

Coming Out at Vermont Law School

Jeffrey Busch is a second year student at Vermont Law School in South Royalton. He wrote the following letter to the VLS newspaper as a reflection on his experiences coming out on campus

As a gay student, surviving at Vermont Law School requires fighting two battles. There is the battle we all share - the battle to acquire a legal education. Then there is the invisible battle which I feel I fight alone - the battle to contend with the law school community's homophobia.

Early this semester I took ten days off of school to reevaluate why I am studying law, and to reevaluate the ways in which I have been interacting with other students.

As I remember my most idealistic pre-law plans, I remember that I am studying law to promote justice and to represent the underrepresented within society. Law school is simply a means to achieving this goal. Like it or not, law school is hard. Whether a legal education is a self-effacing, degrading, and inapplicable rite of passage, or whether it will provide the fundamentals to promote justice...only time will tell. At any rate, a law degree is generally an ABA requirement, so if I want

to represent the underrepresented, acquiring a legal education is a battle worth fighting.

Then there is the second battle. The battle of which every gay student is aware - the invisible battle. The battle involves trying to fit in, living quietly in fear and sometimes anger, and hoping no one will "guess" or "find out." I had hoped that I wouldn't have to fight that battle at VLS. The catalog has assured me that "discrimination based on...sexual orientation...shall not exist in the School."

When I arrived at VLS as a 1st year student, I remember how awkward I felt socially. People don't automatically know when someone is gay. It's not like race or sex. Most people just assume you are heterosexual. The battle began the first week of my first year. When my new found friends started asking me to go to the Pub to pick up some "girls" I found it easy to correct them saying "in grade seventeen, I think we can start calling them women." What I wanted to say was, "I'm gay." I hadn't actually lied. I was simply protecting myself, being new to the school and all. So I found myself spending lots of energy walking the fine line between lying and being discreet.

As the first year progressed I remember reading about students who were outraged that a music group, sponsored in part by VLS, had sang some songs which made references to homosexuality. I remember student outrage when Dean Chase enforced the policy of non-discrimination, by not allowing the military to recruit on campus. I remember silently being battered in the battle: In the Pub one night a student said to me, "There are no homosexuals here. I don't know who the Dean thinks he's protecting. If there are any gays, why don't they have the guts to stand up for themselves." What could I say? I was too frightened to come out. I did not want to be drawn into a battle. I felt beaten.

The degradation persisted in both subtle and blatant ways well into my second year. From listening passively to offensive gay jokes, to deftly dodging vague insinuations about my sexuality.

I don't mean to gripe about old battle wounds, I just wanted the community to know about the second battle. Recent studies indicate that over 10% of society is homosexual. Based on this statistic, it is

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Commentary: Pardon My Stammer

by Debbie Alicen

Occasionally when I'm meeting new people, I'm faced with a dilemma. When someone asks what I do for a living, I find myself stammering. The problem isn't a speech impediment so much as it is a conceptual impediment.

Most people would call me a therapist, or a psychotherapist if they're being formal about it. I prefer not to call myself a therapist because "therapy" and "therapist" are medical-model terms, and I don't work from a medical model.

In the medical model the person with a problem is a patient with a disease who goes to an expert for a cure - a cure in which the patient has little or no part. I prefer a framework in which I am helping clients to empower themselves, to become their own experts and effect their own solutions to problems - a framework in which people aren't perceived as having an indigenous disease, but rather are seen as reacting to the circumstances of their lives. Such a framework (oversimplified here due to lack of space) is what typically goes by the name of feminist therapy. But there's that word again, and so I stammer.

I prefer to call myself a counselor, but it's not always advisable to do that. If, for instance, I'm called on to testify in court, my testimony is likely to carry more weight if it comes from a therapist instead of a counselor. I'm not going to insist on semantic purity at the risk of detriment to a client. Ideally, I'd like to live in a culture that doesn't assign such privilege according to title; but since I don't, sometimes I adjust.

On the occasions when I start to explain my hesitation in calling myself a therapist, the usual reaction is, "So what's the big deal?" If I'm talking to a feminist therapist, the subject usually doesn't go far. I find the lack of concern disconcerting, especially when it's coming from lesbians and feminists who otherwise put a lot of energy into creating a culture based on empowerment rather than power-over.

A cornerstone of changing consciousness and creating new culture is changing our language. We've insisted on linguistic changes in so many respects. The fact that there's so much resistance to change in the language of and about therapy says a lot about the structure of therapy, as existing more to maintain status quo rather than to facilitate transformation.

I don't find comfort in the fact that therapy is as much a cult for many lesbians as it is in the culture generally. I'm in agreement with other lesbians who are writing and talking and decrying the isolating role therapy plays in lesbian lives. If we get into going to therapists with all our problems with lovers, friends, and community, we cut ourselves out of the closeness that comes of resolving problems directly with lovers, friends, and community. In that way therapy promotes emotional isolation and divisiveness among lesbians -if our therapists are the only ones we show our deepest selves to, we lose the strength that comes of sharing our selves with each other.

I see two appropriate roles for

counselors: to help someone gain the confidence and skills necessary to gather a supportive network of friends, and to help in situations where friends aren't able to help. Either of those processes may be short or long term, depending on the individual and the situation.

Therapy has functioned primarily to maintain the power-over structure of dominant/dominating culture. Even those therapies which claim to be valueless, i.e., not imposing therapists' values on clients, function in that way. Linguistic analysis of therapists' language shows that fact readily enough. My counseling isn't valueless (I value the empowerment of disenfranchised individuals and classes), and I don't seek to maintain the cultural status quo. Given those considerations, calling myself a therapist is in direct opposition to my goals. Every time I refer to myself as a therapist, my values of empowerment receive a little dent, much the same way that our integrity is dented (or devastated) when we find ourselves denying, for whatever reason, that we are lesbian (or gay). I've been publicly out as a lesbian for a long time. I'm not yet that out as a counselor.

So, please pardon my stammer.

P.S. With the introduction of H247, the lesbian/gay civil rights bill, in the Vermont legislature, I'm offering time at no charge to lesbians or gay men who are thinking about or have decided to come out publicly to support the bill. I may be reached at 454-7701.

