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P A G E T W O

Providing role models

The supremely gifted need not apply

BY ROBERT A. BERNSTEIN

In society's crazy, upside-down view of the gay world, nothing is crazier or more upside-down than its aversion to homosexual teachers.

By conventional wisdom, the taboo protects otherwise straight students from being "persuaded," by advocacy or example, to "choose" homosexuality. In fact, everybody loses. Educational quality suffers generally, since the pool of talented teachers is needlessly depleted. And for homosexual youngsters in particular, the absence of openly gay adults in their schools can be, literally, fatal.

Sexual orientation is, of course, neither contagious nor ephemeral. (As one discerning, if arguably sexist, psychotherapist said of the suggestion that counseling might undo homosexuality, "Hell, we can't change a 'leg man' to a 'breast man'.") But a sense of the soaring magic of human genius can be caught — and just as easily from the libidinal descendants of Michelangelo and Gertrude Stein as from those of Ernest Hemingway and Grandma Moses.

Carl Jung, the famed psychiatrist with a deep theological bent, saw the average homosexual person as unusually spiritual in nature, and as one who "may be supremely gifted as a teacher."

It follows. For one thing, a mature homosexual person virtually by definition has mastered one of the most basic of spiritual principles: the importance of being true to oneself.

"I Am What I Am," after all, is more than a mere music-hall tune. It is a restatement of a tenet equally celebrated by Jesus, Shakespeare and Freud — as stirring to the straight as to the gay theatergoer, because it speaks to universal truth.

The process of human growth, for anyone, is a journey of self-discovery. Its fuel is the courage to find, accept and express one's God-given nature. What more skilled guide, then, than an elder who has successfully overcome the obstacles of undeserved shame and guilt imposed by the false standards of others?

I realize that there are some gay teachers in the schools. But the climate of fear presumably holds the number far below the 10 percent that proportionate representation would predict. And virtually all of those few, in any event, remain in the closet — where their creative talents are at least partially stifled, and where they are unable to serve as role models for homosexual youths.

So I assume that both my children — one straight, one gay — were deprived of at least a measure of inspiration and insight they might have gained from teachers who had experienced the unique challenge of growing up gay in a homophobic society.

But it is clear that my gay child suffered the more seriously. The absence of openly homosexual teachers confirmed her fears that much of her inner experience was "wrong." And she was barred from important kinds of counseling, routinely available from teachers to her sister and to nine-tenths of her peers.

At PFLAG (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), we regularly hear tales of tragedy and near-tragedy born of this void. They bear out the conclusion that we need to be more concerned about providing our gay kids with the right role models.



Illustration by E. Ann Hinds

One mother, for example, tells the story of a gay daughter who later admitted that as a teenager, desperate in her isolation and sense of shame, she had considered suicide. Ironically, the young woman ultimately was to learn that one of her favorite teachers was a lesbian, a potential source of support and guidance, but unable even to make that known.

The young woman survived, and has grown into a warm, loving and talented adult. But others, not so fortunate, do not manage to overcome society's preoccupation with its misbegotten version of morality. Studies indicate that gay teenagers are somewhere between two and six times more likely to attempt suicide than are their heterosexual peers.

The statistics, however frightening, are not surprising. What perhaps is surprising — and testimony to the underlying spiritual strength of a tenth of our young citizens routinely exposed to cruelty and indifference — is that so many of them nevertheless manage to grow up not only intact but happy and healthy adults.

Father Robert Nugent, a priest with a ministry to gay and lesbian Catholics, has summed it up pithily:

"To grow up in a society carrying the burden of being classified 'sick' by the medical profession, 'criminal' by the legal system and 'sinful' by popular religious beliefs is something that few of us could bear without severe and permanent emotional damage."

Robert Bernstein is a Washington, D.C., attorney and a member of PFLAG. This piece was originally published in the Washington Blade.

