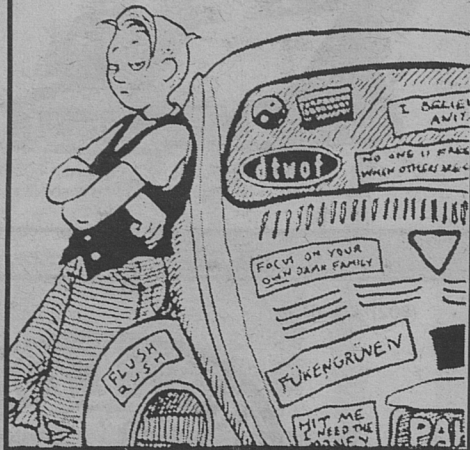


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Faith Matters & Feelings Matter



Columnist - Rev. Christine Leslie

In January I began teaching a course on Monday nights that my partner, Martha, and I offer through Triangle Ministries called "Surfacing Our Souls: A Study of Families, Fear, and Faith." This course invites participants to explore:

- a) how we develop in family systems,
- b) what the spiritual maturation process is, and
- c) what the Bible really doesn't say about homosexuality.

Having found the information in each of these topics to be life-changing and therapeutic, I really enjoy every opportunity I get to teach this course.

At this writing the seven course participants and I have met four times. The sessions on how human beings grow and develop in family systems has been foundational to our upcoming conversations about "What the spiritual maturation process is" and "What the Bible really doesn't say about homosexuality." We simply can't talk about what the spiritual maturation process is without understanding the basics about human development in general, or without understanding what impact being raised in our family of origin has on these human developmental processes.

Even with the prevalence of thousands of self-help books and the ready availability of counselors and therapists to talk to, I continue to be amazed at the number of people I meet who have not learned a) that feeling their feelings really does matter, or b) how to name, experience, and deal with their feelings in healthy ways. Few folks are shocked to learn that the struggle they have with feeling their feelings, and dealing with them in healthy ways usually stems from how their family of origin dealt with normal human emotions.

When we get right down to it feeling our feelings, and then dealing with them in healthy ways can be very hard work whether we have learned how to do all this or not. I think this has to do with the fact that a large range of human emotion involves feeling a lot of feelings we don't want to feel much less deal with. Its no wonder then that most families of origin, and consequently most people, have not fared well and struggle so with understanding a) why we have feelings in the first place, and b) what we are supposed to do with them when we do have them.

It's also no wonder then that so many people spend their lives flip flopping between stuffing their feelings or spewing them at inappropriate times in inappropriate ways that often hurt themselves and the people they love the most. People who are emotionally mature could be described as people who feel their feelings in ways that neither diminish themselves nor others. They are people who can speak the truth about what they feel even if it is just to themselves. They also tend not to stuff or rebuff feelings nor spew them, but rather take them as they come, digest them so they can get the emotional nutrients they need, and sluff off the waste products of digestion they don't need.

One of the good things we g/l/b/t folks have going for us is the fact that figuring out we are gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered can be catalytic for our emotional and spiritual maturation processes. The human maturation, or differentiation process in general can be described as learning how to live from the inside out rather than from the outside in. This is what coming to terms with being g/l/b/t is about, too, since we live in a world that still tells us, for the most part, not to feel our sexual feelings for someone of the same gender. Acting on them is simply out of the question! This is also what the journey from second-hand religion to first-hand spirituality is all about. This process is all about learning how to trust in our internal sense of the holy and sacred and let go of depending more on religious externals than spiritual internals.

Learning to believe in, and live out of, what we experience as holy and sacred, what we find valuable and meaningful is very contrary to what so many of us have been taught to believe by traditional religions. This is particularly ironic to me since the word "religion" comes from the Latin "religio" meaning that which ties back or reconnects. How many religions today really help their believers reconnect to that which is holy and sacred? I know that for many g/l/b/t people many teachings of organized religions have disconnected and alienated them from their experience of the holy and the sacred, and have even wounded them so badly that they have walked away forever from their spiritual journeying only to lose one of the most important sources of hope and healing available to us all.

When all is said and done, when it comes to our emotional and spiritual needs, we simply cannot ever make up on the outside for what we lack on the inside....no matter how hard we try....no matter what lengths we go. To think we can make up with externals for what we lack in internals is comparable to drinking salt water. Salt water can never satisfy your thirst, and in fact, only increases it.

The work it takes to learn how to live from the inside out rather than from the outside in matters immensely to our emotional and spiritual well-being. Both are journeys worth making, because learning how to feel our feelings, and deal with them in healthy, helpful ways, makes it possible for us to develop faith in ourselves, each other and The Sacred. Being willing to mature emotionally makes it possible for us to mature spiritually. This is part of what makes feeling matters matter so much. This is what makes faith matters matter at all.

Rev. Christine Leslie, the first openly ordained lesbian in the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), is founder & director of Triangle Ministries, A Center For Lesbian & Gay Spiritual Development near Burlington, VT. Rev. Leslie is available for commitment services, individual, couple, and family counseling, workshops & retreats. She specializes in the integration of sexual-identity formation & spiritual development. Contact her at 802-860-7106 or email her at REVCSL@aol.com. Visit the Triangle Ministries web page at <http://members.aol.com/revcsl>.

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