

Letters home

Paul,

It was good to see you again this past weekend - especially in the familiar setting of Pawkatuag, which seems each summer to be more of an anchor for our transient family. I was also glad to finally meet and talk with Deborah.

My only regret is that with so many people around and so little time, I didn't get a change to share with you some thing that's been on my mind for a while. I don't think it will come as any huge surprise for you to learn that I'm gay. Over the past few years, I think there have been enough unexplained actions and decisions in my life to make anyone watching wonder.

I'm not sure what you need to hear from me or what I want to tell you. If I was talking to Mom and Dad, or even Ted, I'd probably go to great lengths to point out that many of us are surprisingly "normal" in character. But you don't need me to tell you this - I think the biggest issue at this point for us is how this news will affect our family - or, more exactly, how Mom and Dad will deal with it.

Actually, I'm worried about their reaction. Over the years having watched them deal with all the minor and major crises in their lives, I'm struck by how little they actually communicate - how much they talk at each other and how little they really understand about what the other is saying. And I really believe this will be a time when they will need to listen and hear what I'm saying. We as a family obviously don't have a strong tradition of verbally working through our problems (strained silence is more our forte). And I know I'm no exception - but I'm working on it.

For all these reasons and others, I hadn't planned to tell them anytime soon but I'm having second thoughts. More and more in family situations, I find myself becoming increasingly resentful that I can't feel comfortable or open about who I am. And I know that a lot of the hostility I project is a direct result of that. I don't like feeling closed-mouthed and angry, especially when no one understands why. I'm sure my reticence is being mis-interpreted but most of the time it doesn't seem worth the risk that I'll inadvertently let something slip.

I also wanted to wait until I felt more settled and comfortable about being gay - until I could honestly say that I'm happy and ask them to see that - and that day is much closer. I'm not totally pessimistic. I do think they will eventually accept it. If I put myself in their position, I see the biggest issue as not the gayness, but the knowledge that it is a tough lifestyle. I know they want me to be happy and want things to be as easy as possible. I just hope that they will recognize that the way to make that happen now is to accept me as I am and see that nothing has changed.

Your support when that time comes will make things a lot easier I know. So thanks for listening and please let me hear any insights or words of wisdom that you have. I feel lucky to have the brothers and sisters that I have - you make things much easier.

Love,
Karen

Dear Karen,

Well. I didn't think I'd be writing another letter to Burlington so soon, but your letter today just seemed like the kind of thing that deserved a quick answer. (You must have been surprised to get my other letter and not see anything in it about the subject at hand.)

Thank you for sharing with me that you are gay. This was not a big surprise to me,

but seeing it in blue and white did clear out my sinuses a bit. Like a whiff of Mr. Clean.

I don't need to establish my open-mindedness credentials for you. Let it suffice to say that I lived with Colleen Kitman for three years in Buffalo and my only problems with her were her dog, which she had put to sleep, and her cigarettes, which she quit but then went back to.

Actually, that's an interesting case. When I moved in with Colleen she had just moved out of a house she shared for seven years with her female lover. By the time I left, Colleen had decided she wanted to be straight again and was dating men. I think her real ambition was to have kids. From talking to Colleen I got the impression that for her, being with a man and being with a woman fulfilled very different needs. She was very pragmatic, though, about not wanting to get caught in the middle. For her it was one or the other. My impression is that people's sexual preferences fall along a continuum, with a relatively small number of people being all the way to one extreme or the other. It just happens to be a whole lot more convenient to dichotomize. If you feel more attracted to women, I accept that. One small advantage is that you have a lot less to fear from sexually transmitted diseases than gay men or heterosexuals.

As you observed, the real problem here is how to break it to Mom and Dad. I remember when I was dating Barbara in Buffalo, I thought to myself, "I hope Mom doesn't say, 'She's old enough to be your mother.'" Well, we started talking about how Barbara had a daughter graduating from Columbia and another entering Yale and how she was 44 years old. And Mom said, "She's old enough to be your mother." I never did get around to telling Mom and Dad the precise extent of my relationship with Lena, the black lifeguard. And I'm still debating how to let them know that Deborah performs abortions. (By the way, let's keep these items in Confidence for the time being).

The hardest thing I ever had to admit was during my senior year in college when I contracted a case of tapeworm. The doctor in the clinic told me I should give this information to everyone I shared food with, so they could come in for treatment and prevent the spread. You will remember that I was living with 19 other people and we all ate together. I worked up my nerve and posted a sign next to the menu saying that I, Paul Cox, had worms in my feces, and anyone else, blah, blah, blah. You can imagine that many people could not manage to eat much dinner that night. I was greatly humiliated, but in retrospect, I'm glad I steeled myself to do it. Probably some of my housemates sneaked off to the clinic the next day.

I think you're right that Mom and Dad will eventually accept that you are gay. You're also right that their biggest problem will be the knowledge that it is a tough lifestyle. Undoubtedly they will ask you why you can't try to be straight. I guess my own feeling is that some people can go either way; many can't. Obviously you feel you can't. That's legit.

On to practical matters. It would not be very smart to walk in the door with a partner on your arm and pronounce your sexual orientation. They do that in the movies because it guarantees fireworks. Much smarter, I think, would be to write a letter to them somewhat like the one you wrote me, except longer. The main thing is

not be defensive. The main thing they want is for you to be happy and love them and know they love you. Everything else is secondary, after the smoke clears. Writing a letter gives them plenty of time to squawk and faint and retch and bellow in the privacy of their own home, then gradually compose themselves and write out a measured response.

Speaking of measured responses, I'm almost up to 1 1/2 pages here. Time to go to the Red Apple and buy some more milk. Take care, honey. Thanks for writing. And say hello to Sarah.

Love,
Paul

VLGR Annual Meeting Planned

Vermonters for Lesbian and Gay Rights (VLGR) will hold its annual meeting on Thursday, January 8. VLGR was formed in the fall of 1983 largely as a result of Vermont's first lesbian/gay pride march. In the past year, a number of significant developments have occurred as a result of VLGR members' work.

One of the major accomplishments is the beginning and continuation of this paper. OITM is put out by a collective of lesbians and gay men, some of whom are very involved in VLGR. The initial grant to start this paper was received by VLGR from the Haymarket People's Fund. Publication began in February of '86.

As in past years, VLGR sponsored the annual lesbian/gay pride events this year. The featured speaker was Gil Gerald, Executive Director of the National Coalition of Blade Lesbians and Gays. Also addressing the rally this year were Vermont governor, Madeline Kunin and Burlington Mayor Bernard Sanders.

This year has also seen the development of a statewide lesbian/gay coalition which came about through the efforts of many people and organizations, including VLGR.

In the Vermont legislature this past year, Rep. Micque Glitman of Burlington, introduced an HTLV-III anti-discrimination bill. VLGR produced an educational packet for legislators and lobbied for the bill.

And finally, this fall VLGR distributed a questionnaire as a means of documenting discrimination against lesbians and gay men. The deadline for receiving these was December 1. However, if you haven't received a copy and would like one, we would gladly accept them still. We plan to have some preliminary results within the next month.

So that, in a nutshell, is what VLGR has been up to in the past year. Future plans include completion of the survey and working on a lesbian/gay civil rights bill which is currently being drafted and may be introduced into this year's legislature. We will also be calling the initial planning meeting for lesbian/gay pride '87 (see calendar) with the intention of having an independent group take it over from there.

If you've been thinking about getting involved politically, please come to the meeting on Jan. 8 at 7:30 pm at the Peace and Justice Center, 186 College St., Burlington. The possibilities are only limited by our energy.