

# Coming Out

## A Different Life: Coming Out

by Patricia J.

I still remember the time as a child when I picked up what I thought to be a beautifully patterned rock only to be startled into dropping it when the turtle's head and wiggling legs appeared. That image returned recently as I've been immersed in yet another stage of my own coming out process and close to friends involved in theirs.

Although my parents have "known" for 13 years, it has felt like a secret we had pledged to keep from everyone else by never talking about "it" beyond our immediate circle - and then so rarely I can still count the times on one hand! Until this summer, when I realized that most of the people around me at work and home are aware that I'm lesbian, returning "home" to family felt like crawling back into a box. I didn't want to do it any longer.

So I told a favorite aunt and uncle, trusting that they would probably not reject me (and discovering that was true) and began to break the silence by saying the words "gay" and "lesbian" out loud. In my family, no two words could be more avoided or more loaded with discomfort and fear. I had hoped that if someone else my parent's age (70's) knew, then they might step out of their isolation and dare to share some of their feelings of anger, disappointment, and confusion. When I had asked over the years if they could talk to anyone, my mother always said, "Of course not. No one would understand and anyway, we don't want them to know."

Over and over again we and our families stand behind the fear of what it might mean to be gay or lesbian, and that fear silences and separates. Years of family gatherings - picnics, weddings, reunions, holidays - were all pleasant and superficial while we tried to ignore that I didn't bring

a partner (she hadn't been invited) or that I didn't have children. It seemed there was little else that mattered enough to talk about while what we didn't say hung like a cloud over everything - or so it felt to me.

"Why do you need to come out?" some people ask. "It's your private life, so why talk about it?" I don't necessarily want to talk about my private life or about the intimacies of my loving, but I do need to have some people hear how it feels to live and love in a world that wants to narrow loving down to male/female relationships. I want my partner to be treated with the same respect and welcome as my brother's wife - and would settle for acknowledgement that there's even a similarity. But that acknowledgement didn't come during 15 years of living with one woman, so I don't count on it in the future.

Why do I/we need to come out? To stop the feeling of living a lie, a lie we aren't telling but that others are hearing, a lie that allows people around us to fix us up with a date or presume we're still looking and waiting for the right man (or, for the gay man, the right woman); to silence the thoughtless remarks about queers and weirdos overheard by countless gays and lesbians who people presume are someplace else; to free ourselves from the darkness of a closet in which no one should live.

We need to open that door, if only to let in a crack of light at first and air enough to breathe. Once that's done, we can see more clearly and discover that fear is weaker in the light. There is reason to be afraid of coming out...there are no guarantees of what responses we'll receive. Some are devastating, others may be refreshing, and most are jarring, at least in the beginning...for much the same reason as my experience with the turtle.

People think they know who we are

and they're startled, dismayed, disoriented, confused to find we are different from what they had assumed. We may be injured as a result, and we may also experience something valuable. Fortunately for me, my turtle survived and taught me a lot that no rock ever could (even about loving). We can hope our friends and families will someday feel the same...and meanwhile remember that when we open the door, we also discover each other.

### Coming Out: Steps You Can Take

(A public service announcement)

- ▼ Explain to your cat that you're gay. If you don't like cats, tell your dog. If you don't have either a cat or a dog, buy one, and then let it know right from the start that you're gay.
- ▼ Take the photo of your loved one out of the top drawer of your desk and stand it up front and center. Stare longingly at it for the greater part of the morning. If people ask what you're doing, tell them. Repeat in afternoon (after taking your loved one out to lunch, of course.)
- ▼ Sit on the same side of the table when your loved one takes you out to dinner. Ask the waitperson for that "special" bottle of wine.
- ▼ Linger a little bit longer in the "gay lit" section of the bookstore, and then actually take one of the books or magazines up to the counter and buy it.
- ▼ If you can't find the "gay lit" section in the bookstore, ask someone where it is, and if they say they don't have one, ask why. Volunteer a list of your favorite titles.
- ▼ Read your copy of *Out in the Mountains* out in public without hiding it inside the pages of the local newspaper. After all, it is a local newspaper.
- ▼ Call mom or dad and wish them a happy holiday. When they ask you which one it is, tell them.
- ▼ Don't just resort to wearing your pink triangle pin; be creative. Wear two.
- ▼ Practice telling yourself that you're gay. (It's not as easy as some people think!)
- ▼ Share the wonder of no longer wondering. Know it, and then...
- ▼ Show it.



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