

Commentary

Build Bridges, Not Walls

The following article was censored from the pages of Vermont Woman by the publisher because of its lesbian content.

Vermont Woman Responds:

Vermont Woman is a small women's newspaper with a broad-based readership. We are entirely supported by advertising revenue and we struggle to survive. Deciding not to publish this column was one of the most difficult decisions we have had to make in our three year history.

(Signed)

Suzanne Gillis

Publisher

Michele Patenaude

Editor

by Euan Bear

Ever since the National Organization for Women purged its openly lesbian members in the early seventies, it has been hard for lesbian feminists to trust heterosexual feminists politically or personally. That struggle occurred again during the Vermont ERA battle. Conservative (heterosexual) feminists asked lesbians to go hide for the duration so the opposition wouldn't use us against them. Each side has poured rivers of rhetoric and pounds of pain into the argument.

The issue of trust between feminists of differing sexual preference remains problematic and incredibly personal.

A few years ago, I asked a married woman friend, I'll call her Jane, to come march with me in the Gay and Lesbian Pride March in Burlington. She said no, that wasn't something she could do. She could stand on the sidelines and cheer us on, but she couldn't actually march and have all those people look at her and think she was a lesbian. She said she could be at the rally, but she couldn't march.

That year Jane never showed up. Company arrived just as she was ready to

leave, she said. Besides, she didn't really want to be at the rally under false pretenses, she said. She didn't want all those lesbians to mistake her for one of them.

"Why?" I asked. "When you're so safe in this society with your heterosexual credentials! When no one is smashing your mailbox and stuffing it alternately with obscenely violent misogynist material and pre-printed sermons on Sodom and Gomorrah!" I said. "Why can't you stand up with me and say, 'No one should be discriminated against because of their sexual preference: I'm one of you heterosexuals, but if you're going to hate queers, you're going to have to hate me too.' The only answer I can think of is that deep down, you're just as afraid of homosexuality as the most rabid rightwing redneck, but you're just too 'liberal' to show it."

We had a riproaring fight. But time went by and we valued each other's friendship too much to let this issue destroy it. The next year Jane came to the rally, and stood on the sidelines to cheer us on, but she still wouldn't march. I realized that was a big step for her, even while part of me wanted her to understand that if I had to live with heterosexual prejudice all the time, she should be able to handle it for one day.

I visit Jane and her family when I can--I enjoy their company. She has not visited me and my lover so far, though the last time we spoke of a visit, Jane said, "Yeah, maybe me and my husband will come over for coffee some Sunday morning." She never otherwise refers to him as "my husband"--she always refers to him by name.

Jane would deny that she meant anything by the unusual emphasis, or that she is uncomfortable with my being a lesbian.

I don't fight it with her any more. I file it away that I cannot trust Jane to support me on this issue when push comes to shove.

And when I hear how "my husband" gets emphasized, I shrug my shoulders and let it go.

Just last month I invited a bunch of friends over for a woodstacking party--work, food, and fun. Most were lesbians. One, whom I'll call Lydia, now identifies herself as bisexual, though she called herself a lesbian for many years.

We talked about politics, the election, Holly Near's benefit concert for Bernie Sanders' congressional campaign. Some of us are disappointed that Near has changed her musical focus away from addressing the lesbian community and toward mainstream styles and messages--genderless love songs and liberal politics. (Those who went said it was a concert from the "old days"--lots of politics, naming many oppressed communities including gays and lesbians.) Referring to Holly Near, someone said, "I have a hard time with 'former' lesbians." I saw Lydia cringe.

Later we discussed the international literacy work of a woman relatively unknown in this country. "She wasn't a lesbian," said one. "You'd like to think such a wonderful woman was, but she wasn't." There were other comments suggesting that unless a woman is a lesbian, her work, her life, her love are less important, less valid than those of lesbians.

Lydia left the room to cry about how unsafe she feels, both in the heterosexual world and in the lesbian community. Where, she wants to know, is there a place for her, where she is not judged on the basis of her sexual preference?

I know--the other lesbians at the party know, and Lydia knows--why lesbians make those comments: Because there is so little validation or acceptance of us as lesbians in the rest of the world, we fight back with their own ammunition, discounting the achievements of those not like us.

It is understandable, perhaps even more so than the thoughtless or deliberate discrimination by the overwhelming heterosexual majority who should feel secure, given the constant barrage of het propaganda we all live with. It is understandable, but not excusable. If what we want is a world that accepts all of us based on our worth as individuals and not on our sexual preference, we cannot afford to give in to the very "us" and "them" attitudes that promote our own oppression.

And that is what I want. I'm not a
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