



"Don we now our gay apparel, fa la..."

For the Holidays

by Walter I. Zeichner

As the holidays approach I have some thoughts and feelings I'd like to share with you.

Usually, when I think of this time of year, I think of depression, loneliness, feeling isolated. I think of what it's like to be single in what can seem like a world of couples, and I feel the loss of warm, safe family feelings. Somehow all these things are accentuated by being gay in a straight society.

I also remember how, in my past, at this time of year I would increase my use of "recreational drugs." I drank more, smoked more dope, cigarettes, anything to distract me from my painful feelings and feel like a "party."

At this point in my life my only drug is chocolate, which I indulge in frequently. I feel sad when I think of how I used to hurt myself with drugs, and I feel sad remembering how lonely it was for me to be doing that. I feel sad often when I'm around people who seem to be doing the same thing. I want to tell them "You deserve more love and care than you're getting. You deserve to treat yourself with more love and care for who you are, no matter what awful things have happened in your life, no matter how hard it is with the approaching holidays."

As a gay/lesbian community, and as part of the whole human community, we deserve to feel with our hearts how wonderful we are. These holidays were originally intended for participation in and celebration of the return of the sun and light into our lives.

I feel sad remembering how hard this time has been for me, and knowing how hard it can be for others. I feel sad remembering how I compounded my own hurts, and watching others do that to themselves. I personally want to celebrate the passing of the darkest, coldest time of the year with a feeling of warmth, belonging and community, knowing that even in the dark times, love and connection are possible and available. I invite you to do the same. Shalom.

G/L Adult Children of Alcoholics

Recent estimates indicate that there are between 28 and 34 million children of alcoholics, over half of them adults. If we apply our favorite statistic to that population we come up with at least 3 million gay/lesbian adult children of alcoholics. I attended a conference in Boston sponsored by the Exodus Center and of the 128 participants who spent the day dealing with gay/lesbian issues, over half attended the session for ACOAs.

First, a brief explanation of what it is like to grow up in a home where alcohol abuse is a central issue. Most often, family life is inconsistent, unpredictable, arbitrary, and chaotic. Children growing up in an alcoholic family learn not to talk about the drinking that they see every day, they learn not to trust the adult role models they have, and they learn not to deal with their feelings. What a parent says one minute is changed the next. Parents who promise to show up for school events never show, or worse, they show up drunk. We learn to deny feelings because to deal with them causes more pain than we can bear. We often feel inadequate, tense, and upset, with feelings of confusion, guilt, anger, shame, or fear. While these are normal responses to an abnormal family situation, because of the cardinal rule of not talking about the issue, no one tells us that this is crazy behavior so we accept the abnormal as normal. Denial is part of the disease of alcoholism and denial is a big part of the life of the child of an alcoholic. The world says that parents are good, caring, consistent, loving, stable, reliable and a source of support and protection but the person raised in an alcoholic home doesn't see that image and thus may deny the problem and create a family in his/her own mind that fits fantasy and not reality.

Now, go back and reread the above paragraph and see if there are some uncomfortable similarities to what we all go through at various stages of dealing with being gay/lesbian. The guilt, the confusion, the inconsistency of feeling one attraction

but being told by the world around us that another attraction is the way things "should" be. How many of us talked to anyone else in our family about our gay/lesbian feelings during those initial stages of development? Whom could we trust - we had no positive role models to help us deal with our gay/lesbian identity but we were victims of the media portrayal of negative role models. How many of us expended great amounts of energy denying our gay/lesbian feelings before we finally accepted ourselves?

A double bind if we are gay/lesbian and an adult child of an alcoholic. The behavior patterns developed to survive as an ACOA carry over into our adult lives and many of the strategies we learned in surviving in a homophobic society are the same. Combining the two only serves to strengthen coping skills which protected us early on but which can be destructive and self-defeating as adults. If we don't learn to break the cycle of "don't talk, don't trust, don't feel," we can destroy relationships. Between 50 - 70 % of children of alcoholics may become alcoholics themselves or get involved with alcoholic relationships and many experts believe ACOAs are about twice as likely to attempt suicide.

Solutions are never easy. Find a support system. Talk to friends, read some of the excellent literature on the subject of ACOAs. Take positive steps to deal with your emotions around this issue. Sometimes the hardest step is just saying the words, I am the child of an alcoholic. Understand that their alcoholism is not your fault. If you had been a better child, a better student, if you were non-gay or non-lesbian it wouldn't have made any difference. They own their alcoholism - you don't.

Developing a positive gay/lesbian identity is often times hard enough, but to develop that while surviving an alcoholic home can be incredibly difficult - not impossible, but difficult. Dealing with the alcoholic or the alcoholic family will be the subject of another article. For now, just understand that you can survive and can break the cycle but first you need to recognize the issue and accept the fact that you cannot not be affected if you were raised in an alcoholic family....