

Working with the Jigsaw Puzzle of Inclusion

by Paij Wadley-Bailey

Audre Lorde called herself a "black feminist lesbian mother warrior poet." She didn't cut herself or anyone around her any slack when it came to dealing with the issues that divide us. Life endowed her with a decidedly distinct vision, but she was careful never to confuse distinction with separation.

Separation means I crawl into a tight, gloomy corner called fear and I box everything not like me out of my mind. I fend for myself with no allies. Now, multiply this behavior times millions and you have a society of tight, cramped corners turned away from each other, floating in some vague ether called civilization. This is an illusion and serves only to separate the body politic. Unfortunately, this illusion is the society we live in.

The image that comes to mind is a jigsaw puzzle. There's the initial excitement of creating vision from seemingly separate pieces. But then, when you get home, open the box and empty

the contents, you find yourself staring at a pile of separation. All of a sudden that excitement becomes panic. Oh my God, what have I done? Why did I get a 10,000-piece jigsaw puzzle? Why did I dream so big? The prospect of putting it all together is overwhelming.

Nevertheless, the dream won't go away. Where to start? You know what it's supposed to look like because you've seen it in your mind's eye. And somehow, after a very heavy sigh, you start in. The only way that you can begin assembling the puzzle is to search for similarities, common borders. Sometimes "surface" characteristics clue you in. Some parts look like blue sky, some like trees, some like flowers in a meadow. Those are the surface groupings. Then, you have to look further for common borders. When the picture emerges, you find suddenly that sky fits tree fits grass fits cottage in the meadow.

How did that happen? Well first, you managed to fit two little pieces together. You saw that

their boundaries coincided in ways that were delightfully unexpected, even beautiful. Then another piece found its way into those two, then another and another. You realized that your brain got attuned to thinking differently. After awhile, you even started anticipating patterns, actively sought them out. So that before long, the picture was complete. What a sense of accomplishment, when hours, maybe days, maybe months before, you dreaded the prospect of assembling it. Hoped that a piece or two didn't get lost under the sofa cushion, or eaten by the dog or used as some strange tool by the kids. It all fit.

And what if you had taken the opposite approach? Say you looked at a piece that appeared to you to be odd in shape, something you couldn't quite categorize. You are too correct to just throw the piece out. Instead, in an attempt to fashion unity, you impatiently sliced off a tab of that piece and jammed it into the picture, just to be rid of that particular chore or project.

In the big picture, that poor jammed piece will stick out like a bony elbow, and every eye will be drawn to that pained-looking area of your vision. And they will ask, "well, what happened here? Looks like you missed a spot. Why is that poor soul all scrunched up like that?" The answer will only be an excuse: "Oh, I ran out of steam!" Your vision has become the mosaic of impatience. It says, "I only thought about today, and about my comfort." And there will always be that nagging elbow poking, bunched up in the face of humanity. Or maybe it will be several elbows jabbing and disjointed. It all depends on how tired, lazy, or impatient you got in the process.

This puzzle image is the acknowledgement of common borders, linking, a wholesomeness and strength brought about by the effort of inclusion. As outsiders, we need each other for support and connection and all the other necessities of living on the borders.

Listening is key. Audre's

poem "If You Come Softly," expresses the kinship that is possible when people meet, soul to soul, to share their grief. "If you come as softly/As wind within the trees/ You may hear what I hear / See what sorrow sees."

This expression of our mutual sorrows can be painful. But it's all part of creating that vision, those 10,000 pieces slowly coming together. Sometimes the pain comes out as anger. Because anger might not feel good, we shrink from it. Sometimes the sounds of 10,000 pieces coming together can sound downright cacophonous. After all, the doors have been opened; inclusion is the password. But there are times when we cannot hear or understand each other. That requires some serious patience.

Let the voices be heard. Let the cacophony rock the boat. For as Audre says in "Lightly,"

"Don't make waves/ is good advice/ from a leaky boat." This boat, however, is strong and will sail! ▼

GLAADAlert

Harper's Magazine: Matthew Shepard and Compulsory Heterosexuality

In its September 1999 issue, Harper's Magazine re-examines the Matthew Shepard murder from a provocative new angle: rather than focusing on the sexual orientation of the victim, frequent Harper's contributor JoAnn Wypijewski looks closely at the sexual orientations of the killers and the environment which may have helped shape them. Wypijewski's excellent in-depth look at the culture of "compulsory heterosexuality" defies easy categorization - it neither demonizes Shepard's killers nor venerates their victim, choosing instead to look at the history, character and culture of Wyoming and the social forces that simultaneously buckle

under the weight of and reinforce institutionalized homophobia.

Wypijewski examines the pressure to conform to masculine heterosexual norms - a pressure she believes not only causes homophobia, but also damages heterosexual men. "Among the tolerance peddlers, it's always the 'lifestyle' of the gay guy," she writes, "never the 'lifestyle' of the straight guy or the culture of compulsory heterosexuality." She proceeds to quote a University of Wyoming student in a discussion with a woman opposed to violence, but who was convinced that homosexuality is immoral. "The issue isn't tolerance," he said. "We don't need to learn tolerance; we need to learn love." For Wypijewski, love is not just an abstract concept - it is "life's

defining line," one held firm by "all the little things of a culture, mostly unnoticed and unremarked, like the way in which the simplest show of affection is a decision about safety, like the way in which a man entwined with a woman is the stuff of everyday commerce, but a man expressing vulnerability is equivalent to a quaint notion of virginity - you save it for marriage." In this outstanding, complex piece of journalism, Wypijewski has constructed a story that works on multiple thematic levels, one which compellingly suggests that the way to eradicate homophobia is to reconceive a heterosexuality now broken by fear of same-sex male emotional intimacy. Please thank Harper's for publishing this vital, remarkable feature.

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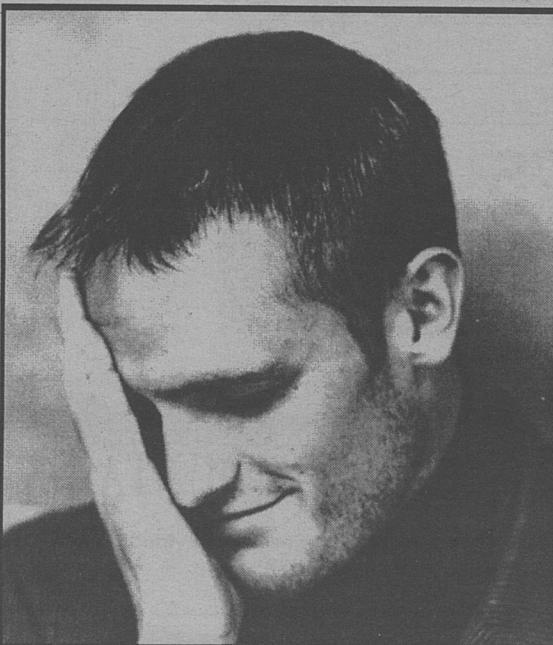
20/20 Gives a Voice to Homeless Gay Youth

ABC News' 20/20 opened its 1999-2000 season with an extensive segment called "Throwaway Teens," which examined the plights of three homeless lesbian and gay youth who have been thrown out of their homes on account of their sexual orientations. The segment opens with a young man walking: "He spends his days going nowhere," explains 20/20's Connie Chung. "Barely visible to the people he passes, he matters to no one. [H]e is homeless, fending for himself, far from

anything he ever knew." Later, Chung explains that the youth, Daniel, "is certain that he was thrown out [of his family's house] because he is gay ... sent on his way without tears, without even a goodbye." Forced to find livelihood, Daniel admits that he has turned to prostitution during rough times. In the end, he says, "I miss my home. I'd like to tell my mom and my family that I love them and that I wish that they would accept me for who I am and just love me again."

At times, the segment seemed needlessly sensationalistic - with examples including gritty and blurred street footage and one teaser which broke to commercial with a description of these youth as "so young and struggling to

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