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INSIDE OUT

Homosexuality: Going Beyond the Labels

Woman happier with females

by Nancy McCallum

Jennifer, 24, (not her real name) has been a lesbian for four years. "In some ways I've been a lesbian all my life," the Old Town woman says earnestly. "But I've just recognized it in the past four years."

A slender, lean woman, she looks younger than she is. She has short blonde hair, wide eyes and a thin, black shirt and speaks directly and openly about herself.

"I attach as much significance to people's preference for sex as I do for their preference for color. There's a huge spectrum as far as sexuality goes. There are so many different levels," she says, "and I want to put strictly heterosexual."

She describes the relationship she had with a woman, and the emotional trauma that accompanied it. "I was in Bar Harbor for the summer, four years ago. I met a woman who was just incredible. At the time I was completely heterosexual," she says. "Her friend was struggling with her feelings about herself and women."

"I thought 'well, that's okay for you but I don't want to have anything to do with it.' Jennifer smiles as she recalls the situation.

"One time she wanted to come and kiss me. I couldn't believe it. Then she kissed me and I couldn't handle it. I went away, back to school, and then she came to visit me there for two months. Nothing happened. Then I went to see her over Christmas vacation, and it was a real high. I put the moves on her, and that was it." The relationship lasted two years. Although she lived with the woman, as her "girlfriend," she continued to see men sexually.

"It was really rocky because for the first year and a half I wouldn't admit that I was a lesbian. But as soon as I got involved with men I'd say 'what am I doing?' She says the experience changed her life. "I don't know how I would have evolved if I hadn't had that experience. I could still be heterosexual."

Since the first relationship she has had several other relationships including a long term involvement that just ended. Her affairs with women have been better than with men, she says, because she feels "more equal" with them. "Any woman who hasn't had a relationship with another woman doesn't know what she's missing. In this society it's really hard for a hetero couple to feel equal."

"When I'm with a male I find myself sliding into the 'I'll wash your socks I'll cook your meals' role. With two women it's easy to be equal. And it's important for me to feel that way."

She notes that lesbians are often identified with the feminist movement; she says she is a feminist. She is not anti-male, however.

"Some women I know are openly hostile or just ignore men. It's an over-reaction, and I was that way for three or four months." She pauses, and adds, "It's not a positive thing to do."

She says she realizes that many women want to be dependent on a man. "That's bad enough—I feel sorry for them and for the poor man."

Yet, besides feeling unequal with men, she says there was something lacking in her relationship with them. "When it comes down to brass tacks, they bore me. I don't know if I mean emotionally, intellectually or sexually. But I get bored with feeling committed to a man."

"It's really hard. It's sort of an isolated life," Jennifer says slowly. "It can be lonely. Most lesbians, especially in a state university town are not out. They don't want to get found out."

"If everyone came out right now there'd be no problems because there are so many. Many people go through life gay. Most of Jennifer's friends and family are aware of her sexual orientation, although she hasn't told her mother.

"My mother is a strong woman, says Jennifer. 'She's a neat woman. But it's a real dilemma. I know my being 'queer' would not make her happy.' She says her mother is "the type who would be able to handle it if one of her friends told her their daughter was gay...but if it was her own she wouldn't understand."

She laughs, "My sisters were definitely freaked out. My older sister suggested I spend my life celibate."

Her father died when she was seven. "I absolutely adored him," she says. She doesn't offer this as an explanation for her sexual orientation, "It's occurred to me—I may have felt ripped off. But I really don't think so."

Her coming out did not greatly affect her relationships with males or females, gays or straights.

"Most of my friends that I deal with on a day to day basis are hetero," she says. "And they accept me. But there is a high school friend of mine who lives near by who has not warmed up to this." She shrugs her shoulders.

Although her relationships in the past four years have been solely with women she does not rule out becoming involved with a man again.

"It's occurred to me—I can't say it wouldn't happen. Although I strongly doubt it."

She adds, "But I'm a humanist, not just a feminist. And things do happen. One thing I don't like is to be labeled. I'm perfectly proud to be a lesbian. But I'm a person too."

The worst times were in high school when he was pressured to go out with girls. "I never did though," he says. A former UMO student, he lived in a dorm for two years. There were no gay organizations in the area at the time. "I knew I was gay all the time, but I didn't meet any gay people for two years," he says.

"I went to a sex symposium in the early 70s that encouraged him to be open. Jim thought the administrator who led the meeting was open and non-judgmental about homosexuality, so he went to talk with him."

The sympathy was surface. "I asked him if there were any gays I could meet here," Jim recalls smiling. "And he advised me to move to Boston."

"There was no gay scene," he says, "and I thought 'Well, I'm not happy there,' and came back to Maine to get his degree."

Once back at UMO he became involved with the newly-formed Wilde Stein club, the University's homo- sexual organization. He also began his first relationships with men.

He describes his first love affair with a man. "It was love at first sight," he says. "I just felt I lived for him and for him only. We spent the summer together in Provincetown, Mass. Gay people can be very open there."

When they came back to Maine, however, the relationship dissolved, partly because of the physical distance and also because of career.

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Gay stereotype 'hurts'

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His first relationship was the most traumatic, he says, because it meant admitting and accepting his homosexuality. Since then, there have been several relationships, including one that lasted three years.

"That was the deepest pain I ever felt," he says referring to the break up. "It tore my heart up, but it's healed. What I did was throw myself into my work."

Being in love with a man is more intense than with a woman he says, because "it's more sexually expressive."

He has had several relationships with women. "I fell in love with a woman, and it was one of the deepest loves of my life, but we didn't express that love through sexuality. I was honest with her. She's one of my closest friends, but she wanted to marry me. It wouldn't have worked."

He says he can't imagine having sexual relations with a woman.

Expressing the feelings he has for men hasn't been easy. It involved examining himself and the society around him.

"One thing about growing up in a small Maine town is that I got a deeper insight to how society works. I saw holes in it. I knew I wasn't immoral and that I was a good person. I had to resolve that.

He says we are taught to feel guilty about anything that contradicts the accepted modes of behavior. "My eyes became open to the accepted models, the masculine models, the feminine models that are presented."

The morality of homosexual behavior is sometimes questioned.

"I don't think that homosexuality should be considered immoral per se, any more than it's moral. You have to examine each individual relationship. You have to see whether love is going on or exploitation." What is immoral, he says, are relationships where people take advantage of each other.

One relationship broke up because his partner could not deal with the conflicts he felt about the morality of the situation.

"He was a Christian," Jim says. "He couldn't reconcile his homosexuality with his religious beliefs. Other people made him feel guilty, and he decided to give up homosexuality rather than the Church."

He has dealt with religion; yet he says he still hasn't been open to his parents.

"I haven't told them but they must know," he says. "They love me very much but it's something we never discussed."

He says he has many friends, gays and straights, and he has been open with most of them. "The more honest you can be, the better your friendship can be," he says. "I tend to avoid people who will make judgments about people just because they're gay. If someone is prejudiced I can sense it pretty quickly, so I don't pursue their friendship."

"I seek friendships with people who are more receptive to me as a person and not a stereotype.

The stereotype image of male homosexuals hurts gays, he says. "The stereotype is a fag, limp-wristed, with a lisp and everything. There are people like that, and they are very visible. They stick out like a sore thumb. People must think that is what we're like."

"Most gay people are invisible," he says softly. "And they are just as varied as straights."

"It takes a lot of courage to admit homosexuality," he adds. "I know they're out there, but they're all hiding."