



Open Letter to All Lesbians  
Continued from opposite page

member when she entered the building, to remove her personal belongings from her office.

To attempt to strip someone of control over her own life by surprise and humiliation is an abuse of power. It is shameful that these abuses of power occur in service organizations whose staff and volunteers are primarily involved with the work because of a belief in the mission, the services and the philosophies of the organization, not because of a desire for money and power. And it is shameful that we are *not* outraged. As a community, we need to examine the ways the boards of directors of our organizations do business and we need to hold them accountable...because the alternative that was played out at LGHP is *not* okay.

In the dangerous position of being at the top of a hierarchy, our boards have the continual responsibility of checking their own power. Being unable to act in the face of an abuse of that power is unacceptable. Perhaps the LGHP board as a whole is up to the challenge of confronting this recent abuse of their power. Perhaps the board will re-examine their process in the firing of Lucy Harris. For the sake of the lesbian and gay community, I hope so. The implications if they fail to do so are frightening, for silence truly is the voice of complicity. If we cannot challenge power abuses among ourselves in our own communities, how can we possibly expect to challenge and change the power structures in the larger community with any integrity?

For Real Progress: Boycott  
Continued from opposite page

adopt policies to join the Boycott had never been approached before, had never had anyone explain the discrimination that lesbians and gays face on a daily basis both as customers and employees. And thus, it is an opportunity for personal growth, for taking coming out to a new level.

Asking the owner of the restaurant or shoe store you frequent to join the Boycott has a bigger positive impact than a flyer from the local political group. At a time when much of our energy is spent responding to far-right assaults, the Boycott is a positive, proactive step that helps build those crucial coalitions we will always need at the ballot box.

Nadine Smith was national co-chair of the 1993 March on Washington and is a member of the Democratic National Committee. Copyright Empire Syndicate, 1995

# Coming Out: It's Day and Nature

by Richard D. Mohr

A gay friend new to town needs to buy a washing machine. "I want a really basic model," he tells the salesman, who in response asks if he's married. He hums and says no. The salesman continues "well, when you do get married, you'll want a delicate cycle for her dainties." Later, my friend guiltily admits, "I should have just come out to him. I was caught off guard."

It's Fall again. The first day of school. Two minutes into class. After drawing attention to the syllabus listings of my office information, I do a mental push up and proceed: "I've also given you my home telephone number; there's an answering machine and my lover is willing to take messages, though please don't try his patience with complicated ones." The sentence floats out over the room: some students get it, some don't, some, still sleepy-eyed, aren't even listening. But word gets around. Word is out. I've just come out to fifty strangers.

October 11th marks the eighth annual celebration of National Coming Out Day. What is it that we celebrate? What makes coming out something worthy of celebration? Why for so many gay people is coming out the central event of their lives? The answers are courage, freedom, and dignity.

Now, many gay theorists — mostly trendy academics — claim that the very idea of coming out is a bugaboo. They hold that there is no lurking inner gay essence that somehow is first discovered by the gay person within him or herself and then made manifest to others through an act — "coming out" — whereby that which before was concealed is now revealed. They claim rather that society induces or constructs the person as gay and so also always knows that the person is gay even though both society and the person pretend that this fact is not known. On this account, homosexuality is an open secret, a secret that is always giving itself away.

But the issues of whether one's sexuality initially is an open or a complete secret and

whether its causes are society, genes, or something else are largely irrelevant to understanding the coming out processes. Coming out is primarily a moral rather than a cognitive act. It is not a matter of *knowledge* but of *acknowledgment*. In coming out, one acknowledges one's sexuality to oneself and presents it to others in such a way that even if they know of it already, they can no longer act as though they don't. Coming out is the claiming of one's sexuality as one's own (wherever it came from) and raising it as an issue for others where relevant.

As the lesbian theorist Joyce Trebilcock has put it, coming out is primarily a matter of taking responsibility for sexuality: "Coming out is not merely a matter of reinterpreting one's past; it involves taking responsibility for being a lesbian both in the past and in the future."

Coming out is socially important because it dashes the shame generated by the open secret, the dirty little secret that runs: "we know that you know that we know, but we won't mention it because your sexual bearings — you — are as embarrassing to acknowledge as excrement." Coming out says no to the humiliating rituals of "don't ask, don't tell." Coming out is a refusal to go along with society's presumption that for all public purposes being a person means being heterosexual.

But because this presumption is so central to society's understanding of itself, coming out will not be socially viewed as merely an irritation, like hooliganism. It will be viewed, like civil disobedience, as an act of treason — a challenging of the very ground rules by which society, largely through unacknowledged habit, constitutes itself. And so coming out is a major act of moral courage.

Indeed as modern culture becomes ever more bureaucratic, mechanistic, and socialistic, the coming out process affords one of the few remaining opportunities to manifest courage.

But what's in it for the individual? Many gay activists hold that the point of coming out is that it

makes you feel good and gives you power. The truth though is one which gays' parents in particular don't want to hear: coming out is not chiefly a means to happiness and power; indeed it typically requires putting these values at risk. Coming out cedes away privilege and its powers. It increases one's exposure to discrimination. It gives one a heightened awareness of the ways in which society despises gays. These changes are not near occasions of happiness.

But no one who goes through the coming out experience ever willingly goes back into the closet. For people get something else, something more important, out of the experience. They get a sense of self, a sense that, for better or worse, their life is their own, that it has a ground. This is something quite different from acquiring materials and benefits or enjoying, say, sex or a tune. Coming out is an ultimate adventure, for it constitutes the surfacing of the individual as capable of guiding her life by her own lights. To be so positioned is to be a person, to live in freedom, to have dignity.

In their willingness to sacrifice their own happiness, privileges, and benefits, gays and lesbians through coming out reconsecrate personhood, freedom, and individual dignity as the highest human values.

We are right then to celebrate coming out and to give it its special day. Coming out is the heart of gay pride. What is worthy of celebration is not the simple and perhaps given fact of being gay, but our doing something about it for the good. That we mark coming out, like a birthday, with one special day, though, should not mislead us into thinking that coming out is an event, like being born, which is singular, unique, and done once and for all.

At least until the emergence of the messianic era, everyday living itself will occasion the need for coming out on a rolling basis. The paradigm case of coming out is not that of telling mom and dad, but of telling sleepy students and clerks at Sears.

## Quotes

"Life's too short [to be in the closet]. I don't think anyone is shocked, particularly, that anyone is gay in the '90s."

—Entertainment mogul David Geffen, 52, to Entertainment Weekly.

"I sure liked Donna Summer. I didn't burn her records either. I said to myself: 'No way. I don't care what she said, I'm keepin' my records.'"

—Disco diva Jimmy Somerville to Etcetera.

"I'm wearing black. I'm not a blimp, but when your hips are on the side you don't want to express it. I have two choices: either be on a treadmill 24 hours a day, which I don't have time for, or wear black."

—Disco diva and confessed chocolate-lover Donna Summer to L.A. & Frontiers.

"I have completed my study, Sir. It appears that in order to make the military less appealing to lesbians and gay men, we must make some modifications, such as eliminating the following: Polished black leather boots, all belts, buckles, straps and uniforms generally, all short crewcuts and all fit, healthy, lithe young men and women, Sir."

—From a cartoon in Australia's Melbourne Star Observer.