

# Coming Out

## Surviving in a Gay Gulag

by Dick Cornwall

When I came out in 1983, my life was mired in well-worn ruts as a father and tenured professor at Middlebury College. I was eager to make up for lost time and to confront the heterosexist covers I knew so well. I lost no time becoming outspoken at the College, pushing for an antidiscrimination clause and even teaching a short course with a colleague on "Tolerance of Homosexuality."

Part of this desire to recover the ground lost over two decades since becoming an adult meant finding an attractive man at a meeting of Integrity and quickly setting up a lover relationship, modelled after the heterosexist relationships I had learned about so well. This meant flaunting our connection, as heterosexists are wont to do. We were both well accustomed to the prerequisites of well-educated white straight males. We continued to act like empowered, privileged men - dancing, kissing, holding hands where we wanted.

When two lovers walk together, it is often compelling to hold hands. Of course, it took about thirty seconds to experience the verbal onslaughts this always sparks in Vermont - unlike Montréal. My reaction was a more determined assertion - damn it, this is what lovers do, and we are as legitimate as lovers as any mixed-gender couple.

As my partner and I walked from dancing at the Festival on the Green down Main Street past the Ben Franklin, it was jarring, but not really a surprise, when a red-haired man whom I had seen around town but did not know came up to us, said "You're faggots." and immediately started throwing punches. The preposterousness of a twenty year-old, with no obvious skill

in martial arts, attacking two fruits in our 40's is an indication of the foolishness of our heterosexist stereotypes. We had no trouble convincing him to beat a retreat behind the Mobil station.

What lingers from this event several years ago is no scars or physical impairments. We were lucky to have our attacker be incompetent, and even luckier to have the myth that we could claim the privileges of straight white males shattered.

The assault several years ago has become a critical symbol for me of what it means to be out. The isolation I experienced during those few minutes on Main Street, when no neighbor came by to help - that sense of vulnerability has grown. The graffiti on my door or car; the students who avoid the fag professor; the question to a straight male colleagues: "Why are you so friendly with Richard?" - or colleagues who tell other colleagues I am too far outside, impossible to satisfy in my requests for parity of lesbian and gay issues with other issues of equity at the College; the responsibility to play a major role in ordering books for the Library or bringing speakers and pointing out when the President and his staff derail well-orchestrated initiatives to address homophobia here. Adding insult to injury, my colleagues outside of my discipline with whom I have worked closely on issues of diversity and oppression often assume that of course I do all this activity while also matching my straight colleagues as a "productive," conventional teacher and scholar.

So the list of emotional assaults seems big. Survival means reaching out, networking. For me, this means

- ▼ getting Green Mountain service from New England Telephone, since keeping in touch with gaymen and lesbians all over the state is essential for my sanity;
- ▼ keeping in touch with gay and lesbian political economists around the nation;
- ▼ subscribing to *Out/Look* and *Outweek* to keep some sense that a large G/L world

exists, even though there is usually no clue of it in Middlebury;

- ▼ embracing the "I Hate Straights" broadside of the NYC Gay Pride weekend even though I love certain straight people dearly;
- ▼ trying out the few organized social gatherings that exist here, from VGSA to the Pearl's;
- ▼ being crazy-queer for some of my colleagues and letting them play with the idea that Richard is going off the deep end;
- ▼ agonizing over how blatant I dare to be and finding I am more of a rebellious kid than I ever let myself be up to now;
- ▼ rejecting more and more of traditional social institutions of oppression like organized religion;
- ▼ blending more and more my voice as a gayman with my roles as a father and a political economist;
- ▼ being much less naively bold about holding a friend's hand in public and reflecting while the rush of rage and anxiety overflows again.

Being gay or lesbian in Vermont means working especially hard to nurture ones worth, for there is a dearth of gay and lesbian social capital: no gaymen's chorus, no Men Of All Colors Together, damn few out parents or blatant professors. This means that the conjecture that gay and lesbian are really different - even outside of the bedroom - often feels dangerous. Being queer is not about a right to privacy; it is about the freedom to be public, to just be who we are. We have to fight the erotophobia that says respectable men clearly segregate their sexual parts from their serious parts - an ideal battle for us sex-driven queers to wage.

Surviving, for me, means moving from being the token gay on the faculty to being a real thorn, rejecting the Jekyll-Hyde existence of the social disease known as the closet and fully claiming and integrating my sexual self into my life as father, scholar and teacher. It also means being less surprised by feeling raw and alone, each time, after I speak out and write out. The refrain "Richard, we appreciate your taking an initiative on..." feels cold, and I turn again for nourishment to the network I keep plugged into and to a quiet evening of reading, with Lloyd Cole singing in the background, "You don't need a lover in this climate, you don't need a boyfriend in your bed..."

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