

Views: Lesbian-Feminist Mother Finally Gets 'Queer'

On a lake in the northeast kingdom, on a clear October day with wind pushing water into frothy white tips, my partner and I paddle our new red canoe. I am in back, in charge of direction – a new place to be. Alongside us and easily keeping up with our tandem efforts at forward motion, a lone woman paddles her sleek and shapely canoe. I imitate her paddle's long reach for water with my paddle, working hard to keep our canoes parallel and close so we can continue our conversation. We are getting to know each other.

My partner and I begin to tell her about our daughters who, at 19 and 24, are all grown up and living on their own in Northampton, Massachusetts. We love to talk them up because they are beautiful, smart and strong. We're proud of them. But it seems that most people, especially heterosexuals, have a particular curiosity about our daughters. So, this makes me cautious as well.

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highest hopes or darkest dreads confirmed: that a lesbian feminist who raises two daughters with her lesbian partner will produce young women who are not 'normal' (a favored code word for heterosexual). Since the heterosexuals I've spoken with generally have such a large need to know whether or not my daughters are 'normal,' they often ask pointed questions designed to ferret out the gender and/or sex of the individuals with whom my girls are romantically involved. And I don't want to go there with them.

I wasn't worried about telling my new lesbian friend that

movement to steal back and remake queer. I ought to be glad that their resistance against the limitations of sexual and gender identity is creating such a powerful turnaround for a nasty word. It is something a lesbian feminist mother should be proud of. But this regeneration hasn't yet eased my discomfort with queer.

The wind blows harder. I'm embarrassed when I can't keep our canoe from angling toward hers, which requires a correction that results in angling away. My partner and I begin to fall back, battling both the wind and my scalloping course changes. I want to continue our conversation but thoughts about my queer daughters have disguised themselves like frightened spies in uncharted, mysterious territory. I cannot identify them.

I then wonder if talking about my difficulty with pronouns when referring to my youngest daughter's transgendering ex might clarify things. Or maybe I could bring up my oldest's involvement with being a boy and the frequent conversations we've had in hopes that I might understand some things about 'The Dick'. I then remember my youngest's firm resistance to default definitions of herself that relate to the gender of people she dates. I imagine both of them rolling their eyes and shaking their heads with impatience because they think I still ... don't ... get it. I still don't get what queer is. There is so much more explaining to do, but the separation of our boats has ended our conversation for now.

Our new friend pulls farther ahead of us. We follow her around a straggle of boulders and paddle into flat water. The wind isn't blowing any longer – paddling's easier; my thoughts are clearer. When I take a moment to think again about that uncharted, mysterious land of queer, I suddenly see the spies for what they are – some skeletons of a personal history that need to label, delineate and categorize. That need to know – for sure and always – what things are, especially when it comes to being a boy or a girl. I see 'queer' conducting a revolution in the country of gender. I look into the center of my confusion and discomfort to find 'queer' grinning up at me. I think that I have finally gotten it. ▼

Lynne Barton recently completed her MFA in Visual Art and started seriously writing – focused on queer theory, especially in regards to parenting queer daughters. She lives in Clarendon Springs with her civil-union partner of 13 years.

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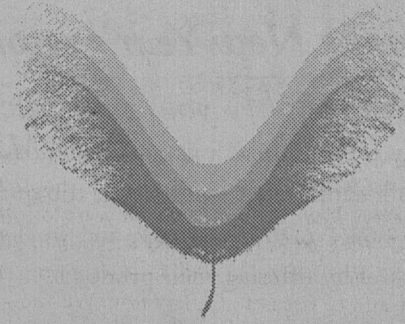
about them in the company of women like myself – aging lesbian feminists whose politics probably evolved in similar ways to mine: with uncomfortable identification and sympathy for blacks during the Sixties civil rights movement and an unwavering alignment with Seventies lesbian-feminism. I assume that less will have to be explained to women like me when I talk with them about my daughters.

So I was feeling pretty comfortable with our fellow paddler in the long black canoe, who seemed to be about my age, is a lesbian and may even be a feminist. I allowed our conversation to venture a short way into the dating lives of my daughters, which is something I don't ordinarily do.

Instead, especially when in heterosexual company, if the talk turns to their love relationships I usually employ some specially evolved strategies of conversational distraction. I believe heterosexual people want their

both daughters have been dating women for a significant length of time. Long enough that I'd be surprised if they started dating men. However, I didn't anticipate how tangled up I would become when trying to describe their lives.

We had only gotten to, "Are they lesbians?" to which I could not answer yes. Nor could I answer yes to, "Well ... are they bisexual?" I suddenly became aware that I had blundered into the shape-shifting territory of 'queer'. I couldn't just say, "My daughters are queer." Despite their careful tutelage, the word 'queer' does not slide out of my mouth easily like the words lesbian or gay. It catches on memories of noisy crowded school halls, playgrounds in the projects, a scary boy down the street. It certainly is *not* a word that I can use in this conversation on this lake with this woman who seems nice but whom I do not know – when referring to my daughters. They are part of the



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