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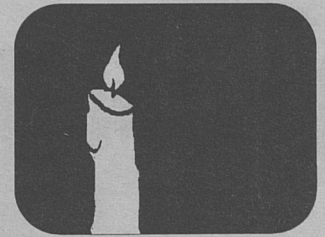
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FAITH MATTERS

by the reverend christine leslie



Faith Matters and Identity Matters

Martha and I have dogs who happen to be “barkers.” In fact, one of them, Clancy, barks so much that we finally had to get a bark collar to help him bark less. Even with this device on, Clancy has learned how much he can bark before he incurs a mild electric zap from the collar’s buzz box.

We also have a friend living with us, who happens to have a seven-year-old dog. Jessie has never lived with other dogs, and prior to living here, she was decidedly not a barker. But since moving in, she has learned that she, too, can bark. Now she loves to get our dogs to form a circle so they can take turns barking at each other.

Jessie has learned from Clancy and Sequoia that she, too, is a barker, and is free to use her voice as a pack member. In fact, we believe Jessie is reveling in her newfound barker identity.

We humans also seem to have longings and capacities awakened within us as a result of interacting with others who have discovered and integrated things about themselves that we admire and envy. For instance, as small children, we watch an older sibling ride a real bicycle without training wheels, and no one runs alongside them to keep them upright. We think about the tricycle we are riding and make a decision that, as soon as we are big enough, we are going to become “two-wheelers,” too.

Sure enough, when our legs have grown longer and we are in better command of our motor skills, we try out a two-wheeler. We do this with and then without the training wheels. Oh, the exhilaration of riding on our own for the first time!

But mastering the brakes can be rough, as our nieces, Caroline and Katie, learned one summer. It was tough to watch them use the back ends of parked cars to stop themselves. Being determined individuals, by Labor Day they were proudly braking with the pedals like pros.

Katie and Caroline went from being training-wheel dependents to two-wheeling

independents in a matter of weeks. As they did this, their bike-riding identities changed. What they had once longed to be, they had actually become. They were able to do this because they had watched other people successfully ride two-wheelers, and then, when

lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered. Those of us who have come to love our GLBT sexual identities are fortunate, since the common primary response, internally and externally, to finding out we are GLBT is rarely, “Congratulations! You are a GLBT person!”

We believe a lie to think that our GLBT sexual identities are contrary to having a healthy spiritual identity.

big enough, were eager to try it themselves.

What happened next was critical to the process. While actually riding their two-wheelers for the first time, both girls were steered a bit, and then launched with cheers as they whizzed down the street (and into the back ends of parked cars). Success was theirs, internally and externally!

This is the identity development process in a nutshell. We learn most of what we believe possible about ourselves from initially watching other people and comparing ourselves to them. We then decide whether or not a particular belief or behavior is something we want to try on and perhaps integrate. Sometimes what we strive to integrate into our identity is good for us; sometimes it isn't. Unfortunately, for most human beings, identity development is a trial-and-error process filled with considerable misinformation and bizarre notions of what constitutes a healthy sense of self.

For many GLBT people, this trial-and-error process is exacerbated when we are faced with the reality of being gay,

Developing a positive and likable spiritual identity is also a trial-and-error process, because organized religion has made such a bad name for itself in our modern world. People who claim a spiritual identity, even a liberated and healthy one, are no longer esteemed as they once were by mainstream culture. In fact, we are held suspect by those who hold too tightly to their beliefs and those who scoff at and scorn anything spiritual.

Given these realities how on earth are GLBT people to develop positive, loving sexual and spiritual identities? We seem to do a better job of showing people they can be independent bike-riders than we do at helping them know they can be healthy, happy GLBT people of faith. It's no surprise to me that many GLBT people spend most of their lives feeling like exiled, ugly, orphans, for whom the concept of a loving God is as unfathomable as the magnitude of the universe. Is it any wonder so many of us have a terrible sense of ourselves and believe that God shares our views?

Identity matters so much