

## DYKE PSYCHE: LESBIAN BABY BOOMERS AT MIDLIFE

by Esther Rothblum

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On June 28, 1969, the lesbians, gay men, and bisexuals at the Stonewall Inn Bar in Greenwich Village fought the police who came to raid the bar. The ages of the Stonewall patrons ranged from late teens to early thirties. Twenty-four years later, on June 21, 1993, the cover story of Newsweek was entitled "Lesbians: Coming out strong; what are the limits of tolerance?" and depicted two young, white lesbians embracing.

I'm a lesbian of this transitional generation, a group which came of age in the period between Stonewall and the more progressive — or at least, lesbian visible — 1990s. We were in our teens and twenties in 1969. As we approach midlife, the awareness of the general U.S. public about lesbian and gay issues has significantly increased. According to a recent Newsweek article, for example, 43% of the U.S. population indicated that they have a "gay friend or acquaintance."

We are also part of the baby boomers generation. And just as schools, colleges, the military, and the workplace accommodated our numbers as we grew up, the nation, and we as individuals, are preparing for our aging and retirement. Given what we know about aging heterosexual women, what might be different for lesbians?

### Affirming lesbianism and affirming aging

For white women, becoming a lesbian is learning how to live as a minority. As females in a male-dominated society, both lesbian and straight women are oppressed, although sexism is usually least apparent to young heterosexual women. As Gloria Steinem has noted, this is the age when women have the most social power, since we are at the peak of our physical and sexual attractiveness. At least for able-bodied, middle-class, white women, then, ageism may be the first recognized experience of oppression.

Women who are members of other oppressed groups, however, have faced oppression throughout life. Thus, coping with heterosexism may prepare lesbians to cope with aging more effectively and research on this question supports this idea.

### Families of origin

For lesbians who are out to their parents, midlife may be a time of increasing comfort and decreasing tensions. Lesbianism may no longer be considered a "phase" that the woman needs to outgrow. For lesbians who come out at midlife, the fact that they were involved in prior heterosexual relationships, including marriage, may be less threatening to parents. Coming out to parents at midlife may be easier than at adolescence, when the

lesbian is still living at home and financially dependent on her parents. It's harder to tell a daughter that she'll have a miserable life being a lesbian when she has surpassed the educational level or the socioeconomic status of her family of origin. Yet, while the data we have is limited, it seems as if few lesbians are in fact out to their families. Among the last people we come out to are our parents, particularly if we are Euro-American.

Not being out to parents has a number of implications for lesbians. They may move further away from their family in order to keep their lesbianism a secret. They may keep their family distant in other ways, such as infrequent visits and superficial communication. Not disclosing sexual orientation to parents means that parents will view their lesbian daughter as a single woman. For aging lesbians who are closeted to their parents, aging may imply decreased pressure to date or marry men. However, the unmarried daughter may be called upon by family members to take care of aging parents. Thus, she may spend her midlife years providing care in her own community or perhaps back in her hometown where she is most closeted. Friendship networks and partner relationships

Ask a lesbian who is out what she means by "family" and she will probably describe her family of friends in the lesbian community. A major way of finding lesbian friends is being integrated into a lesbian community. In fact, most lesbians for whom we have information, are. Over two-thirds of the lesbians in the National Lesbian Health Care Survey lived in a community that had lesbian support groups, lesbian cultural events, lesbian sports teams, lesbian therapists, a lesbian bar, lesbian or gay religious groups, and a lesbian or feminist bookstore. Only 18% of lesbians lived in communities where there were no lesbian activities, but 50% of these lesbians lived within 50 miles and 22% lived within 100 miles of communities with lesbian activities.

Lesbian communities do not seem as fixed by age as the dominant culture. Lesbians of all ages participate in various lesbian social and political events. Consequently, lesbian friendship circles include women across ages. I once lived in a communal household with four lesbians who ranged in age from a college student in her early twenties to a woman in her fifties. The women in this household viewed themselves as peers, not as women spanning two generations.

As the Stonewall generation, we have made our way through many types of relationships as we aged. If we knew other lesbians while we were children and adolescents, they were probably in butch/femme relationships that mirrored the rigid gender roles of heterosexual marriages of the times. During the so-called "sexual revolution," monogamy was frowned upon in many lesbian communities, and lesbians had multiple, short-term

sexual encounters. These days, middle aged lesbians strive for long-term relationships consistent with the nesting stage of development.

Increasing numbers of lesbians are also parenting children together which marks a shift from couples rearing the children of one partner's former marriage to couples bearing or adopting children together. Moreover, lesbians are rearing children later in life than their heterosexual sisters. This is certainly due to the high costs of childrearing and adoption, and the relatively lower income of women compared to men's.

### Conclusion

The Stonewall generation is just turning fifty, and that is the older segment of our cohort. Therefore much of this essay has focused on mid-life, not old age. As Psychologist Sarah Pearlman has said: "Early mid-life may be the theory, but late mid-life is the practice . . ." Other issues will become important as the Stonewall generation retires and becomes old. We are well aware, for example, that older lesbians have experienced significant ageism, including ageism from younger lesbians, but the baby boomers have not yet faced this head on.

We are also aware that while many of us do not feel old, turning fifty is considered old in areas and countries with high rates of malnutrition and disease and, thus, we note the class and race components of post-Stonewall lesbian aging. Muriel Miguel describes how she has felt she was at midlife since she was twenty-five; that while growing up she saw members of her Native American community die before age forty. Also, we emphasize the importance of gender differences: at the same time that lesbian baby boomers are turning fifty, the AIDS epidemic is killing young gay men.

Thus, it is important to emphasize the diversity of the Stonewall generation. Those of us who live in rural, conservative, Bible-Belt communities may lead lives not too different from those of lesbians in the 1940s and 1950s. Lesbians in Boston or San Francisco, in contrast, may be part of the "mainstream" and out to everyone. It is important to keep in mind that our generation spans a wide continuum. There may be more similarities between lesbians and heterosexual women of similar political backgrounds than there are between lesbians who differ in level of conservatism, religiosity, and other factors.

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## Voices from the Mountains: Meet G/LEARN

As the excitement of Ellen's public coming out fades, those of us who are in the less-than-public eye have wondered how we can benefit from the current increased awareness of the issue of sexual orientation. The Upper Valley, the area around White River Junction, has a large population of Lesbian and Gay people, but because we are so spread out in towns and rural areas, the sense of having a community has never been very strong. There are a number of organizations which serve to keep us connected with each other, such as The Amelia Earheart Underground Flying Society (Amelia's) and Social Alternatives for Men (SAM) and the Dartmouth Rainbow Alliance (formerly DAGLO), but we are still fairly closeted to the larger community. A relatively new group, two-year old G/LEARN (Gay/Lesbian Education and Resource Network), has been working to change that.

Originally created by a small group of Lesbian and Gay parents who were concerned about the treatment their children were receiving at the hands of their peers when the sexual orientation of the parents was discovered, the focus of G/LEARN was to educate educators about the issues involved.

We sent out informational packets to school administrators and counselors, we formed a speakers bureau, and we organized a weekly support group for lesbigaytrans and questioning youth. We have put up posters in public places in the towns in the area. We meet monthly, have had trainings for the youth group facilitators and the speakers bureau, have received grants to carry on this work, and are putting together Educational Packets to send to the schools.

And yet, it still seems that very few know we are here. The posters are taken down (often within 24 hours) and we put them back up, only to have them disappear again. We have had very few responses to our mailings which go to 100+ people and schools and organizations. The Friday night youth group has seldom had more than one young person per meeting.

We're now seeking allies, both in the straight and lesbigaytrans world to help us get the word out. As a school administrator, are you concerned about the use of the word "faggot" as the most popular pejorative in your school? As a teacher, do you have a student you think might be

at risk because of her/his or the parent's sexual orientation?

Are you a parent who is frustrated at the lack of sensitivity in your child's school? Do the statistics about the suicide rates of lesbian and gay teens make you want to do something to help in ways you wish had been available to you as a young person?

Get in touch with us and get involved. We are planning a retreat in July to evaluate our work to date and to plan for the coming year. We have more influence as a group and it's important for us to support one another. We can make a difference. As one of my earliest lesbian t-shirts proclaimed, "An army of lovers cannot fail".

Ellen said we're coming out because it's okay to be queer. And because too many people have had too much pain in their lives because of who they are. It's time to talk about it and let the world know that, indeed, we are not going away.

FMI: G/LEARN, PO Box 27, Norwich, VT 05055, or newvic@AOL.com, or 802-649-5297; for youth group info: Headrest Teenline 800-639-6095.