

# LOOKING BOTH WAYS: Sometimes Parents Just Don't Understand

Mike Rothbart

CUTTINGSVILLE -- "You never tell me anything about your life," my dad complains. We are spending two weeks on Nantucket with the extended family: two parents, a grandmother, two brothers, a girlfriend, an ex-girlfriend's sister, childhood friends and the family dog. Plus about six acres of sand, most of it embedded in the living room rug. This statement from my dad is nothing new. Throughout my life, I've been closer to my mom. I find it easy to talk to her about my hopes, my fears and my arrest record. With my father, I mostly converse about movies. Sometimes we expand to discuss books.

We've had this conversation before. I tell my dad, "Sorry I exclude you; I don't like to share things with you 'cause, for one, you freak out about anything I say."

"Try me."

"And two, you avoid any personal or emotional conversations."

"That's just typical of any man born before 1950," my dad responds.

"Well, you're the worst I've ever met," I reassure him.

"Good to be superlative at something," he extends his fake grin.

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That was two days ago. Tonight, after dinner, I ask my dad, "Where is Cliff Road?"

"Well, why do you want to know?" he responds.

I ask him, "Why do you need to know my reason? I just want to know where the stupid road is."

"Communication," he smiles with yellow teeth, separating the word into its five separate syllables. "I ask lots of questions because I find, otherwise, people don't tell me anything."

"Well, maybe they don't tell you because they don't want you to know. You really want to hear my reason, for Cliff Road?"

"Yes. I always want to hear about my children's lives, anything they tell me."

I smile back. Okay, I think; I'll tell you and we'll see what happens. I lower my voice conspiratorially, so my grandmother in the kitchen doesn't overhear. "Well, it started yesterday, when I went to the grocery store. I was wearing my ACT-UP shirt, you know, the one that says ACTION=LIFE. Well, I met this hot guy. His name is Kevin."

Dad has dropped his smile. He's listening, his eyes slowly growing like raisins soaked in boiling water.

"I half-noticed him standing by the baggers. He strolled over, timing his approach to pass us just as we finished paying. He told me, 'Hey, that shirt's great. I wish we saw more around here like that.' He winked. I grinned back, and we struck up a conversation walking out of the store. Kevin, he was this gorgeous light-skinned black man, late twenties. Built!"

I look at Dad. He doesn't know what 'built' means, but I continue. "So Kevin introduced me to his two gay friends, and his withered eighty-nine year old great aunt. She immediately demanded of him, 'What does this boy want, Kevin? Why is he walking us to our car? Is he going to rob us?' Kevin told her, 'No, Ethel, I'm just talking to this man.' Ethel scowled, peering up first at me then at him. 'Well, Kevin, I hope you remember what I taught you.' Kevin sighed, 'Yes, Ethel. I do. I always wear a condom.' Then she turned, pointing her finger toward me, 'You too, young man. Wrap that plaything in a prophylactic.'"

I laugh, recounting it. Meanwhile, Dad has his rabid grin stuffed tight between his cheeks. He looks like a macaque just before it bites.

"Anyhow, Kevin gave me his address and phone number. I'm going to call him now, and I might go over there tonight, see what happens. So I wondered where Cliff Road is."

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I excuse myself into the back bedroom to phone Kevin. My dad, I learn later, makes a beeline for my mom in the kitchen. "Barbara, I need to talk to you in private," he gesticulates at her in his agitated sign language. My mother is completely deaf.

"Can it wait?" she wonders from the carrot sticks.

"No. Come here. Your son is going to a house where gay men live!"

"Okay. He's a grown man, Hal. He can do what he wants."

"Yes, but he's going to a gay house. I don't think. I don't think ..."

"He's a grown man," my mom repeats.

"But he's going to see a gay man!" Hysteria has crept into his voice like a freight train sliding off the track.

"Why is it a problem?" my mom asks, ever-patient after having reared my dad and his three sons.

"Well it's dangerous, to be in bedrooms, with gay men you don't know." His signs look like fingers attempting jumping jacks, "And it's very late. I don't think he should be going out so late."

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In the other room, Kevin and I have figured out that we won't be able to see each other before he leaves the island the next day. I give him my address in Vermont, and we trade teaching stories. When I come out, my dad sits on the sofa, reading *Time*. "See Michael," he says, "You can tell me things and I don't react so badly. Are you really going out?"

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A nod to Karol Raiche, the Rutland woman who wanted to stuff *Out In The Mountains* in the Rutland Free Library closet, along with both of Heather's mommies, Mo and Lois, E.M. Forster and Bill Shakespeare. After all, once you start segregating racy children's books from all the normal ones, where do you stop? Personally, my favorite Shakespeare scene is in *Twelfth Night*, where Viola has cross-dressed as a messenger and woos the duchess Olivia into falling in love with her. I'll just say, I hope the Rutland Library has a walk-in closet. I'll be sure to pack a light.

Even so, Karol Raiche, I hope you realize that your attempts to hide or ban our books will not remove us from your life. After all, we are your baby-sitters, your teachers and librarians, your post-mistresses and gas station attendants. (Check out the guy on the graveyard shift at Exxon.) We are your neighbors, your friends, and quite possibly -- as my dad sometimes accepts -- your children.

Mike Rothbart is a bisexual activist. He is currently working on a feature film being shot in Rutland. He invites anyone uncomfortable with the idea of bisexuality to call him up and come over for tea and cookies. He looks forward to sharing a closet with his hero, Alison Bechdel. ▼

## Leaders

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"As lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgender folk we are an incredibly huge community (made up of each of our smaller communities with its own leaders and issues) linked merely by our identification as 'sexual minority' and differentiated by the dominant culture solely by what we do in bed/who we do it with. It would be laughable to talk about leadership in the heterosexual community, yet we somehow expect (demand?) our community to have individuals who claim to speak for us all. It is inevitable that whoever takes on leadership roles in our community will fail to represent/advocate for/be supportive of vast numbers of that very community, whether out of ignorance, indifference, or simple inability." (Dudley, Strafford)

"The curious thing about being lesbian or gay is that simply by living our lives and standing up for equal protection and recognition we become leaders. It's the part about being willing to stand up for justice that separates some of us from others." (anon.)

"I do not see myself as a leader in the gay etc. community. I have come to understand, however, that I must be a model for some since I have been contacted from time to time to talk with individuals unknown to me about a variety of things important to them. Is a model a leader? Perhaps." (anon.)

### Accountability

"It's interesting to me to note the care with which I'm choosing my words on this page -- there's a kind of pressure to live up to the notion of being considered a leader." (Chris Tebbets, Burlington)

Many members of our community wish our leaders to be more considerate and sensitive to their position and its resultant responsibilities. By far the single issue of concern cited most frequently by the respondents is the accountability of our leaders. The Balkanization of our greater community into its component elements fosters identification with specific agendas and priorities that may not reflect the greater community.

Many respondents questioned individual decisions made by "our" leadership, which directly calls into question, "To whom are our leaders accountable?" "The people who purport to represent us -- do they? Do they have a feel for the overall community? Or do they represent a minority which is more politically invested?" (Cliff Dow, Burlington)

Too often, it seems, our leaders are thought guilty of representing their own agenda when their position (or even representation) may suggest they speak on behalf of the community as a whole. As one respondent put it, "One or two people make a decision, (and) it reflects on the whole community."

Again and again the respondents referred to two very controversial decisions made surrounding 1995's Pride Day events. While Jennifer Muncil and Peter Thomas were often specifically appreciated for their efforts and devotion to organizing Pride Day, respondents queried, "Who disinvented Lieutenant Governor

## "I'm not a straight man, but I play one on television."

Many gay and lesbian people like Dan Butler thought acting straight was better than being open and honest. They hoped that others did not know, or that they feared friends and family would not accept them. After coming out, the love and support many receive tells them one thing -- that being themselves is the best act to follow.

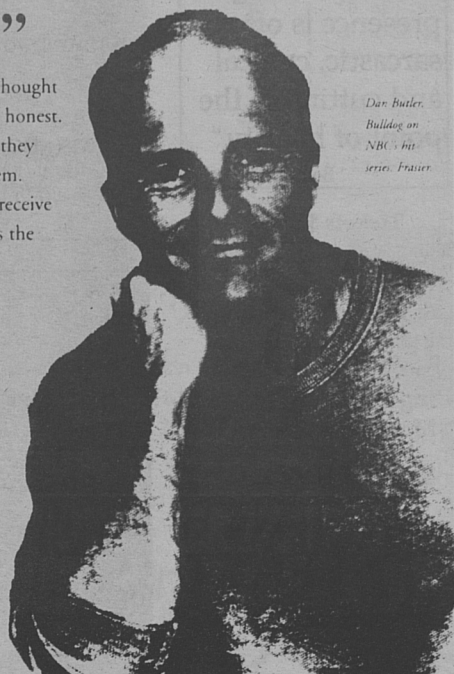


National Coming Out Day is October 11  
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Dan Butler,  
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NBC's hit  
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