

Paranoia in a Public School

Carol

Working in a public school is a great way to enhance your paranoia if you're a lesbian.

When I started teaching in this suburban Vermont elementary school I was immediately impressed by the strong support among the staff. This was apparent on a personal as well as a professional level. These people planned Christmas parties, end-of-the-year parties, attended each other's weddings, AND listened to and tried out new teaching ideas. My previous job had involved a huge caseload and a great deal of traveling, which precluded any involvement other than the requisite "Hi! How are you? Here's my schedule. See you next week." This new job was a positive working environment - what a gift.

I attended Christmas parties (alone), went to baby showers and housewarmings, and cooked for potlucks. As a shy person, this was a comfortable way for me to get to know some of my colleagues. I could sit back and listen, and occasionally throw in a wisecrack or share an experience. Small things can have a big effect on professional interactions. When people feel that they know each other, they can often work well

together. It also just feels good to have someone at work ask how your dog is, or if you've gotten the plumbing fixed or your dental work scheduled. "This is good," I thought, "I'm finding some balance in my life; people care."

Then I came out (to myself) as a lesbian.

I began to listen more closely to conversations at work to see if anyone had gay or lesbian friends or relatives. Well, if they did, they didn't talk about them. There was discussion of famous entertainers, "He's a fag!", and of infamous teachers, "They might hire her at the town high school to teach P.E.; she's queer! How'd you like to have her watching your kid take a shower?" This began to move from being uncomfortable to being hurtful. (P.S. they didn't hire her.)

So what would happen if I were to come out at work? A quick review of my contract revealed that a teacher can be dismissed for what is vaguely described as conduct unbecoming a teacher. This is determined by the school board, whose elected members represent local popular opinion (and, apparently, moral standards). I like my job; it's a career I sought out and I'm good at it. Risking the loss of it is not something I'm prepared to do.

I find myself attending lesbian events rather than Christmas parties or other after

work social events. I don't have the energy to speak out at work against the subtle and not-so-subtle bigotry, worry about the possible consequences, and also do my job well. Do you remember the scene in *Lianna* where she is gently rebuked by her lover for publically embracing her? It would be different, she is told, if they were just friends. But they are not. It would be different if I were straight or if my career were not at risk. But I'm not and it is.

Every year a facsimile of an 1800's broadside appears in the teacher's lunch room; it's entitled *Rules for Teachers*, and lists a number of proscribed activities for teachers of that day. Teachers could be dismissed if they were caught playing cards, dancing, or traveling after dark. The intent is humorous, but the reality is serious. How far have we come?

For now, I express myself in safe environments. I share my experiences, my apprehensions, and my joys with straight and lesbian friends. I call the Sate House anonymously to urge passage of S 131. When the parking attendant conversationally asks where I've gone that evening, I tell him about a lesbian cartoonist and show him my *Dykes to Watch Out* for calendar. These are not bold declarations, but I've always been a rather private person. Right now this is the most effective way for me to be out safely, maintain my privacy, and ward off the paranoia demons. ▼

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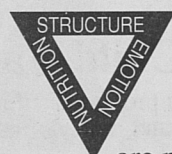
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