

Don't touch

A hidden layer of homophobia can taint interaction with children

BY WILL O'BRYAN

A cousin of mine, after several lengthy sessions with a shifty hypnotherapist, became convinced that she'd been abused as a child by a neighborhood baby sitter. I don't know all the details, but it was something along the lines of consuming feces and playing with dead animals. Rationally, it was later agreed—with the help of her parents, the hypnotherapist's recordings of the sessions, and another therapist—that her childhood days spent on Satan's altar were the product of her imagination: metaphors for other, more pedestrian complications in her life.

The tall tales reminded me of my own childhood and Charlie Turner. He's the neighbor boy who made me drink his piss out of a little flowery Dixie Cup in his parents' bathroom. I should've realized that "lemonade," as he called it, wouldn't have been so warm. But I spit it out all over the room and it proved not to be too traumatic an experience.

My friend, Mike, who I've known since I was 5, warned me about childhood memories. He's convinced that one day he'll see a certain color or taste a particular flavor that will suddenly unlock a horrific memory of childhood abuse. He imagines smelling blueberry pies and suddenly an image from his childhood will flash across his brain—perhaps of himself at 4 years old in a rubber body suit applying Vaseline to his grandmother's bunions.

The reason I've been picking my brain lately trying to dissect my emotional and reasoned responses to child abuse is because of a sad, albeit liberating, realization I had while visiting my sister not long ago.

My sister has four children, ranging in age from about 11 to 3. First born is Eugene, followed by Quinn Jane, then my namesake, William, and my godson, Thomas Jefferson.

One afternoon during my visit, we all went to a little league baseball game to watch Eugene's team win. I've been out to my family for years, so I thought nothing about wearing my Right to Pride baseball cap to protect myself from the unmerciful San Diego sun.

Although San Diego is fairly Republican, I didn't think the other spectators would bother attacking me with undersized children's baseball bats. I would've lied and said I had a Log Cabin affiliation if it got ugly. San Diego, regardless of its politics, is a big city and I knew I had nothing to worry about except skin cancer. I was wrong, though.

At some point during the game, as I sat on the ground counting blades of grass or watching planes fly overhead—anything but watching the mind-numbing boredom of baseball—William came over to sit in my lap. Having already tried to entertain my niece and two of the nephews for about half an hour, I was burned out. But I let him use me as a chaise lounge nevertheless, as they'd already broken my resistance.

After 30 seconds or so of sitting quietly, he suddenly got a second wind, as children often do. He expelled this wind by flailing about on top of me as though he were having an epilep-

tic fit. In and of itself, this was just annoying. Then, however, I had my dark realization.

I practically threw William off of me, much to his surprise and consternation, when I thought of what other people might be thinking: "That little boy is probably performing some peculiar act of sexual abuse that perverted fag taught him."

The next thought that went through my head was, "Why the hell did I think that?"

The realization that came to me is that as a gay man, a queer, a homosexual, a sodomite, a pervert, I'm also a suspected child molester.



This huge piece of internalized homophobia had been riding around with me for all my adult life, and it made sense in that single moment, just like a repressed memory.

My history of being someone who generally likes kids but who avoids them made sense suddenly. I'd never thought about why I wouldn't hug children or be too friendly to them. My subconscious just told me that it was something sexually deviant people shouldn't do.

The feeling I had at the baseball game reminded me of the first time I kissed another guy in public. That was another thing I thought I shouldn't do. Had I been asked, I would've said it was fine and a powerful political and emotional statement. But for a long time I didn't do it and I justified it to myself in dozens of ways: Public displays of affection are tacky, it's inappropriate, I'm too private, etc. "I'm scared" was never on the list. "I'm not entitled to the same level of freedom as straight people" was not one of the excuses.

Regardless of my homophobia surrounding the public kiss, the first time a guy kissed me in public the world didn't stop. I wasn't beaten up. It didn't even merit a scornful look. And what if it had? I was still entitled to the expression.

So it goes with my realization with little William on my lap. He was just being a little kid, and my nephew to boot. Shunning him was my problem, and I made it his. I can apologize here and thank him for helping me acknowledge and overcome that buried shred of self-hate.

The lesson must've meant something to me, because as I said goodbye, I had no reservations about picking up little Quinn, William and Thomas and giving each one a big hug and a kiss when I said goodbye. Eugene, however, is entering the too-cool-for-school sensibilities of preteenhood and couldn't be bothered.

But that can be his problem, not mine.

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When Beth got some time off from her hectic job it took no time at all for her to convince Charity to cruise down the Oregon coast. It would be a spur of the moment trip, no plans, no reservations. Charity couldn't resist, she hadn't spent any quality time with Beth for months and their relationship was faltering because of it.

They headed south down Highway 101, passing through Yachats when they noticed a little motel off to the side of the road with magenta doors and blue trim. Beth said, that place looks good, so they stopped. They were pleasantly surprised to be greeted by lesbian hosts who escorted them to the Princess and the Pea room. Charity said, this is the room I want, without seeing any of the others. Beth agreed. They spent the next three days lingering by the fire, watching the sun break through the waves, while falling in love with each other—again—and with the magic of the See Vue.

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