

CROW'S



C A W S

BY CROW COHEN

To those of us who identify as lesbian, gay, bi, or trans, communities are crucial to our well-being. Communities validate our pain, give us courage, create rituals to grieve our losses and help us celebrate our life passages. They certainly help us feel less alone, but they have limitations. Communities create peer pressure; and hence, can wreak havoc in our lives if we don't have the skills to maintain personal boundaries.

Based on interviews with several lesbians who were part of the Burlington Women's Community in the '70s, I found that many dykes struggled to feel a part of what was perceived as a powerful like-minded group of women hell-bent on changing the world. The BWC had a national reputation for being progressive — possibly because we were small enough to be in constant contact with each other and were located in a place that prides itself on open-mindedness. For whatever reasons, the BWC was a force to contend with both within and outside its "borders."

The following are excerpts from interviews with women who sometimes, often, or never felt they fit in. Granted, there are myriad personal reasons why people feel alienated in groups, but perhaps a contributing factor can be group dynamics.

First of all, it was inevitable that within such a tight community there would be a core group who emerged as natural leaders. As one lesbian put it: "My perception was that there were a group of lesbians who were the 'in group.' I could tell you who they were, but they might deny it."

Because we didn't officially elect these women to take charge, somehow they were given power and seized it, mostly unconsciously, just like in high school: "I had a definite style. I'm not afraid of a lot of stuff, or at least I don't appear to be. That's been one of my primary roles in political activity in the community."

Sometimes we would be too willing to "educate" our peers (i.e. pass on our version of political correctness). One woman said:

"They didn't seem to be terribly comfortable with me, but what they did want to do is educate me. They talked a lot to me about politics. Everything about me was being turned inside out, washed out, and returned in a way that left me with nothing. I didn't know how to function because I was in the middle of two worlds that made no sense to me. I don't think they were trying to be condescending. I think they wanted me to improve my life. I noticed there were a lot of shut doors. I could get involved with the politics of their lives, but I

What?! You Mean Our Community Wasn't Perfect?

couldn't get involved with them personally. I had very low self-esteem to begin with so I thought, of course, there's something wrong with me. I'm not good enough. I know that, and they know that, too."

We were so fervent about our new discoveries related to misogyny and homophobia that we mistook our revelations as "the truth." In the face of this political passion, those of us who were introverted or simply more laid-

back to me is sisterhood and community. I didn't find that in people who were espousing feminist, anarchist, separatist theory of amazonianism. There was a huge amount of process, and the rules seemed somewhat arbitrary as they went along and then would come out as doctrine."

Sometimes there was an unwillingness or inability to conform to certain mores, like non-monogamy, for example: "I didn't have these personal intercon-

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possible exclusion: "I would never do stuff that I perceived as stupid to fit in, because I never had fit in when I was a kid, so it didn't make any sense to me to kiss ass to fit in later."

It was also at times unsafe to explore those unresolved parts to ourselves that might have been perceived as counter-revolutionary: "Part of the problem was resolving the issue about how I felt about men. I didn't have a whole helluva lot of trust for men. All the men I've ever loved in my life sexually abused me or hurt me or did some pretty horrific things to me. I needed to heal that if I was ever going to be in a relationship with my sons in a healthy way. It felt desperately important to my being whole and complete."

Understandably, we were fervently attempting to train our focus onto women, since men have had center stage forever, but it was probably naive to expect that once we stepped over that line into lesbiansim, we could just renounce the males in our lives. "By being honest that I had a struggle with my feelings [for a man], there was no opening. I wasn't really met on a heart level."

Aside from personality and political differences, there were other factors that set us apart from one another that often went unacknowledged — age and class, for example: "Sometimes I think my age had a lot to do with the way I felt. I was old enough to be everybody's mother. Some of their behavior felt childish to me, and yet I had a lot of respect for all the political stuff that women were doing. Yet when all the infighting started, I never got deeply involved in a whole lot of the politics, because I disagreed

with the way people interacted. I felt people were just not respectful. This dates me. I grew up in a working-class family, and we learned two things: respect and a work ethic. When I came to Burlington and got to know the community, I didn't see either one of those things. It was very difficult for me to relate on an intimate level with people."

Other issues such as race, background and body type also separated us. One woman often felt stifled: "This could be style stuff — talking loud and being rowdy. We had some confrontations around that. These women would expect you to walk quietly. Go hide yourself, don't be seen, especially don't be talkin' loud. I tell them, 'Look it. I'm a big woman. I got big fuckin' lungs.'" Another felt she didn't have the more 'popular' disadvantages: "My basic claim to oppression was being fat and having hair on my face, but those weren't 'cool' ways of being oppressed — not at that time." One dyke felt that BWC was pretty insular — and we were!

"I think I was more multicultural even back then, because as a junior in high school, I lived in Africa, and I [saw people who] didn't even have enough food to eat. Growing up in Vermont, there's all these diseases we never have to think about. There's a lot of survival issues that are so intense. We were in

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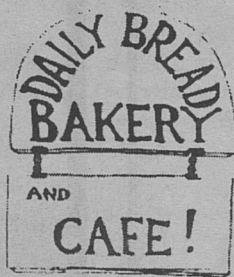
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back (to use a '60s term) felt inferior:

"I wasn't against the sentiment. I just had a hard time going out in the streets. I was not a risk-taker in that way. I was struggling with trusting my own self. I felt a lot of the women were intellectually superior to me. I felt intimidated. I kept meeting these women that fascinated me, but they were not very kind. They were really abrupt and cool. They wanted you to work and do your share and help do the volunteer work, but there was just no laughter, no warmth. I felt there was something that I didn't get! If I could only understand what it was, then maybe I could fit in."

When revolutionaries get so attached to their theories that they throw process and tolerance out the window, a lot of us felt mowed down:

"I would see these people talking about this theory and analysis, but it looked to me like my Catholic upbringing, like another self-righteous, one-way kind of thing to do. It hit all those things that I was trying to heal from. I wouldn't be sucked into another kind of righteous theory, whether it was called feminism or anarchism or lesbianism or sisterhood is powerful or spiritual whatever. I was desperately trying to find something I could grab onto because I wasn't politically correct. I shot animals. I was kissing women on the street in a tuxedo. Rita [not her real name] and I used to go to straight bars and dance as a couple, and I would pass as a man, so it's like I felt I had been living lesbianism my whole life, and these women are wanting to spew this theory. I was never a separatist in theory or in practice, since all of my hurt and pain came from women. I did not think that sisterhood was powerful. Taking care of someone when their ass is on fire —



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