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A secret place

'Tis the season of Mother's and Father's Days, and sadness is inevitable for those who choose not to come out

by Lee Lynch

In his *Washington Blade* column, Lawrence Biemiller writes of his father: "Not that he's not a nice enough guy, 'cause he is. He just didn't know—doesn't know—how to have a queer son."

How true of most parents, and how unutterably sad. As children, we don't have the words to communicate who we are. Some of us come out, a simplistic and incomplete revelation of our real selves. Our openness often has the unhappy consequence of—on some level—repelling those we ask for acceptance. Parents seldom want to deal with a sexual child, much less a homosexual one.

And my experience has been that homosexual, for a straight person, means "sexual," to the exclusion of other qualities.

As adults, we have the words—or do we?

concern and, all too often, horror.

"I did live in a secret place when he was younger, a place only gay children know," writes Georgia Dullea in a *New York Times* interview of set designer Ian MacNeil and his father, Robert MacNeil of PBS' *MacNeil/Lehrer Newshour*. As I read of Ian's "secret place" I immediately envisioned green bowers, like illustrations in my childhood copy of Robert Lewis Stevenson's *A Child's Garden of Verses*. There was always an androgynous white child pictured in such drawings, an unsmiling but not unhappy being with Prince Valiant hair, who was intent on some solitary activity. This secret and necessary place of ours is recreated by queer adults in bars or works of imagination, elaborate gardens or very exclusive intimate relationships. Interior decoration takes on new meaning when we consider all the queer children perplexed by the world and retreating to secret places to dream.

"I think gay people are some of the best actors in the world," says a young lesbian in *The Washington Blade*, commenting on the personas we slip into for families, employers, the futon sales-

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Whenever I run into one particular parent my eyes mist over. She so obviously loves her queer child, and is so active in fighting those who not only discriminate against him but hate and threaten the whole family because of its activism, that I am overcome with admiration and gratitude—and pain—because this is the way it should be for all of us. Yet I know that particular child did not willingly come out to his accepting, educated, liberal parents. They respectfully, kindly, gave him the opportunity to say what were probably the most difficult words of his young life. He was unable to initiate the disclosure, perhaps because every queer person knows that no words can ever completely express who and what we are. Without that wordless understanding, I doubt that any heterosexual parent can ever completely accept a child's queerness. They may love us, reserve judgment, support our unions, but when we listen hard—let our lavender antennae tingle—we know there will always be a sense of bafflement, a caution around us.

In Irish literature there is a fascination with the changeling, a new child suddenly substituted for the "real" child, the one the parents thought they had. The changeling is a mystical explanation of the different, disappointing offspring. We see our difference cloud our parents' eyes with, at least,

person. I imagine the wary pride in that young lesbian voice, already alert to how accomplished we are in our subterfuges. I also imagine the heart-breaking sadness in her eyes, her knowledge that no child should have to make believe forever.

As we celebrate the season of Mother's and Father's Days, sadness is inevitable for those of us who choose not to come out to parents—and for many of those who do. That invisible cloak a queer child draws around herself is no seasonal item. Whether we store it in a handy closet or donate it to a thrift shop, the years of wear have imprinted us. Our parents are as alien to us in this one respect as we are to them. There is an extra guardedness built into what, for many, is already an uneasy relationship.

Regret our defenses as we may, the ironic truth does not change. The very parents who fight hardest to eradicate discrimination, who struggle most intensely to love us unconditionally, are, through no fault of their own, often the people who taught us that we needed to wear cloaks, to hide in secret places. If it is true that most parents simply don't know how to have queer daughters and sons, it is also true that we don't know how to have straight parents. We become the best actors in the world to bridge that awkward gap. But when we act, it is from love.

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