

# Commentary

## Naming Myself

by Christine Burton

In the the gay and lesbian media I am reading more and more about gay people and gays, and less and less about lesbians. In recent months more and more lesbians are calling themselves gay women and gays.

I hear of an organized movement in Texas, whose stated purpose is to eliminate all use of the word lesbian, because it is felt the word divides the community. They intend to go national with their insistence on calling all of us gays. It is true all homosexual men and women need to unite our energies in order to overcome the growing animosity against us. If we are ever to reclaim our human freedom that the heterosexual (especially white) is allowed to take for granted, the homosexual community needs to unite in one political purpose. Understandably, we do not prefer to be called homosexuals because the word does not emphasize our other human qualities.

But should we unite under the one descriptive term, gay, obliterating the unique identity of females? For to eliminate the word lesbian is to make unimportant those individuals who are female homosexuals. If you don't have a name, eventually your existence in the minds of others becomes vague, which cannot help but minimize yourself to yourself. Again, it becomes a man's world—a gay man's world.

We repeat history because we are creatures of habit, the familiar feels comfortable. Since the beginning of scientific disciplines, man has been the generic term for the human race. Men have become accustomed to ignoring the great contributions women have made, lumping them all together under phrases like man has achieved or man has discovered, etcetera. But is it only habit? Aren't our emotions involved?

To make our point, why don't we drop man as the generic term and use woman as

the generic term for humankind? We could say, "When woman discovered America, she did not realize she was opening to development vast geographical areas to all women." Or we might say, "When woman landed on the moon she took a big step for womankind." In science, history and anthropology, substitute woman for man, and I believe all males would feel slighted. I doubt if they would stand for it. Would the Texas organization be just as happy if the word gay were eliminated? Let's call all homosexual men lesbians to maintain a unified front to the world.

Many women dislike the word lesbian. Accustomed as they have been for centuries to being called man and mankind, and taking their husband's name when they marry, many women feel insecure if they do not bear a male name in this man's world, either their father's or their husband's. Now, wanting no husband, they still feel more comfortable with male identity.

Gay is a male term. In the early part of the nineteenth century, heterosexual men observed the homosexual man's carefree and happy behavior, not burdened by familial financial responsibilities and the social strictures of monogamy. Out of envy, and more than a little derisive, they began calling homosexual men gay.

Lesbian is a female term. Six hundred years B.C.E. (Before Common Era), there lived on the island of Lesbos in the Aegean Sea, a poet named Sappho. She was as famous for loving women as she was for her poetry. Later, when they burned the great library at Alexandria, fire destroyed most of her poetry. But they've never been able to burn out of the memories of woman-loving-women Sappho's great love for women. Millions of woman-loving-women proudly use the name of Sappho's home to set themselves apart from the women who are not woman lovers, and

from men who are lovers of women. Now, it is proposed that we abandon the name lesbian, with its unique history. We would lose our woman-loving identity among men who love men.

Calling all of us by one name creates confusion. If you see an ad for a gay inn, no one knows what to expect. We are not heterosexuals who seek the presence of the opposite sex. Most of the time we prefer socializing with our own unless we've internalized society's homophobia to the point that we feel less "queer" when we're with the opposite sex, as our heterosexual conditioning urges us to feel.

The purpose of the Texas group is good: to create a united front to a hostile world. But the method is that of the Fundamentalists who insist on uniformity, in thought, belief and behavior. It is unity that creates power; not uniformity.

Diversity is nature's most outstanding characteristic. To try to eliminate the nominal distinctions between flowers and stones, clouds and animals, in order to express the idea that the Universe is one, would be equally foolish. The Universe is one because of its diverse parts locked together in mutually beneficial ecological niches. The lesbian and gay community will achieve more, get where it's going quicker, by recognizing the variety of its strengths, by naming all of us who and what we are.

Men and women are very different. Each evolved differently so that together they could assure the survival of humankind. About the only thing that gay men and lesbian women have in common is that they are attracted to persons of their own sex. Not being sexually attracted to one another, lesbians and gays are more independent from one another to develop their own strengths. Then when they unite their energies in political action, they can be more powerful.

Ignoring the habits of nature and cutting out of our consciousness the facts of history, and our own inner reality, do not create a solid foundation from which to achieve what both lesbian women and gay men want.

And what do we want? The free exercise of our inborn human rights and the liberty to exercise all the rights of citizenship that are ours because of where we were born. Rights are personal to each individual. It is at the personal level that they will be reclaimed. In our minds as we know

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