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"Out and Serving our Community since 1989"

Survival Has Been the Answer

BY EUAN BEAR

In discussing the plotlines of recent "gay-friendly" broadcast TV shows, columnist Pat Robinson (Bark o' the Banshee) was upset that in one show, a character who had been introduced as a lesbian was revealed as an imposter, it was all an act in order to get a book contract. Later in the column Robinson thought it was hilarious when a gay man and a straight woman in another show pretended to be straight in order to get a business loan, and after they got the loan, the banker turned out to be gay.

It got me thinking. Why is it okay to lie about our lives and pretend to be straight, but we're offended when others lie to us and pretend to be gay? Obviously, survival has been the answer. Those of us who could "pass" as straight did so in order to live, to eat, to have a safe place to sleep, to keep a job. The extent to which any of us had to do that is a measure of our (hopefully past) oppression. And there are still pockets of that kind of toxic homophobia, as witness the higher rates of suicide among gay, lesbian, bisexual and questioning youth.

But it should now be a measure of our community's maturity and our success in

standing up for ourselves, speaking the truths of our lives to the powers that be, that we no longer regard lying about ourselves as ethically acceptable behavior.

I brought this topic up at a recent gathering of lesbians ranging in age from 48 to 70-ish. It fell on the floor like a lead balloon. Maybe it was because this group of women had all grown up in times when "passing" was an absolute necessity for survival. Doing otherwise meant being locked up in a their homes or a mental hospital or a jail, being thrown out of their families and communities, beatings, rapes or death.

I was the youngest woman in the group. My attempts at "passing" were short-lived and rarely successful. Long dangling earrings aren't much of a disguise for someone who comes across as a diesel dyke. At some point I just decided to assume that anyone looking at me would figure it out and I stopped caring about trying to "pass." Earrings became a celebration rather than a disguise. And now I rarely wear them at all.

My partner and I have a phrase for the women we see who feel they must wear a disguise at work, but who register immediately as lesbians on our "gaydar": dyke-in-a-dress. The tip off is usually the mountain boots below the hemline. Sometimes it's the butch walk or the white tee shirt (I once spotted a FedEx driver - not in a dress - by the white tee and later walked beside her in a Pride parade). Other times it's the not-quite-ladylike navy blue suit, even when it's a jacket and skirt. Sometimes it's the willingness to look other people in the eye or to take up space.

Unfortunately my gaydar is not tuned to spot lesbians who are into high femme attire and presentation. They are mistresses of "passing" and have the most choice about declaring their sexual and gender allegiance. The fact that they do declare their allegiance says a lot about their courage.

Another sign of the maturing of our community is that, at least in Burlington, I now rarely get that "I see you, we have a connection, I've-got-your-back" eyes-locked look from women who trip my gaydar at 100 yards. Of course, the fact that there are so many lesbians I don't know with whom I could share the stare shows how the community has grown. An email friend originally from the Caribbean and now living in Toronto commented that

she gets that look from every African American she encounters when she travels in the US, but rarely gets it in Canada. It's an artifact of surviving under oppression.

Not getting the bonding look is probably a sign of health. We can be different, less on guard, live and bond with others beyond the obvious connections. I'm glad for the easing of overt acts of hostility (though there are still many public acts of verbal and legislative hostility aimed at us here in Vermont). But damn, I miss that look, that sense of being seen and connected within a community, even when I don't know the other lesbian or gay guy.

Outside of Burlington, Richmond, and Montpelier, I still get and return the look from gay men and lesbians. Hell, I was up in Franklin County the other day on my way home and bonded with the woman driver of a car with an "Uppity Women Unite" bumper sticker alongside the one that said "Women Vote." I couldn't believe that I didn't know this woman who was brave and yes, uppity enough to carry those words on the back of her car. But when we got to the fork, she turned left and I stayed on the main road. It would've made a better ending to this story if I had waved (from my rainbow-studded baby SUV with the "Keep It Civil" bumper sticker) and she waved back. but it didn't happen that way. She went her way and I went mine, and I felt a sense of loss that I hadn't pulled over, flagged her down and introduced myself. But even so, just knowing she's out there eases my mind just a bit.

So, Burlington and Montpelier and Richmond, being the centers of liberal acceptance that they are, can show us maturity. The gay men and lesbians who live there can speak truth about their lives usually without negative consequences. They can return a blank stare for the stranger's "I-got-your-back" look because they don't need a stranger's help for that any more, never mind whether the stranger needs theirs. They can be healthy and refuse the bonding of oppression. Or they can flirt if they're interested. But out in the rest of the state, we ain't there yet. Some of us out here speak the truth of our lives even when there are negative consequences. And some of us can't. We still share the look that says, "You're part of my community, you're not alone, I see you."

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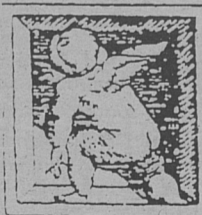
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