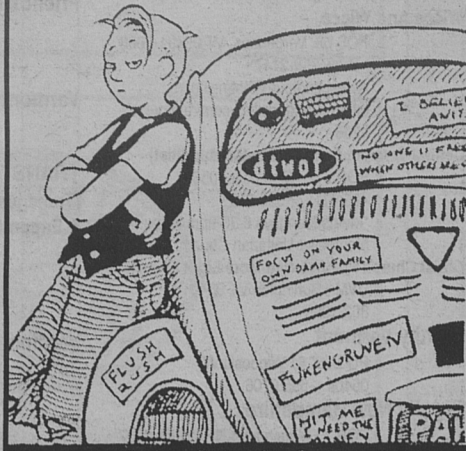


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# Faith Matters & Family Matters



BY REV. CHRISTINE LESLIE

In August my partner and I attended a reunion for my father's family. I enjoyed being with my relatives and was amazed at the genuine love and affection I felt for them. Especially endearing to me was how warmly Martha and I were received. My sister, Sandi and her partner, Lois, had a similar experience. Everyone seemed wanted, welcomed, and willing, at least for the weekend, to put aside negative feelings about our many differences and enjoy each other's company. This was no small feat given the amount of diversity in my family!

There were also a number of family members absent, including my mother, for whom my heart ached. I was glad I could feel that ache because all of my feelings reminded me just how much my family matters to me, and just how much family matters matter. I also left that reunion with an awareness of how my family has grown more healthy in my lifetime. This is not to say that we are dysfunction-free! No family is! However, on a scale of one to ten, one being the most dysfunctional, or closed system, and ten being the most open, or functional system, I would give my family of origin a score of six.

Families tend to become more functional, open systems when the beliefs and behaviors that fuel dysfunction are brought to light and found no longer to be acceptable by a majority of the family's members. For instance, my family has grown more open as a result of how it has faced a number of painful divorces; mentally challenged family members; elderly grandmothers; religious fanaticism; several untimely, tragic deaths; and, of course, the presence of openly gay and lesbian family members.

I attribute much of the successful navigation of these turning points in my family to my parents, who have acted as key emotional work-leaders as these critical events have occurred. This has not been a pain-free differentiation process. However, it is a process that has been worth it for all of us given the level of healthiness we enjoy today.

How I wish the many faith traditions that make up God's households on earth could be more functional than dysfunction-

What a different world this might be! Unfortunately, many of God's households are, to a great degree, dysfunctional, closed family systems that have many of the following characteristics:

- 1) Provide for little or no change.
- 2) Depend on law and order and operate through psychological and sometimes physical force.
- 3) Evolve from certain sets of beliefs which are few but powerful:
  - a) Humans are basically evil and have to be continually controlled to be good.
  - b) There is one right way and the one with the most power has it.
  - c) Relationships have to be regulated by force.
  - d) There is always someone who knows what is best for you.
- 4) Self-worth is secondary to power and performance.
- 5) Actions are subject to the whims of the boss.
- 6) Change is resisted.
- 7) Have rigid and inhumane rules that:
  - a) Make no allowance for differences in people or circumstances.
  - b) Discourage change, seeing it as a potential threat to the status-quo (especially that of the rule-maker).
  - c) Are made for someone else's benefit or to uphold some impersonal principle or institution. Not for the good of the persons who must keep them.
  - d) Are often unrealistic and impossible to keep.
  - e) Encourage one to be dishonest and manipulative with others to avoid punishment or rejection.
  - f) Encourage one to be dishonest with oneself to avoid feelings or guilt.

Since a lot of communities of faith operate as closed family systems, it explains why so many people, not just g/l/b/t people, have fled the faith traditions they were raised in and why so many people distrust organized religions. In fact, many people are distant and estranged from their family of origin because many a dysfunctional family of origin is supported in its dysfunction by its membership in a dysfunctional family of faith.

Not all is grim and without reason to hope. With each passing year there are more of God's households, from all the faith traditions in this country, becoming less dysfunctional. I attribute much of this growth to many people of faith, straight and g/l/b/t, who have, and are, serving as key emotional work-leaders in our respective faith communities.

For example, just this summer the leadership of the Episcopal Church issued a public apology to gay and lesbian people for the hurtful ways it has treated gay and lesbian members. This same gathering came within one vote of authorizing the creation of same-gender commitment services. Even though it didn't do so this time around, I bet the Episcopal Church will authorize the creation of such liturgies at its next national

meeting in 1999. The Episcopal Church is acting as a key, emotional work-leader in God's household, much to the consternation of some of its leadership and membership. Because of the steps the Episcopal Church took this summer, I believe other denominations will take similar steps in the future. With strides like these and more like them, in due time God's households will become more open, functional communities of faith.

I believe this process will also be expedited when many g/l/b/t people realize we have been the "shame-bearers" in God's household for too long and that we no longer have to accept this role. This means g/l/b/t people of faith need to be more and more visible and verbal so we can give our respective faith communities the opportunity to grapple with their dysfunction in open and honest ways. Without our being key emotional work-leaders too, how can God's dysfunctional households ever become functional, open family systems that believe and behave as follows:

- 1) Offer choices and depend on meeting reality successfully for their continuing life.
- 2) Actions are the outcome of reality.
- 3) Provide for change.
- 4) Change is welcomed and considered normal and desirable.
- 5) Self-worth is primary, with power and performance related to it.
- 6) Communication, system, and rules are all related.
- 7) Have flexible and humane rules that:
  - a) Are applied with appreciation for the inevitable differences in circumstances and in the needs and capabilities of people involved.
  - b) Accept and even encourage change as potential source of growth for the individual and the family unit.
  - c) Are made for the benefit of the whole family, not just the rule-maker.
  - d) Accept each person for who she/he is - a human being, possessed of feelings, well-meaning but fallible.
  - e) Validate worth of every one involved.

I hope this is good news to all who read this. With such mature differentiation work like this going on in our respective faith communities, I believe there is reason to hope that within several generations, most faith communities that make up God's household will be open, healthy family systems. And when everyone is free at last to live as full members of their family of faith, then God's kin-dom on earth will surely be close at hand.

Rev. Christine Leslie, the first, openly ordained lesbian in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is co-founder and director of Triangle Ministries, A Center For Lesbian and Gay Spiritual Growth near Burlington, VT. Rev. Leslie is available for counseling, commitment services, workshop and retreats, and specializes in the integration of spiritual development with sexual-identity formation.

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