

Straight from the Heart: A Heterosexual Man Considers Coming Out

by Don Peabody

A graduation celebration last summer at Brandon's Lilac Inn reminded me of two things: first, the debt of gratitude owed my gay friends and their community of support. My heartfelt thanks go out to all of you who are "out in the mountains." You're models for all of us who struggle to be free, to accept and express ourselves.

Second, that gratitude, in turn, reminded me of some unfinished business which began in the summer of 1995, when I shared the contents of a three-year-old file with a gay friend. The file contained a letter addressed to the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General John Shalikashvili, a poem that accompanied the letter, and the General's reply. I explained that the presumptuous hope for a substantive reply had been tempered with political savvy. Where I would have failed utterly by myself, Senators Jeffords and Leahy succeeded in gaining a response — albeit minimal — from the General. My friend handed back the file with a challenge: "Write a frame for those and send it to *Out in the Mountains*."

My first thought was that doing so would be even more presumptuous. What do I have to offer the gay community? Support? Sure. Friendship? Absolutely. So what? That's not news. Second, this topic is stale; it's old news. Third, I hesitated to suggest a frame I thought bound us all together — straight and gay — for fear of minimizing the bravery of those whom I admire so keenly for having come out as homosexuals.

Over the summer months, however, as I watched the scapegoating of poor people for the problems of this state and nation, I came to realize that friendship and support are not to be taken for granted, that progress is not permanent, and that regression is a live force. Friends reminded me, citing the arson at Vermont CARES a few years ago, that although homosexuals in the armed forces may not currently be a hot media topic any more, homophobia is far from a dead issue. Ironically, switching gender roles in a contra dance both confirmed what those friends told me and gave me first-hand experience of the abuse meted out by frightened males.

Lastly, seeking help in titling a play, I discovered a gay folklorist who allayed my fear of giving offense. He too saw coming out as a metaphor, with this difference: where I saw "self-recovery," he saw "engagement." He said he didn't feel the least bit diminished by my viewpoint. On the contrary, he encouraged me to elaborate my own particular point of view and I promised I would. So, here 'tis:

As I understand "coming out," it's to say who and what I am. That comes hard to me, raised a rock-ribbed conservative Christian Vermont farm boy. It's easier to stay in the shadows, to embrace the cultural icons, to not rock the boat but to go with the flow of the "great cultural constructs" (as my friend Susie terms them). So, when I can break free — forget, for instance, the multi-generational Vermont relatives and stern-visaged villagers on the hillside, connect with my deepest creative impulse, take courage from the kindred spirits around me and come out of the shadows to dance in the

light — it is time for celebration. When I can dance free on this earth, I hope for my friends to clap their approval and laugh their glee that I am living happy, joyous, and free.

It is in the breaking of my own bondages that I learn the ingredients of coming out: First, humility (a clear recognition of who and what I am). Second, self-love and self-acceptance (gladly and willingly taking it as it comes). Third, courage (faith in the presence of fear) to go through the process (rather than over or around it).

However, without in the least diminishing my own re-births, I acknowledge that my comings-out — as pacifist, addict, spiritualist, mystic, dancer, animist — are (at least) marginally acceptable. Nonetheless, because of them I know how rare and difficult it can be to achieve this synthesis, to stand spiritually naked, assert ownership of all my power. That, in turn, gives rise to empathy, even awe, at the coming out of those who have a sexual orientation other than the dominant heterosexual one.

To stand up in the face of that heavy social construct is an awesome and sacramental act. My Muse, I believe, tried to express this holiness in the poem "Get It," and in the subsequent letter to General Shalikashvili. I had dared hope for something more illuminating in response. That is, however, left to us.

Mostly to you, actually. Because to my mind, there's another aspect to this frame I was challenged to build, an aspect I leave for each of you to picture.

It is a torch.

Imagine, if you will, a torch inside this frame each and every one of you who have come out carries. If you'd like it to be a torch of enlightenment, picture it so. But I also treasure the truths of the dark and see it more as a beckoning torch, a leading beacon, guiding the way for all — straight or gay, General or civilian. A beacon lit, and kept burning, by those of you with the insight, and valor, to be "out in the mountains." ▼

Get It

Remembering the joyful curve of summer's rainbow, the spectrally-diffused, climactic conjunction of summer's caressing rain suffused with warm sun, that arcs from one wet, warm, flushed earth spot to another, spans the verdant forests and teeming fields below, gives eternal birth to creative images of the bard, ever-fecund, fertile, feminine, our Earth's mother.

Watching winter weather's alternative show: orange sun sinks slowly into twilight mountain, and suddenly sending, straight-up, a rising column of brilliant, icy light, a dramatic, surging pillar ascendant through greying clouds, laden with wintry snow, prompts visions — more driven than pro-creative, stark, hard, mounting-up from dead, harsh, cold earth of our Earth's Father?

Oh, damning poetic dogma!
I refute thee,
false, remnant muse!

Require not
that I clothe my summers in dresses and lie on my back
and my winters in pants to stay on top.
Let me take my Father and Mother as they may reach me,
in the cool of summer's glade and the heat of winter's play.
Let me cross-dress my Barbies and Kens,
paint flowers on my G.I. Joes
and hug my teddies tight at night until I die.
Let me cry manly tears of pain and compassion,
and assert womanly detachment and toughness of mind.
I am sister and brother as each wants to be,
on the level,
neither up nor down, above nor below,
all-embracing and -embraced,
complete,
whole.

-- Don Peabody

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