

Faith, Love & Acceptance

by Bill Lippert

In 1973, I came to Vermont for the first time, hiked on the Long Trail and climbed Camel's Hump with my parents and my two brothers. I had only come out to a few friends, and was not yet out to anyone in my family. A year later, I would struggle with telling my parents I was gay. It would be another five years before my youngest brother would come out as well.

Not in my wildest dreams could I have imagined then that twenty-nine years later, following my mother's death, I would sit with twelve other Lippert family members as guests of the Central Pennsylvania PFLAG (Parents & Friends of Lesbians and Gays) monthly meeting, as PFLAG members took the time to pay special tribute to my mother. For seven years, as a PFLAG board member, moderator of their monthly meeting, and an active member of the PFLAG Speaker's Bureau, my mother had had a powerful impact through sharing her life and telling her "story," as she liked to call it.

Raised in the conservative Mennonite Brethren in Christ church, my mother had moved through her own personal journey, opening her heart and mind, along with my father, to embrace a diverse family she had not known she would have. Coming out publicly as the parents of two gay sons would happen only after my father's retirement from the active ministry. But as she said in a public meeting a few years ago, "My husband and I have two gay sons. We have been doubly blessed!"

My mother's unwavering commitment to her church and her Christian faith, combined with her equally unwavering love and pride for all of her children, gay and straight, provided a powerful antidote to homophobia for other members of PFLAG. To all my mother gave her unconditional

welcome and approval.

Tears of love and pride for my mother rolled down my face, as I heard story after personal story of the important role my mother's life had played in helping someone else's parents, or someone else's lesbian daughter or gay son, to find hope and wholeness.

I am reminded that sometimes it is the little things that say it all.

Two and a half years ago, my father, a United Methodist minister, died following a long illness. Several hundred people from parishes all over central



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Pennsylvania would gather at my parents' church to worship and to honor and remember my father's ministry and life.

As with so many things, Mom took charge of the details, including the written program for what would otherwise be a traditional religious, United Methodist memorial service. One thing, however, would not be quite so traditional. In the printed memorial service program, my mother listed all of my father's surviving family members: my mother, my sister Mary and her husband, Don; me and my partner, Enrique; my brother Tim and his wife, Sue; and my youngest brother, Jon, and his partner of 20 years, Jeff.

For my mother, there was never any question that all of her family members who had loved and cared for my father, and for her, would be publicly listed and acknowledged. When someone

commented that there would probably be some folks from Dad's earlier parishes who might not know our family included two gay relationships, she stated simply, "If they don't know, it's about time that they know!"

So, in February 2002, when it was our turn as her children to plan a memorial service for my mother, we knew just how she would want it done. In addition to our old family favorites, we included a new, special hymn, which we understood in recent years my mother had particularly come to appreciate: "Help Us Accept Each Other."

On this Mother's Day, I love and honor you Mom. I am proud to be your son. I miss you and am grateful that so many others were also touched by your love and your life. ▼

Bill Lippert lives in Hinesburg.

Travels With Ma

by Carrie Rampp

Only in the past year have I introduced my mother to my "real" life. Of course, she has known I was gay for more than a decade. But whenever we were together, I never really shared with her what my life was really like.

My mother typically visits in marathon-like sessions in December and July. She comes to Vermont from Pennsylvania and stays for three weeks. She just loves Vermont. Anyone who has ever had relatives visit knows that three weeks is a pretty long stretch ... you really have to plan ahead for success.

For years I had planned for this time as if it were an intense vacation, with programming for every day. Because of this, my partner Jenn and I, as well as my mother, are really well traveled in Vermont — you name it, we've pretty much done it. I planned every sort of outing, from Manchester to Woodstock, to Stowe and St. Johnsbury, to picnics at Mt. Philo, outings to every museum or historic site, to visiting the Lippizan camp on the Champlain Islands. But what I didn't do was let my mother meet my friends.

I was convinced this would be a terrible idea, that she would surely be mean to them or behave in a wildly inappropriate fashion. So when she was here, she only saw me, Jenn, and occasionally my co-workers at Middlebury College. This left me more and more frustrated. When she was here, I had a good time, and I was happy to see her, but I was always somewhat angry that I had to change my whole life around to accommodate her visit, and that she really didn't know what my life was all about.

But last summer I was complaining to a friend about this, likely for about the 20th time, and he essentially shouted at me — the issue was really much more about

ME and my feelings about my mother, he yelled, and much less so about my mother and how she would treat my friends. So I resolved to give it a go. Maybe he was right, maybe it was ME.

Last summer I took my mom on all of my regular outings. We went everywhere with my gay friends. I took her to parties, concerts, had friends over ... and guess what? Everything was totally fine. She actually liked most of them. She sometimes said things that were a little funny, but mostly because she hadn't had much exposure to so many out gay people.

Nearly a year later, she now looks forward to seeing them, nearly as much as to seeing me. She's happy that I'm coming to visit her in Pennsylvania next month and bringing along one of my gay male friends that she likes. She's asked me a lot of interesting questions that we surely wouldn't have talked about otherwise — about civil unions, about why gay people always seem to be hugging each other (a very funny question in my book), about how I have managed to meet so many gay people, about whether I think this many gay people live in her neighborhood in Pennsylvania ... and so on and so on.

So as Mother's Day approaches I can't help but think how fortunate I've been in the past year. My relationship with my mother has not only grown closer, but much more honest. I thought I had done the "bold" thing when I shared with my mother that I was gay, but it wasn't really until I was totally honest about my life and shared with my mother the people who mean the most to me that I could really say I was completely "out" to her. So happy Mother's Day Ma! I love you so much. ▼

Carrie Rampp lives in Leicester.

Knowing and Not Knowing

by Ernie McLeod

We don't generally get to choose our mothers, any more than our mothers get to choose who we'll become.

Sometimes, though, I wonder ... What would it have been like to have, say, a PFLAG mom (one hopefully less grating than the Sharon Gless character on *Queer as Folk*)? Or a fundamentalist Christian mother? Or a single mother? Or an adoptive lesbian mom who, in many locations, would've had no legal right to be my parent?

On the flip side, I wonder if my mother has imagined me as another sort of son. Perhaps as a

straight man with a couple of kids and a penchant for sports, beer, and boat-sized convertibles. Actually, she doesn't have to work hard to imagine that one since it pretty much describes my brother.

Fact is, for better or worse, we're stuck with one another, and — at this point in our lives — there's not much room for imagining what might have been.

It wasn't always that way. I imagine for quite a few years there I kept my mother's imagination busy and confused, particularly on the subject of my sexuality.

As I was growing up, she had eyes. She found clues and —

indirectly, usually — let me know she'd found them. So, she probably knew, or at least had some heavy suspicions.

But then there were those girlfriends, the ones I took to proms and the one I remained with throughout my twenties, the one who became like a member of the family. I don't think my mother knew that my girlfriend knew (eventually) that I was gay, but then again I can't know for sure since my mother wasn't one of those mothers who inquired. If she wondered whether I'd marry or produce grandchildren, she didn't do so aloud, in my presence.

Then, suddenly (or so it must have seemed to her), I was spending much less time with the girlfriend who'd become like a member of the family and much

more time with a mysterious man she'd never met. She didn't ask; I didn't tell.

Eventually, she met the mysterious man, and very gradually he became far less mysterious. He became like a member of the family.

I had come out without officially coming out. Not the right or wrong way to do it, but the way it worked for us. She got it when she needed to and (along with my father) adapted.

How my mother and I have chosen to deal with — and not deal with — my sexuality is but one facet of our relationship. I'm 40; she's in her 70's. It's pretty much off the table. She can worry about me traveling to weird countries. I can worry about her being an elderly widow living alone.

Occasionally, the envelope gets pushed, slightly: I mention attending the civil union hearings or warn about a certain "Letter to the Editor" I've sent to the hometown newspaper. She mentions reading about a woman who's adopted kids with her female partner or informs me that one of her acquaintances has indeed seen my "Letter to the Editor" and — to her surprise — declared it right-on. If my mother can learn to do e-mail, anything is possible.

I'd wish her a Happy Mother's Day here, but she doesn't read *Out in the Mountains*. As far as I know. ▼

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