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steppin' out



PHOTO BY LINDA KLEWER

editorial

Say it isn't so

A tireless lesbian activist makes a startling revelation that will rock the lesbian community

by Renee LaChance

For the past seven years, through my company Sea Turtle Productions, I have been bringing JoAnn Loulan to Portland to talk about lesbian sex. Over the years she has made us laugh and made us cry. I never knew what she was going to do on stage next. One minute she'd be seriously discussing safer sex or cancer, and the next she'd be parading a member of the audience across the stage trying to establish by looks alone whether the woman was butch or femme.

Loulan is a nationally known psychotherapist and sex educator. She has lived her life debunking the myths about lesbians that are perpetuated by homophobia, and has simultaneously validated lesbian lives. She is the author of several lesbian primers that hundreds of thousands of women have turned to, including *Lesbian Sex*, *Lesbian Passion* and *Lesbian Erotic Dance*.

Loulan has enhanced the sex life of a great number of lesbians without actually touching any of them (well, only a few). She conducts workshops and has made video and audio cassettes imploring lesbians to have sex, to make it fun, to make it intimate, to do it safe, and above all to make it a priority in their relationships.

Loulan gave us the 10-point butch-femme continuum to give us some reference points to define ourselves. She has conducted surveys and done analysis of the lesbian community that has given us a vocabulary for and a window onto all the wonders that we are. As a representative of lesbians Loulan has been a frequent talk-show guest, appearing on *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Donahue*. She has lectured at medical schools, served on national lesbian boards, attended political marches. She has been a tireless advocate for lesbian rights and visibility.

Personally, Loulan has been a role model for me in establishing my attitudes about sex and intimacy. I have looked up

to her. "JoAnn Loulan, the guru of lesbian sex," I called her.

Imagine my surprise when I received a letter from her recently informing me that she has fallen in love with a man and begun a relationship with him. He is someone she has known for 29 years, a member of her extended family. If it hadn't come straight (no pun intended) from her, I wouldn't have believed it. She said she had given a great deal of thought to whether to nurture her new connection, and the conclusion she came to after much soul searching was that this man is who she loves and who she wants to be with right now.

Over the years rumors that Loulan had slept with men would pop up, and she would publicly dispel them. She would be incensed at the thought. Loulan had been out and loving women for 22 years. Now those rumors seem like a premonition.

In her letter she told me she was anxious about how lesbians would perceive her now. She still feels like a lesbian, but she's dating a man. She doesn't feel like a bisexual, though her actions seem to best fit that label. She doesn't feel like a heterosexual because being a lesbian has been her life, her culture, her world. "Can one be culturally lesbian while in a monogamous sexual relationship with a man?" she pondered.

I care about JoAnn, she has become a friend over the years. My first response was shock, sadness and disbelief. That quickly turned to concern for her and the potential repercussions she could face from our community. I imagine some will feel betrayed, some will be stunned and hurt, and some will be accepting of her following her heart.

My hope is that as this news circulates, people will remember all that Loulan has done for lesbian equality and visibility over the past 20-plus years. My hope is that she won't be judged harshly for falling in love with a person—not a gender. And while I wish Loulan all the happiness she can have in her lifetime, I can't help but hope that her new relationship won't last forever and that she'll again fall in love with a woman.

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