

Family

Private Lives and Social Change

by Larry Wolf

It is mid-October. Maybe there will be a frost tonight. The first real frost of the year. The trees have traded their flaming colors for a final spare coloring of browns and yellows. Winter will be here soon.

In my house this is the beginning of the annual rites of celebration. It begins with the Fall Foliage (and the perennial question of how to see the leaves and not get run over by the tourists - answered in part by moving to the Northeast Kingdom a year ago). Then there is Halloween, a truly pagan celebration of the harvest, of the spooks and spirits. Pumpkins of all shapes and sizes are everywhere. A last desperate effort to keep the dark of night at bay. Round about Thanksgiving, the oranges and blacks give way to the reds and greens of Christmas. Lights and other decorations of all manner come out of their hiding places and fill the house. There is magic in the air as I light the Hanukkah candles. A growing crescendo of light, first one candle, then two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight! And a final burst of eating, gift-giving, wrapping paper, and hugs to mark Christmas morning. New Year's Eve has become a private time for Craig and me. A time to close out the holidays away from the glitz. Two men. Together. After all is said and done.

This year I have other celebrations. Craig and I have been partners for ten years. A landmark event. I continue to be surprised by how in love we still are, and how that love has grown and matured over the years. I am amused and amazed by how different from each other we continue to be. I always thought of couples, especially same sex couples, as merging into one personality as their lives came together. Yet while we have learned to live in the same house, we have certainly not become

each other. In fact, it is our differences, and our ability to enjoy our differences, which keeps the relationship so alive. The differences are a continual source of new perspectives and insights from a partner who, though of the same sex, is very much not the same mind or same spirit. It is the differences, coupled with the similarities, which keep us together, keep us fresh, keep us being able to offer something special to each other. Year after year. Ten years.

After ten years of living with another man, my lover, my friend, we have become our own family.

Some of our family we are born with. It seems to be part of the human condition. My parents have pretty much let me live my own life. I told them I was gay when I was 21. I was involved with an openly gay man. I was discovering that there was a gay world larger than the anxious fumbblings of the male friends with whom I was exploring my sexuality, in a male liberation context, but really in a vacuum which failed to acknowledge that there was an existing gay community. We were all so afraid of being queer. Homo. You know.

So I told my parents when I went home for a long weekend, and then I headed down to the city (Manhattan) in search of the Oscar Wilde Bookstore and Gay Activists' Alliance. I found them both. I came home with my arms full of books and pamphlets. My parents were not happy with my actions. They told me I was surrounding myself with advisors who were telling me what I wanted to hear (what I needed to hear, but not what they thought I needed to hear); they told me that it was easy to pick up a man for sex (not for me; I was still afraid to go into a gay bar. I was looking for romance and affection as much as sex); they told me that I would have a lonely life

while I was thinking about my friends who were happy that I had started living my feelings and about my lover, who was such a joy to be with.

The weekend ended. There was little dialogue. We didn't know how to talk about my life as it really was. I had spent years trying to understand myself, being afraid to share what I was feeling. To the extent to which my parents may have been aware of those feelings, they were wishing those feelings would just go away.

Near the end of my visit, my father told me to remember that I was always welcome, that his home was my home, that I should not make this (it was hard for him to name my gayness, as it had been hard for me) an excuse to cut him out of my life. That he hoped to see me soon.

That was eighteen years ago. I have been home to visit my parents many times since. I have shared with them the ups and down of my life. Yet there are many ways in which they are still distant because they miss the mundane parts of my life. They miss the miscellaneous details which make the gay and lesbian community so "normal," so very much like any other community within the larger society. And they also miss the details which make the gay and lesbian community so different, because they are trying to protect me, because they are trying to ignore my differences, because they want so much to love me. In a family, the need for unconditional love and the need for unconditional affirmation can get turned into unconditional denial. Yet, they recognize that Craig and I have a marriage, that his family is now my family.

There are still painful times when the pieces don't come together. This past July my youngest sister was married. There was
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