

Are We Really Born Queer?

BY CROW COHEN

There's a debate raging in the queer movement about whether we're born queer or whether we choose it as an identity. believe taking the leap of faith that we choose our queerness can lead to a much more profound self-empowerment.

Let's take a look at the implications. Many of us involved in queer civil rights issues (the freedom to marry, to be protected from job and housing discrimination, etc.) often use the argument that we're born queer. That way the straight world hopefully acknowledges that "we can't help who we are." Hence, we deserve to be respected and protected like other minorities who have struggled for their rights over the years (like African-Americans, or people with disabilities, for example). The dominant culture can then regard us as "the other" since we obviously have different genes or hormones or some such innate biological quirk that caused us to be born "that way" which in turn will increase their tolerance (if they're good-hearted liberals), or their pity (if they're clueless), or their disgust (if they're inclined to suspect there is something abhorrent about our very beings).

And then there's all the "research" out there - all those earnest scientists eager to come up with a definitive answer to the "nature vs. nurture" question. Occasionally we see "proof" in the headlines that we can rest easy - we actually are born "this way" so we don't have to argue anymore. There's one small problem with so-called scientific research using human subjects. Anyone who has taken a basic research methods course can tell you that research on humans is not valid unless you choose your subjects from a random sample. Furthermore, it is impossible, given our homophobic society, to gather a random sample of queers because it's not safe for them to step forward and identify themselves. (Try collecting a random sample of queers in Alabama, for instance, or Cairo, Egypt for that matter.) I sincerely hope that one day it will

be safe for a random sample of queers to identify themselves in one of your common supermarket surveys, but don't hold your breath.

Meanwhile, we're stuck with phenomenon of some of us queers absolutely knowing we were queer or at least "different" before we could talk. I'd like to suggest that this is entirely possible, but it has nothing to do with a concept called "compulsory heterosexuality" to borrow a term from the brilliant lesbian feminist writer, Adrienne Rich. Compulsory heterosexuality means that the moment we're born, and the doc sneaks a look at our infant genitals, we immediately placed in the male or female category and systematically/institutionally forced to conform to heterosexual stereotypical male/female roles right from the get-go. Is "forced" too strong a word? Not when you consider how our parents, churches, peers, schools, military, governments and landlords often freak out when we finally find the words to tell the queer truth about ourselves. Sometimes that freakout results in mere discrimination; but all too often it can result in total rejection, bashings, murder, or at the stake.

I'd also like to suggest that some of us, at a preverbal stage of development, rebelled against this heterosexual trap laid out for us the minute we emerged from the womb and began rejecting being pushed to act like a "real man" or a "good little girl" from the deepest part of our authentic, intuitive selves. Little kids are supersensitive to vibes. I wouldn't be a bit surprised if our secret "knowers" deep within picked up that het vibe out there which resulted in some sort of smart little preverbal knowledge that male/female roles (which sets in cement dominance/submission patterns - hence, oppression) is a fucked up way to relate. Some profound impulse towards freedom very well may have caused us youngsters who look or feel as if we're born queer or in the wrong gender to refuse to give into social pressure to comply with the expectations of institutionalized heterosexual oppression. Lucky us - except during

those exceedingly painful times in our lives when refusing to conform to stereotypes felt like an isolated, living hell until we found each other and built a movement around it.

But what about those of us who, for all practical purposes, continue to fit the male/female "look" but are still queer? Do we suffer from compulsory heterosexuality as well? You betcha. As a matter of fact, we may be even a bit more of a threat since we look so close to "them." They may end up asking themselves how can such a "lovely lady" or "handsome man" turn into a queer? Were they abused? Perhaps all they need is a good roll in the het hay to straighten themselves out. Or maybe they were born that way? Oh, that's it. Now I can relax. I know there's no chance that I'll "catch it."

Now let's make a switch. Let's assume that we decide we actually choose to be queer (consciously, unconsciously, or intuitively) because being queer can potentially give us a miraculous sort of freedom that can lead to profound fulfillment, clarity, love and self-respect. Being queer can help us work through oppression, can motivate us to build communities, can give us meaning and purpose to our lives, can truly liberate us. (I have a confession to make. I know I chose to be a dyke when I was in my med-30's since lesbianism for me was an expression of feminism. I do not make a distinction between those two identities. For me coming out was a logical progression from the women's liberation movement. I am now 54 and the happiest I've been in my life.)

There's no doubt about it. Proclaiming we choose to be queer, and what's more, any het out there can choose to be queer if they'd like, can be construed as a huge threat to the straight world. (We used to wear political buttons in the 70's that said, "Any woman can be a lesbian.") Some of us clearly remember that incredible revolutionary act we experienced when we stepped over that line between the straight world and the queer world. Something deep and irrevocable happened. Something intuitively felt right even though the majority of society was telling us it was wrong. Something powerful and brave and brilliant (and oftentimes scary) happened to us. Something I like to call "freedom." Try it.

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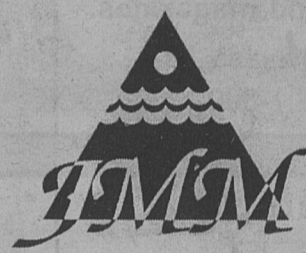
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