

## LOOKING BOTH WAYS: Bi Identity & the Personal Ads

Mike Rothbart

fore the meeting, the gay elected officials will conduct a coordinated series of Congressional visits to meet with key legislators.

Elected by popular vote, openly gay and lesbian officials epitomize the strides that the gay and lesbian community has made towards dispelling anti-gay stereotypes and achieving political equality. "We have spent the past two years laying the groundwork for this unprecedented event," says Leal, "and now, to paraphrase Harvey Milk, we will give the American people the chance to judge us by our own leaders, and by our own legislators." Among the officials invited to the meeting are Vermont State Representative Bill Lippert, and U.S. Congressmen Barney Franks, Gerry Studds, and Steven Gunderson.

### Boy appears to recover from HIV infection

LOS ANGELES -- A Los Angeles boy who tested HIV-positive at birth apparently fought off the infection and is virus-free at age 5, astonishing his doctors. Dr. Yvonne J. Bryson, a pediatrician and AIDS specialist at the UCLA School of Medicine in Los Angeles, said she believes it is the first carefully documented case of someone casting off all signs of infection. Tests proved conclusively that the boy was infected for at least a month during the first two months of his life. Later examinations found no sign of the virus, Bryson said. Doctors have no explanation. "It's like a miracle to me and a miracle to his mother," Bryson said.

Bryson said she and her colleagues are studying the boy's immune system for clues that could be used to stop HIV in others. "It just opens up a lot of things to look at. Before now, there was such skepticism about the possibility that this could occur," said Bryson, whose findings appeared in the *New England Journal of Medicine*. The boy's mother remains infected but does not yet have symptoms of AIDS, Bryson said. Bryson has since identified another child who appears to have accomplished the same improbable feat. Studies are now underway to confirm the second case, she said. Bryson warned AIDS patients, however, not to cling to the remote hope that their infections could disappear. (Frontiers) ▼

CUTTINGSVILLE -- Life for me in Vermont is no longer complete. I just returned from a trip to Philadelphia, where I discovered a new life in the personal ads. Last Friday night found me sitting in Suburban station, reading the *Philadelphia City Paper*, waiting for the R2 train to take me home. The station was dull, as was the newspaper -- until I got to the personals section. There I found hundreds of men and women looking for a partner. I scoped through the pages, reading individualized blurbs, utterly fascinated. All these lonely people, wandering the pages, searching for that perfect man, woman or both. I wondered about how these people chose to label themselves. What sexual identity did they take on? And what sort of partners were they ISO? Most important, which of them would I take home on a Saturday night?

Since I'd just been reading an article about lesbians by Carol Queen, I decided to do a quick survey of the women in the personal ads. In this admittedly unscientific sample, there were 314 personal ads -- 36 listed under Women seeking Men, 180 by M seeking W (I won't comment on what this suggests to me about straight men), 58 M seeking M and 50 W seeking W. Out of the 50 W ISO W, only 26% identified as gay or bisexual (7 gay, 6 bi). Seventeen listed themselves as "bi-curious," and 15 didn't identify themselves in terms of orientation. [Note: the remaining five ads in the W seeking W section were couples searching for bisexual white females (two of which specified blondes).] Does this imply a reluctance of the general population to identify as bisexual or gay? Or does it suggest that the folks placing personal ads aren't as concerned about this issue of identity politics as I am?

I admit I've never heard of the label "bi-curious" before. Are these women questioning their sexuality, are they self-identified as bi but reluctant to come out, or are they, as my lesbian theater professor once suggested, "heterosexual interlopers, arriving on the scene to steal away good women from more deserving, out lesbians?"

As I read through the paper, I recalled the last time I placed a personal ad:

*Roses are red,  
Violets are blue.  
I'm lookin' for love,  
or a used '57 Camaro.  
(bi activist seeks same).*

I was dismayed to realize that there was nowhere for me to put my ad. I didn't fit the categories. What happens to the bisexual who is "ISO male or female?" In my case, I got stuck in the GENERAL section, just after "Men! Women! Call 1-900-CONNECT and meet your match!" and just before "Two Rastafarians from the Bronx seek housemate with same beliefs."

Bisexuals can't be sexually pigeonholed, and thus, society doesn't know what to do with us. Bisexuals are no more oppressed than gays and lesbians, but there's an additional dynamic at work: gays and lesbians fit into a monosexual system of desire, while bis and transgendered folk confuse this binary system. Author Carol Queen comments that "nothing in either our homophobic culture or our homosexual counterculture helps us with the shock that our desires and affections are not always labeled 'either/or.'" Biphobia operates through similar modes as does homophobia, except there is this added problem (or liberation?) of not fitting within society's standard conceptional model. This failure to comprehend bis, which leads to the "fence-sitter"/"indecisive" stereotype of bisexuals, is one of two roots of biphobia. Bisexuals are different, misunderstood and feared because *we threaten an underlying cultural belief of the rigidity of desire*. It is this belief system which pushed the lesbian author Jan Clausen to wonder, when she got involved with a man, "about the astonishing malleability of my sexual inclinations: am I some sort of weirdo, or is it just that most people are a lot more complicated than the common wisdom of either gay or straight society encourages us to think?"

The second root of biphobia is the misbelief that we queers are battling for limited resources, and that any gain in one group will lead to the loss of another. A butch friend of mine thinks that "if bisexuals are 'successful' in claiming a greater share of gay, lesbian and queer spaces and resources, it is lesbians who have the most to lose." It seems obvious to me that the more people who come out and are activist under any label -- as bisexual, lesbian, queer or Men In Raincoats -- the more total resources we will gain, the more we will succeed against homophobia.

I sincerely hope that, as the idea of a 'Bisexual Community' grows, there will be fewer and fewer times when bisexuals will have to pass as lesbians and gays. In answer to the question, 'why are there so few self-identified bisexuals?', I would suggest that part of the reason is the continuing of biphobia by some gays and lesbians. Not being a lesbian (or a) separatist, I can't appreciate all the reasons for internal divisions between lesbians and bisexuals. I do understand separatism as a personal choice, for those women who have no desire to work with men, or even with women who sleep with men. However, as a political choice, separatism and biphobia seem to me untenable; refusing to work together on common projects seems to me a poor external strategy. I fail to see how battling homophobia could be a zero-sum game, where lesbians lose if bisexuals win. I agree with Carol Queen, who says that, "much as we need to honor our differences, we must understand that the strategic risks we run as fractionalized people are far greater than any risks to individuals' identities." Like Queen, I too am angry, because I expected more of others who have faced homophobia.

Excuse me, I'm going back to the Personals. Bisexual activist seeks same, a nice, understanding BiM or W. ▼



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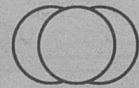
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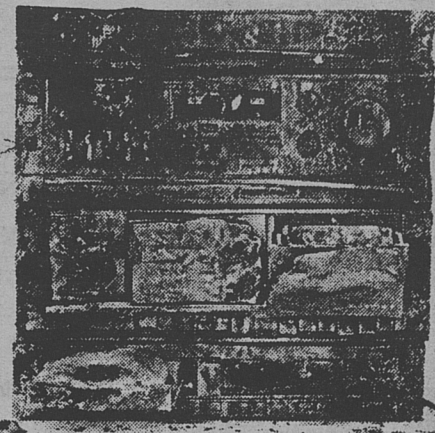
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