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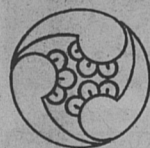
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DYKE PSYCHE:

themes in lesbian coming out stories

by Esther Rothblum



In the 1970s, a few psychologists began writing about the process of coming out. They thought about the experience of coming out as consisting of predictable phases or stages that people went through in an orderly way. A few years ago, a group of heterosexual, bisexual, and lesbian graduate students and I met to read and discuss popular books of lesbian coming out stories (see reading list at the end of this column). In the midst of reviewing and discussing research and academic writing about coming out we found ourselves trying to relate what we were reading to our own experiences or those of people we knew. The coming out models we read seemed unable to capture the richness of lesbian life. Most did not address both coming out and being out. Furthermore, feminism and political identity in general were ignored. Instead of attempting to develop our own model, we decided to examine the women's experiences and see what sort of structure emerged. We did this by reading the coming out stories of lesbians and examining them for themes. We found that, in these personal accounts, the coming out process was a lifelong experience and is quite unique for each individual lesbian.

Diversity in the lesbian communities

The lesbians whose stories we read often discussed the double and triple minority status they experienced as lesbians and as women of color, or as poor lesbians in communities where most women were middle class:

"In this country, lesbianism is a poverty—as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression. The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base....When the going gets rough, will we abandon our so-called comrades in a flurry of racist/heterosexist/what-have-you panic? To whose camp, then, should the lesbian of color retreat?" Cherrie Moraga, in *The Original Coming Out Stories*.

Joining a lesbian group on a college campus could automatically disqualify you from participating in a racial or ethnic student group. As one Indian woman put it:

"I was almost seduced into believing that I could not be an Indian and a lesbian without betraying either the culture of my birth and family, or the culture I had chosen as a lesbian and a feminist. Just as men had silenced me in the solidarity committees and meetings of the left, so too I found

that white lesbians talking for me and about me as though I was not present." Kaushalya Bannerji, in *A Lotus of Another Color: An Unfolding of the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experiences*.

But some women do manage to integrate their lesbian and racial/ethnic identities:

"Being a black woman and a lesbian unexpectedly blended, like that famous scene in Ingmar Bergman's film *Persona*. The different faces came together as one, and my desire became part of my heritage, my skin, my perspective, my politics, and my future." Jewel Gomez, in *Testimonies*.

Religion also played an important factor in the coming-out process: "Religious women who happen to be Lesbians live behind two closet doors" (Charlotte A. Doclar, in *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*). Organized religions are often gender-segregated, and some lesbians seek out these women-only spaces by, for example, becoming a nun or studying the Torah. Early in the process of coming out, many lesbians feel a strong pull to be in a community of women, without always understanding the sexual component of this pull.

The many facets of coming out

The coming-out stories we read demonstrate that lesbian identity development occurs in many more than the five or six stages discussed in stage theories. These women commonly describe sensual childhood experiences with other girls or women before their feelings of sexual desire became explicit. The sense of being different came up over and over again in the writings, an idea that is a theme unto itself: "I carried a strong sense that I was different throughout adolescence. I knew I could be happy just being with my girlfriends, and boys seemed unnecessary, even bothersome" (Sarah Holmes, in *Testimonies*).

The storytellers' emotions

Another theme that took shape as we read these coming-out stories was the emotional responses of the authors to their own coming-out experiences. Some common emotions, especially early on, were guilt, shame, and fear: "I was drawn to her but was also very scared. After much anguish, we decided to 'give in' and experiment with being lovers. What followed was a year and a half of a loving, guilt-ridden, closeted relationship" (Adina Abramowitz, in *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*).

Coming out as a lifelong process

The stories we read covered an extremely broad range of experiences, many of which were un-

related to the traditional conceptions of coming out. We would like to emphasize that coming out is a dynamic, lifelong process, as illustrated by these quotes: "One day I discovered I was about to be 67. The knowledge that time was running out hit me. What was unfinished in my one chance at life? (Lenore Thompson, in *Wolf Girls at Vassar*); "At the age of forty, I stopped being a lesbian dropout and re-entered" (Matile Poor, in *The Lesbian Path*); "My coming out story is my life story, which is harder to end than it was to begin. Since coming out is a lifelong process, there's always the possibility of a new beginning" (Liz O'Lexa, in *Testimonies*).

Further reading:

Christine Balka and Andy Rose (Editors). *Twice Blessed: On Being Lesbian or Gay and Jewish*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1989.

Karen Barber and Sarah Holmes (Editors). *Testimonies: Lesbian Coming Out Stories*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1994.

Evelyn Torton Beck (Editor). *Nice Jewish Girls: A Lesbian Anthology*. Watertown, MA: Persephone Press, 1982.

Margaret Cruikshank (Editor). *The Lesbian Path*. Monterey, CA: Angel Press, 1980.

Rosemary Curb and Nancy Manahan (Editors). *Lesbian Nuns: Breaking Silence*. Tallahassee, FL: Naiad Press, 1985.

Anne MacKay (Editor). *Wolf Girls at Vassar: Lesbian and Gay Experiences 1930-1990*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1993.

Julia Penelope and Susan Wolfe (Editors). *The Original Coming Out Stories*. Freedom, CA: Crossing Press, 1989.

Rakesh Ratti (Editor). *Lotus of Another Color: An Unfolding of the South Asian Gay and Lesbian Experiences*. Boston: Alyson Publications, 1993.

Will Roscoe (Editor). *Living the Spirit: A Gay American Indian Anthology*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988.

Esther Rothblum is Professor of Psychology at the University of Vermont and Editor of the *Journal of Lesbian Studies*. DYKE PSYCHE is a monthly column.

This piece was excerpted from the book chapter by Jessica Morris, Amy Ojerholm, Terry Brooks, Dana Osowiecki, and Esther Rothblum, entitled "Finding a 'word for myself': Themes in lesbian coming out stories" that appeared in the book *Dyke Life* (Basic Books), edited by Karla Jay. For a copy of the complete book chapter, write to Esther Rothblum, Dept. Psychology, John Dewey Hall, University of Vermont, Burlington, VT 05405, email e_rothbl@dewey.uvm.edu.