with the idea because it was part of the straight world to which I was so strongly attached. I told myself that a child would help me to give up the secret gay world that was causing me greater and greater anxiety and that I was coming to hate, although its allure was as strong as ever. When my wife could not conceive a child we began the steps leading to adoption and in a remarkably short time (since children for placement were in short supply) we had a baby in our house. Children's Aid had speeded our application because we were obviously the perfect couple who could give a child a home with all the advantages. All of this made me think of myself as being somehow a "normal" male with the potency of a father and all the hallmarks of the straight world. I felt I had now no reason why I should not devote myself exclusively to the straight world because I had demonstrated that I had all the sexual qualities and abilities that the straight world required. So I resolved at this time to give up the gay life completely. I told myself I now had no reason to want to continue in it and for several months I carried out the full role of the faithful husband and loving father. But it could not and did not last.

When I slid back into the secret gay world, it was via the baths again. The tension began to build strongly in my exclusively straight world. After a year or so, the child had changed our marriage completely. After initial indifference to the idea of being a father, I came to love our daughter deeply and, indeed, I was in many ways both mother and father to her. I felt I could respond to her more fully and completely than my wife could. My relationship with my wife began to change slowly, but with the inevitability of a glacier moving down a mountain. In the back of my mind, I began to realize that I now needed my daughter and I needed gay sex, but I didn't really need my wife.

Finally, the pressures became intolerable for me, although my wife claimed not to have noticed them during those months. We had agreed always to be open with one another and to talk about what we really felt. Yet I couldn't bring myself to talk about this deepest part of me because I knew her knowledge of it would destroy our marriage, and this, I told myself, I did not want. At the same time, I could not see how I was going to go on. Secretly, I was moving further into the gay world. I wanted to meet people as people and wanted to get away from anonymous sex. A few months before the collision of the worlds, I decided to have myself circumcised. There were some medical reasons for doing this, but I knew that there were deeper reasons. The result was a symbolic cutting as well as a physical one and I knew I was moving in a direction I could not retreat from, although I knew too that I was moving towards a personal disaster.

The strain began to tell on me. I would wake up at night screaming and angry. The anger was directed, I knew, at my wife, but I was never able to tell her what was bothering me. Although she must have known that I was profoundly disturbed about something, she always accepted my explanations of the incidents and outbursts that began to trouble our relationship. More lies. She asked me if she were the cause of my disturbance. Another lie. Finally a kind of calm descended on our relationship. Everything was suspended. I was waiting for something to happen. But I could not decide to make it happen. Once I lay in my cubicle at the bath and listened to two guys in the next room talking about their wives' acceptance of their homosexuality. I couldn't believe it; they were matter-of-factly talking about how their wives had adapted to the fact that they were gay.

One guy said something like, "She cried, but finally decided she wanted me even if I was gay." The other man was separated from his wife, but on good terms with her. Neither of them had children. I wanted to walk in on them and talk, but as usual I did nothing. I just lay on my bed afraid, hardly daring to breathe.

Then I went one afternoon to the bath and found it almost empty, as I knew it would be on a lovely August day. But there was that one man again in one of the farthest rooms from all the others. I had gone at such a time hoping that I wouldn't find anybody interesting. But I had been with him before and it was one of those tantalizing unions that asks for more to make it even closer to perfection. He was almost the perfect realization of my fantasy, although we said virtually nothing to each other and I never knew his name. What kind of pain he was acting out I never got to know, although it was obvious from his physical injury and the overdeveloped body that he was determined to win some of life's races even if he couldn't compete in the more usual ones. I wish I had talked to him. More recently I had been trying to combine talk with the sex and I had even had some spectacular successes, although they were always short term because I could never take such relationships outside the secret world. All of this seeking for communication other than sexual in my secret world was simply taking me further down that slope to the point where the next step would plunge me into the abyss.

With this man, talk wasn't really necessary. And in any case, I had gotten to the point where I didn't care whether the next step would bring calamity. However petrified I was by what I could see coming, I knew I would take even more steps in the same direction. I couldn't go back. I tried to think about telling my wife, but it was impossible. That was a step I knew I could not take. At least, I knew it was a step I could not *yet* take. I don't know if I ever would have told her voluntarily, before circumstances compelled me to do so. But in those days, I did at least think about it and I did wish I could face the lie and talk with her about it. But I didn't. Instead I went that afternoon to the bath and fucked the beautiful body — tall, slim, muscular — of the guy I did not know. He took the choice out of my hands; he threw the die I could not cast. As it was he had the clap and some days later I saw the symptoms in me. I phoned the bath and asked the voice that answered to tell body beautiful what I had gotten from him. He was easy to identify, as he was a regular at the bath and, indeed, seemed almost to live there. (Sometimes I thought I did too.) A week or so later I saw him in the same gay doctor's office where I had taken problems of this kind before. As I sat in the waiting room, he came out of the examination room and swept past giving me only that blink of the eyes that says, "I see you."

The week had been hell for me. I knew what had happened, but I couldn't believe it. It had happened, but it wasn't true. The cameras would be rolled back to play the scene again. Chance, luck, something would spare me. But I knew, or rather feared — because I could not understand what was happening to me except as a spectator — that I had made the fatal slip. Had I really broken my rule: "No sex at home for at least three days after a contact at the bath?" Had it been two days, three days, five days? I didn't know. I just knew inside my numbing fear that I had had sexual contact with my wife sometime between the event at the bath and the appearance of the symptoms. I knew then that the worlds were rushing towards collision. I just waited for the impact to register and hoped that something would rescue me from the consequences. I focused on the rule and tried to sort out what had actually happened. "Did I break the rule?" "How long did I wait?" Or did I simply abandon the rule as a way of forcing my way out of the intolerable tensions that were gripping me? Then and since I have never been able to sort out what happened and what my

intentions were in those events. The sequence of acts and feelings was blurred then and remains so now. Certainly I would never have deliberately set out to infect my wife. But I knew with a sense of growing desperation that I might have infected her and that I could have. I waited, hoping for a reprieve. I was anxious, terrified even, yet there was a strange calmness in my behaviour.

In this hiatus, my wife and I went to Stratford to take in a few plays at the Festival — Maggie Smith in *The Three Sisters* and *Antony and Cleopatra*. I stayed on alone especially to see *The Tempest*. I had always loved the play, but I sat transfixed at its end when Prospero seemed to be speaking directly to me and giving me reassurance:

Our revels are now ended. These our actors,  
As I foretold you, were all spirits and  
Are melted into air, into thin air:  
And, like the baseless fabric of this vision,  
The cloud-capped towers, the gorgeous palaces,  
The solemn temples, the great globe itself,  
Yea, all which it inherit, shall dissolve  
And, like this insubstantial pageant faded,  
Leave not a rack behind. We are such stuff  
As dreams are made on.

I awoke from the dream one day after dinner, about ten days after my contact in the bath. As we sat at the table over coffee, I watched my worlds collide and knew that my life as I was living it was utterly destroyed. My wife told me casually that she was being bothered by a vaginal discharge. There was an explosion in my mind, but as usual the outer shell gave no sign of it. I did not flinch, but inside I was stunned, rigid with shock. The next morning, after a night of private horror, I told her what the discharge likely was, that I had just been treated for gonorrhea, and that the source of my disease had been a homosexual contact.

Only then, she said, did she know that I was a homosexual. As some kind of explanation, I added that I thought I had been one all my life. I wept in telling her all of this and said that my life was in her hands. She could do with me as she pleased. She could have hit me, ordered me out of the house, or denounced me publicly. I would not have questioned anything she might have done then.

It took two more months for the separation to come. Medical and psychiatric help, hours of talk, communication that was more direct and meaningful than any we had ever had — these were the things that filled those sixty days. By now it was the golden days of fall and I remember the clarity, the intensity, the sudden utter honesty with which I saw things around me. And this same light pervaded our relationship.

We laid down the conditions for the way we would carry on together. My conditions were that I could no longer live a lie and that I would no longer promise to myself or anyone else that I could live without gay reality around me. My wife tried to live with me as a homosexual, but it did not work. If I was late, for whatever plausible reason, she would be near hysteria when I returned to the house. It was impossible. She said I would have to choose between her and being gay. I knew I could only choose her by returning to the double life, to the lies, to the self-hate, and to the whole way of living and thinking that I could no longer accept. We parted on the understanding that we

would continue as friends. I was to leave on an experimental basis for a short time; I was to sort things out and come to my senses. My wife was confident that I would return on her conditions. She thought I could become heterosexual simply by resolving in isolation to change myself and she hoped the pressure of separation would speed this transformation. I knew if I left I would never return as her husband. I think these conditions allowed us both to get out of a relationship that neither of us wanted to shoulder the responsibility for shattering. And that was the end of our marriage in any human terms.

It was also the beginning of the end of our amicable relationship. Later the fighting and uncontrolled anger took over. It was searing pain from that point onwards, not least for our young daughter who simply could not understand why we were separating. She had never seen anything that suggested tension or anger between us. Her tears when we told her were among the hardest things I have had to bear in all of this history — in this progress towards the final recognition of myself. But they were by no means the only expression of deep sorrow to mark the three years that followed. Those tears, as they welled up and burst forth, expressed the feelings of all of us. But our daughter saw the situation more clearly than we did. We explained how I would remain nearby and how I might come back to live at home again. When she stopped crying, she said simply, "Daddy, you're never going to come back."

Now it is over and we are divorced after three years filled mostly with bitter wrangling. We've all come to accept what has happened in one way or another. Do I think it was all worth it? Oh yes. My only regret is that I did not have the courage to tell my wife earlier and to deal honestly with her about that secret and innermost essential part of me. Would she have understood me? I don't know, but that course — had I taken it — would have been far better than waiting as I did until I made that final slip on my precarious climb down into hell. It is always better to jump than to be pushed. It is always better to face up to what one is than to hide it from yourself and others with the hope that even you yourself will not be able to see the duplicity you are practising.

*Postscript.* When I first read this story to friends in the Gay Fathers of Toronto group they said, "But you can't stop there. Go on and say what happened." I never understood those comments, although perhaps I am beginning to now. Whenever I tried to say more it always seemed pointless to me, as I continued to feel that I had said all I could and even that I had said too much. It is not that my life stopped at the point this story does, but merely that things thereafter are not fixed in a perspective as are those from the earliest part of my life. Things now are still in flux.

And that, I suppose, is what my friends are urging me to say. That whatever the pain from an earlier time, things do go on in the new life. There are new friends, new problems, new opportunities, new mistakes.

I did do a number of dumb things after I started to accept myself as homosexual. But I have managed to do a number of things right, too. First there are those new friends, the gay ones and our times together — tender and intense, like a homecoming. There are the deeply satisfying feelings of being with gay people and rejoicing in it. There is the relaxing, the final act of being oneself.

And there are the men I have known and know now as lovers. Some of them are part of the mistakes. But with them at last I have felt that full sharing of self that can come only with another man. He is with me, here, all the faculties engaged, although the presence may not last. Building a lasting relationship is not easy, and I cannot say too much about it because I have not yet tested

that I can. Starting late with such things means that they are not easy. But in these relationships there is the full enjoyment of an intense sexual and personal bond that is splendidly egalitarian, no sham, no shame, no blame, just the essential stimulating and creative bond. Such relationships are real and satisfying, although they do not fit heterosexual fantasies about the idyllic bond between Snow White and Prince Charming.

There comes also a slow reconciliation with the woman who was once my wife and the return of respect and regard for each other. And there is the satisfaction of watching this reconciliation work its benefit on us all. And so we see our daughter once more bubbling with laughter, able to talk again about one parent to the other. Time does heal even the deepest personal wounds.

And finally I have come to the conclusion that the choice I made about my life was right. I wish only that I had made it sooner, before I had done so much damage to myself and others. I wish the world had let me make that choice much earlier or that I had had the courage to make it in spite of the world's ways. So part of my life is now filled by working for the rights of homosexuals, for the right of some of us to be ourselves and be gay.

The public transit system in Toronto promotes itself in this time of energy crisis as "The Better Way." I know an even better "Better Way" and those of us who sense and mark a mystery deep within us will know what that way is.

— May 1979 Postscript March 1981