

Personal Perspectives

A Different Life: Recognizing Ourselves

by Patricia J.

I am reminded often these days of how it felt to be young and wondering what the confusion, discontent and attractions I was feeling really meant. I'd gone to dances with guys but never felt as emotionally or physically drawn to them as to women. At that time, 20 years ago, the words "gay" and "lesbian" were seldom heard – in my world anyway. I had felt intense love for women and had lived in a women's community for a number of years, but when I first realized that there were words for the relationship of woman with woman or man with man and heard what was said about it, I panicked: "That isn't me!" "I don't look like that or act like that!" "I'm just like everyone else" ... except I wasn't.

As I realized the difference, I felt at first as if I was the only one (except for the woman I loved at the time), and maybe that what we shared wasn't gay or lesbian, just love, period. The most desperate moment in those early adult years was when I knew

that what I felt had been given a name and a reputation that I wanted nothing to do with. Reconciling my own feelings and experience with "the world's" opinions and perspectives seemed impossible at first. In fact, making peace between those outer and inner worlds continues, but the process is creative – not destructive – and I know I'm not alone.

In that time of desperation, it was not primarily my feelings for another woman that frightened me as much as the total isolation – the feeling that there was no one I could safely tell about the conflict and confusion. As I looked around me, everyone appeared to be in male/female relationships and no one had ever talked in public about alternative lifestyles and love-styles except in Church, where it had been condemned. I could see no one who I could imagine would understand or not judge me.

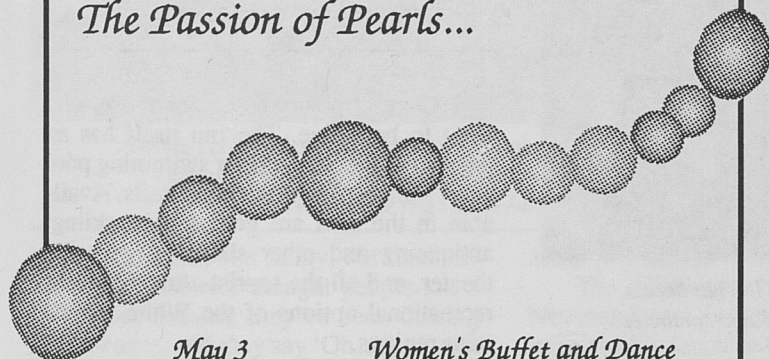
The world has changed significantly since then, but the sense of isolation and often fear as one first recognizes feelings of

attraction toward same sex persons can still be intense and potentially devastating. That desperation can lead to addiction, self-destructive behavior, suicide, not to mention traumatic inner-turmoil, loss of self-esteem and loneliness. Anyone, young and not so young alike, deserves to be able to see and trust that he or she is not alone.

The single most important thing that saved me 20 years ago was recognizing in my friend and two other women feelings like my own and talking about them. Breaking through that isolation and fear of who we might be was essential if we were to grow into healthy human beings.

Who among us hasn't played the games of guessing "Are they? Is s/he?" We who are gay, lesbian and bisexual can't tell who we are by looking, but that doesn't mean we aren't here. We need to be able to see each other, whether that's through a confidential network or a public demonstration. Not one of us is really alone, but many of us don't know that.

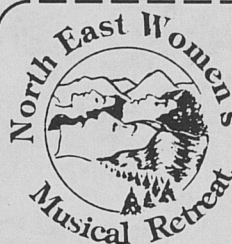
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