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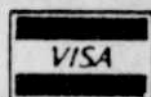


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Outing: psychically violent means

A quandary between ethics and necessity

The first and only time in my life that I was outed, I was 15 years old, barely knew what a lesbian was, and simply denied the accusation. The world was a lot less sophisticated then. People seemed to prefer not to know that someone they loved or looked up to, family or film star, could be so "afflicted." Outing often served only to toughen willing denial systems.

In my case it was a disappointed rival who called the family and rudely dropped the bomb. Few were capable of believing in 1960 that a 15-year-old could be sexually active, much less seducing 14-year-olds of the same sex. And the gay people of my acquaintance then and for many years thereafter were equally incapable of the act of telling anyone outside the club. One simply did not. One,

as a matter of fact, did everything in one's power to prevent that from happening. Sometimes I like to think that my life would have been a lot more simple if the Rude Caller's word had been accepted.

That I would not have learned to lie so facilely, or to hide so successfully. That by confronting society's stereotypes at an early age I would not have absorbed them myself and walked for decades with self-hatred as a second skin on my body and soul.

That was a romanticization. I would have been yanked out of my puppy love reveries and shoved into the offices of shrinks.

The first shrink I saw, when I was 17, loaded me up on new and improved addictive tranquilizers, because I was having a hard time coping with the world. My college referred me to a second one who tried to persuade me to fight my "tendencies." The third was outspokenly Catholic. One visit was all he got outta me. It could have been worse, I know. I could have been locked up like my 14-year-old paramour. Diagnosis for her? Suicidal tendencies. You bet we were self-destructive. You bet we couldn't bear the pain.

Today, I have a suspicion of outing. A bit too much like Pandora's box for my stomach. The consequences of such radical interference with a human life are unpredictable and can be devastating. Which is more culpable? The police department that conducts raids on gay bars and publicizes names, "driving" the ashamed to suicide? Or gay crusaders whose more direct publicity has the same effect?

Outing is a natural consequence of the incredible frustration and rage of a people who have been subjected to raids and ignorant shrinks and rude phone calls since the beginning of time. I want the gay doctors and lawyers and sailors and politicians and actors and bankers and educators and writers and housewives and philosophers and musicians and construction workers and rabbis and athletes to come marching across the world's conscience saying we are proud and you won't ever shut us up again.

I believe fervently that Silence = Death, although, all too often, it's the opposite we see. Obviously, if we ended the silences, we'd end the shame and we'd end the death.

It's a quandary my poor little Virgo mind hasn't been able to sort through. I'm not at all sure there is one answer, just specific situations. Whether people on an individual basis can survive outing, whether mass exposures for the greater good of the gay masses is ethical, whether I personally would participate in outing, etc.

On the other hand, I cannot entirely condemn pulling the covers where it will do enormous good. A certifiably gay politician, for example,

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who is supporting heterosexist legislation. Once I accept that circumstance, however, which others become right in my eyes? Do the lines get fuzzy, does my judgment get shaky? Where do I get off making such judgements about others' lives?

The fervent and self-righteous rage of our front line outers, though one I am either generationally or constitutionally incapable of joining, is one I respect. These are our radicals. Society does not leave us many tools to defend ourselves, to make the world a better place for gays to live. Outing is a psychically violent means to end violence and worse.

My Rude Caller was a wounded gay child like me. Unlike me, she'd been battling in the straight wars for centuries by age 17, in jails and mental hospitals, on the streets — a knife-wielding, cop-stomping baby-dyke. Society's silence did this to a kid who looked and acted queer. She knew 30 years ago that breaking the silence would get her what she wanted. Except *she couldn't break it alone*. One screaming gay child could not call or shout or scream loud enough to out even one other kid who had the defenses of a whole culture protecting her.

Today the outers are grown up. They've got the media, the tactics of the '60s, and numbers. Would I condemn anyone who'd outed a Roy Cohn at the height of his power? I can't imagine that I would. I may be ethically confused, my heart going out to both the outers and the outed, but I do acknowledge that the problem is silence. I just wish there were such a thing as a gentle war.