

Overcoming fear: Gay Pride in the face of the plague

Not only must we stand together, but at every turn we must celebrate the fact that we are still alive.

BY MICHAEL S. REED

Joey is becoming friends with a woman he works with. He's been afraid to tell her he's gay. "What if she tells my boss?" he wonders. He envisions losing his job because his co-workers will be scared of him if they know he's gay; they might be afraid of catching AIDS if he stands too close to the coffee machine. He talks to his therapist about it, rallies his nerve and one day, tells his friend that he is a homosexual. Although there are a few awkward moments initially, since his friend hasn't ever dealt with this particular issue, their friendship does begin to deepen. Joey now may speak freely about himself, his life and his loves.

Anyone who has lived in this lifetime as a gay person has faced situations similar to this one. For gay people, coming out is not a once-in-a-lifetime event. It is something we face every day in every different kind of situation imaginable: at parties, on the street, with acquaintances, co-workers, distant relatives. We decide who shall be informed of what lies within our hearts and minds, for we are a fortunate minority because we may be invisible when we choose (or at least we convince ourselves of this). The ability to become invisible is a double-edged sword, however, because a refusal to reveal such an intrinsic part of ourselves will only perpetuate the myth that being gay is something bad, something to hide from the world.

Perhaps the greatest challenge these days facing gay people, besides staying alive, is using the courage to stand up before the world and say "this is who I am, and I'm very glad to be this way," for we have stood alone for too long a time. We grow up isolated in our invisible minority, feeling like we are the only one who has these thoughts and feelings. But this month is the time for us to stand together. No longer alone, we must remain one united front that will tell the world that we have not been beaten by this plague, not yet, even though our friends have died, are dying now, or will die.

And not only must we stand together, but at every turn we must celebrate the fact that we are still alive. In this way we may send a message to the world around us that because the length of time we may have left has shortened considerably, we demand quality of life for ourselves.

Bill won't tell his parents that he is gay because he loves them. He wants to make their passage to old age easier, smoother somehow. So he won't upset the status quo by revealing his dirty little secret. "It's personal," he says to his friends, "it's my business — besides, they come from a different age; they wouldn't understand." He scoffs when asked if he thinks they'll stop loving him for being gay. "That's not it at all," he says, "not the issue at all."

How long must we consider ourselves to be bad simply because of who we choose to love, simply because we know that someone else "wouldn't understand?" And how can we assume an ignorance and lack of concern in someone else, when we wouldn't like others to make that assumption about us? How long must we hide from our parents, our co-workers, and most of all, from ourselves? When we lie to our families — even if it is not a direct lie, but a lie of omission — we perpetuate the lie that we as a people are perverted or sick or somehow lesser beings in the eyes of a "normal" world. It is our responsibility as gay people to enlighten those who have never encountered us before. This begins with our families. If our families can continue to love us and respect us for who we are, then perhaps they can enlighten their friends and bring more understanding to a sometimes very incomprehensible world.

Tom is straight, but his best friend, Larry, is not. Larry came out to Tom last year. Tom is now puzzled because Larry won't call him anymore. Larry tells Tom that he would just rather be "around his own kind of people now." They have

fought bitterly over Larry's elitist attitudes. Tom insists that simply because he's straight and Larry is gay that there is no reason for them to end their friendship, but Tom is also convinced that Larry cannot cross the bridge between their sexual identities.

Our first step is to define ourselves as a group that takes care of its own. We shall make it known that we are ready and willing to fight for the quality of our lives and our ability to love whomever we choose to love.

Lately, an issue that has come up among my friends is the ghettoization that many of us go through. We find ourselves spending our time exclusively with other gay people. We find that the number of our straight friends is dwindling. Sometimes we explain it by saying "they don't really understand, they have completely different perspectives. After all, they don't live with the same kind of fear that we live in, they haven't watched their friends die, they don't understand the choking rage we feel at having our lives be viewed so unimportantly that the society to which we belong has allowed this 'gay' disease to grow into an enormous problem."

I must confess that I am an elitist. The straight friends I have had (no matter how understanding, friendly, or sympathetic they were) always seemed to consider me as their token gay friend, peering into my life to find the oddities. I live in one of the gay ghettos in this city and I am happy that

I do. I find comfort and reassurance in the companionship of other men who live with the daily fear of contracting AIDS, or who know the pain of watching the people we love shrivel away and die. I find that this level of comfort and reassurance enables me to face, with far less frustration and fewer feelings of being isolated, my workday when I am surrounded by straight people.

However, in spite of the increasing need for solidarity among ourselves, we still must keep communication open between ourselves as gay people and our sympathetic friends. We must not turn our back on those we feel do not understand us; after all, we need all the support available to stop this plague. Just as our families need our honesty and openness, so do our straight friends. When we feel uncomfortable we must speak up. We must share with them our anger and sadness over this disease, even if they are uncomfortable with the topic, which they probably will be. They will get used to it, just as we get used to it with every passing day.

Gay pride is not an issue of shoving our sexual identity into the face of the majority. Gay pride means simply this: the strength to demand quality in our lives and to maintain dignity for ourselves. The message we must send to the world is that we will not be kicked down by this plague. Not yet. Not while there is breath in our bodies. Not while we can still stand. Not while we can still fight for the rights and freedoms to which people of all colors, shape and persuasions are entitled. •



CLARICE
JOHNSTON
D. M. D.

DENTISTRY for adults and children

- Treatment explained and discussed
- Weekdays, Evenings and Saturdays
- Flexible payment plans
- Nitrous oxide available
- New patients welcome

233-3622

230 N.E. 20th
(Three blocks north of Burnside)



Sandro Botticelli: Birth of Venus (detail) c. 1485

PAINTING BY BOTTICELLI HAIR BY GARY LUCKEY

At Gary Luckey we think good art is like a good haircut. It takes vision, talent, and inspiration.

But unlike good art, a good haircut doesn't have to cost much. At Gary Luckey on Broadway we'll shampoo your hair, massage your scalp, cut, style, and blowdry your hair all for only \$17.50. And that's just one of our many reasonably priced hair care services.

Like good art — we'll give you a look you can live with. So the next time you're feeling adventurous come visit us at our relaxing, smoke free salon (just down the street from Dugan's and A Woman's Place Bookstore). And don't forget to check out our complete line of hair products and accessories. You'll be glad you did.

GARY
LUCKEY

281-7831
288-7831

1323 NE Broadway