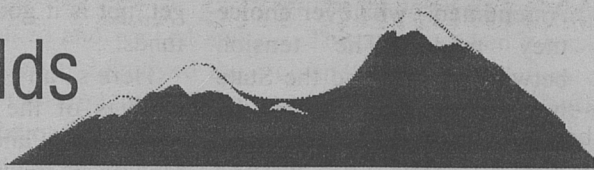


VOICES FROM THE MOUNTAINS

by Brooke Pearson

Shoulds and Could's



When was the last time you outed yourself to someone? Weeks, months, years ago? Your answer probably depends in part upon how long and how openly you have been out. In other words, are there lots of folks, or only a few Magoos who don't already know you're gay? Are you anxious, indifferent, or excited about sharing the good news with others?

Having been out only four years, I still enjoy disabusing the unsuspecting of their assumptions based upon my many years of marriage and my two grown children. Of course, in a state as small as Vermont, and a town as tiny as Montpelier, it is harder and harder to find any unsuspecting to disabuse.

So, imagine my excitement in early June as I headed off to San Francisco to attend the annual conference of a national organization, the 200-250 members of which in attendance I was to address as the incoming president. Should I, could I, would I disabuse these unsuspecting souls *en masse*? Those questions occupied a fair amount of my time as I worked on my speech.

Why, you may be asking yourself, would I even consider inflicting this comfortable crowd of administrative law judges – not to mention my somewhat uncomfortable self – with this personal revelation?

Well, I knew I wanted to elaborate on my predecessor's

remarks at last year's conference, in which she spoke of the diversity of the organization being one of its strengths; I knew several speakers would be addressing issues of bias and prejudice; and I knew I felt proud to be from Vermont, and would feel liberated to be in San Francisco.

And, ultimately, I knew I wanted to expressly extend to my colleagues the opportunity and the challenge afforded them by the diversity of their assembled selves to learn, to appreciate, to understand, to grow; to identify and address their assumptions and biases, and to discuss and reflect upon their differences and similarities; to move through and beyond tolerance, acceptance, and passive endorsement and to move to affirmation, inclusion, and active celebration – to embrace all people and to validate all life experiences in order to become the very best at providing equal justice to all. So, the affirmative answer to the "should" question I reached quickly.

The affirmative answers to the "could" and "would" questions, on the other hand, took a bit more time. Horses of different colors, as you, or Dorothy, might say. But reach them I finally did, with the help and encouragement of one of our speakers, who spoke eloquently about diversity, and a fellow Board member, one of only a handful of attendees who

already knew about me.

While I had heard many positive comments about our new civil union law and the sights (what sights!) of San Francisco, I had also heard some negative ones. And,

Nor was I prepared for the requests for copies of my remarks; nor was I prepared for a wonderful colleagues' coming out to me later that day.

while public speaking comes naturally to me, I've had but a few years' experience outing myself, experience that hadn't previously included appearances in convention or conventional ballrooms!

So, yes, I was on the verge of apoplexy as I looked down from the podium on the raised platform and began my speech. But I also knew I was doing the right thing, and, as I related the various ways in which the organization reflects extraordinary diversity, I became calmer and calmer until, with pride and peace and confidence, I stated as my final example, "and, as of today, your president is Brooke Pearson, a gay man..."

The rest of the speech was a cinch to deliver – and, it was good, if I do say so myself.

What followed was stunning and beautiful beyond words. As I concluded my remarks,

the entire audience rose as one in a standing ovation that lasted a full couple of minutes! That I wasn't prepared for! Nor was I prepared for the line of people waiting to congratulate and thank me; nor was I prepared for the requests for copies of my remarks; nor was I prepared for a wonderful colleague's coming out to me later that day. I am still amazed and, most of all, overjoyed!

So, what's the point of all

same way you answer the "should" question. Whatever your take on the extent of your obligation to do so for yourself and others, surely you would agree with me on the right answer to the "should" question. The same answer is the right one to the other two questions, too. It is right for you, it is right for them, it is right for us!

And whether the response you receive is deafening silence (extremely unlikely) or enthusiastic applause (very likely) matters not a whit! You will have made a difference.

You will have raised the consciousness of and had a positive impact on a lot of people. You will have taken one very small, but one incredibly meaningful step toward eliminating prejudice and engendering acceptance. You will have given your friends the courage to do the same thing. And, you will have made yourself very proud indeed.

Brooke Pearson lives in Montpelier. ▼

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