

INTERVIEW

FINDING THE WORDS

Anthropologist William Leap says young gay men can find themselves and others like them with language

by Gip Plaster



Young gay men don't have to grow up in isolation and fear if they can find a language through which to call out to the gay community, according to one gay studies expert.

William Leap says society can help ease the despair and desperation many gay men experience.

Leap is an anthropologist, a person who studies people. He studied Native American cultures

"Gay men speak vividly and pointedly about identity confusion, isolation and loneliness when they reflect on their teenage years while telling their life stories," Leap says.

Leap bases his comments about gay youth on interviews and sources he uncovered during research for his book, *Word's Out: Gay Men's English*.

Nick, a gay man who grew up in Kentucky, recalls in the book that "the extent of gay life as you know it are scribbles on a bathroom wall."

"From 13 until my bar age, which was 17, I kind of was in touch with myself and I knew what was happening internally, but as far as it relating to the rest of the world, there was this vast desert of—nothing," Nick said.

"There are so many people that say gay adolescence is this great period of angst and self-hatred and so on," Leap says. "I'm saying, 'Wait a minute. It doesn't have to be that.'"

Leap says schools can help make it easier for gay youth. More gay-positive books on school library shelves is one way. Another is the availability at school of material on coming out. Leap says resources like those can be important to gay youth who sometimes look up words like "homosexual" in the encyclopedia because it is the only place they can read about others like them.

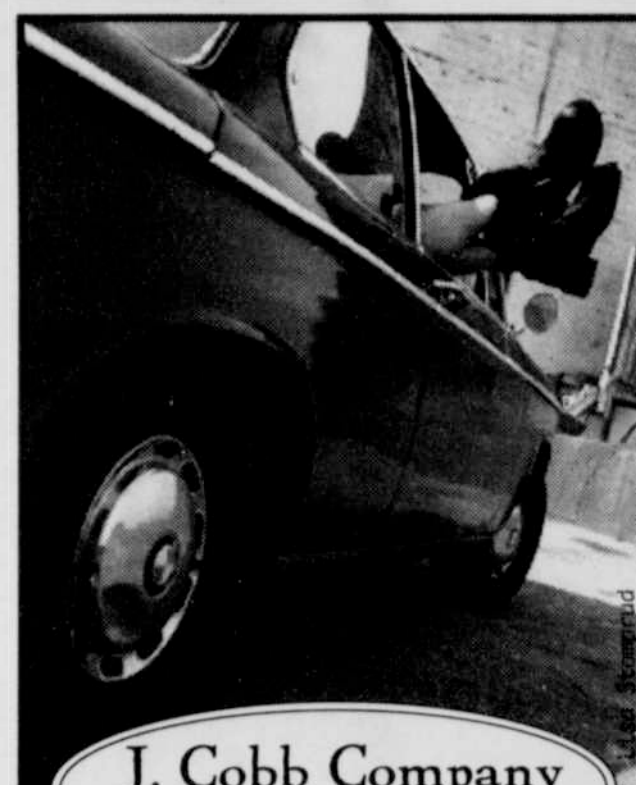
"Adolescence is a search for information," he says. "Guys are looking for answers. Maybe the angst comes because the library at their school doesn't provide any kind of resource."

Leap also encourages gay men to come out and be role models of openness for youth and society.

If gay issues are discussed openly, "it then becomes kind of a routine that allows people to move beyond the touchiness of the topic."

Moving beyond society's touchiness concerning gay issues, according to Leap, can help youth develop a gay language to replace their silent deserts of nothing.

Word's Out: Gay Men's English
by William Leap. University of
Minnesota, 1996; \$17.95 paper.



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Books

and languages for years before deciding to concentrate on studying his own people, gay men. An important part of the coming out process, he says, is developing a gay language.

"A lot of the coming out process is a struggle to find not only labels but ways of talking about ourselves, and ultimately ways of talking to others," Leap said in a recent interview.

He became curious, he says, about why the English language seems to fail gay men in social situations where they are trying to meet people.

"Straight language doesn't work effectively, and some people just don't have the gay language skills to be smooth and suave in those kinds of settings," Leap says. "And I put myself in that category."

But he says he is not alone. Those kinds of skills are learned from a variety of sources, but not everyone learns them at the same rate. He likens learning gay language to learning a foreign language like Spanish; some people pick it up quickly and others never quite get it.

"You can't go to the drugstore and buy a book [on gay language]; you can't go to Berlitz; you can't take a college course," he says.

"How do people learn gay language?" Leap asks. "I don't think we all do." Most acquire the skill eventually, many by watching gay people and correcting their behavior to match, he says. The problem in some situations, especially for youth growing up in rural areas, is finding gay people to model.

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