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On Being a Gay Parent

by Brett Webb-Mitchell . Contributing Writer

Coming out...with a twist

More than likely, those of us who self-identify as a person who is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning or queer expressing are people who have participated in what I guess can only be called a time-honored ritual or tradition of "coming out." Every year at the North Carolina Gay and Lesbian Film Festival in Durham, there are usually a handful of films that deal with the theme of "coming out." There are a plethora of "coming out stories" in book form. When we get beyond introductions at parties and get to know each other better, we ask one another the question, "So, when did you come out?" and we can tell each other the year, perhaps month, and thus the day.

In the best of all worlds, many of us came out at the time we wanted to come out, and came out in our own fashion, while there are some people who are outed by others without consent. Although there is no rule or etiquette book for "How Best to Come Out!" we nevertheless assume that most of us know what to say, as if it were a script written somewhere that we all picked up, along with our card as a member of the LGBTQ club (just kidding).

As most of the books on queer theories and rituals tell us, or what we come to figure out on our own, is that the first person we come out to is ourselves. I've had friends who were helped by looking in the mirror and repeating the words: "I am gay." Those who used this technique also said that they felt like they were part of a self-help program. Others wrote "I am a lesbian" on a piece of paper until they were ready to communicate it with a letter or email. Regardless of how we built up the courage to be honest with ourselves, we speak our truth to the world, sometimes to a parent or parents, to a loved one we are engaged to, to brothers and sisters and extended family members, and to a wide circle of friends or work associates.

As parents, we will have to figure out when and how to tell our children that we are gay or lesbian, bisexual or transgender before the world around us does. I'm not sure if this is an "if" question anymore. I came out to my children while in a married relationship, done almost simultaneously as when I told my former spouse. For parents of foster, adopted children, or biological children, one's coming out may be done when there is a sense in one's gut or intuition that

"now" is the time, though it is often done when children are becoming aware of what is "gay" or "straight," which can be during elementary school years. And if we don't tell our children, they will learn what is gay or straight from the world around us, and this may be more harmful than helpful.

What is a twist upon this theme of "coming out stories" is that in our families where a parent is lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer expressing, our children feel a compunction to come out as well, whether they are gay or straight. My daughter was the first one to come out to us. One morning, while cooking breakfast on a Wednesday morning (always pancakes on these mornings), she simply opened up with "Dad, I thought you should know something: I'm straight." I then started crying, wailing, gnashing my teeth, wondering aloud "God, where have I gone wrong?" and asking my daughter, "Are you sure? Perhaps there is a program we could get you in to help you, or a therapist who specializes in this work," I hugged her and said, "That's good to know!" Of course, none of the first part of that previous sentence happened, but the hug did happen. A few years later, my son came out to us as well, simply saying, "ya' know, I'm straight, right?" I simply said, "Yeah, I thought so too." What was comforting for both of us was the chance to hug afterward.

Coming out in our families, everyone can do it. Living honestly and openly is a gift we give each other in trust. Coming out is an embodiment of hope as we construct a better world.

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Congratulations to *Q-Notes* contributing writer Brett Webb-Mitchell, who was recently tapped as a member of the national Children of Lesbians and Gays Everywhere (COLAGE) board of directors.

Brett's monthly *Q-Notes* column, "On Being a Gay Parent," above, explores his life as a gay father and other issues impacting LGBT-led families. Brett lives in Carrboro, N.C., and has two children. He is the author of the book "On Being a Gay Parent." In addition to writing for *Q-Notes*, Brett blogs at onbeingagayparent.blogspot.com.

One of Brett's first official actions as a COLAGE board member will be his participation in the group's Fall board retreat. ▀



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