

MEN'S LIBERATION AND THE GAY MALE IDENTITY

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Issues in men's liberation have long focused on why men treat themselves, or are treated by others, as sex objects or security objects; and also on why they are out of touch with their feelings, miss out on the joys of parenting, and suffer from homophobia to the extent that they deny true intimacy in male relationships. In the men's liberation movement there has been a strong tendency to orient these issues toward "straight" society, and draw examples, illustrations, and statistics from that milieu. When men's liberationists do address gay issues, it is usually from a stance of distanced liberalism. They are in favor of gay liberation ("some of my best friends are gay"), think it uncouth to criticize the gay identity, and talk vaguely about potential androgyny for the man who is open to homosexual inclinations. But

they do not really scrutinize what the identity of the gay male is; as a result, they do not discern how the men's liberation movement and the gay liberation movement can profit from mutual insights.

During their Gay Pride Weekend in winter, 1979, the Gay People's Alliance of the University of Missouri-Columbia, held two workshops on how issues in men's liberation affect the gay man. Out of the meetings some ideas emerged which, although not conclusive, are worth sharing. The ideas I here present are an amalgam of what the participants could agree on, although sometimes, of course, there were different perspectives. Usually these differences were not disagreements per se, but rather, different ways of articulating the same frustrations, hurts, and needs. Many of the viewpoints here set forth are admittedly subjective, but at this point in the struggle for men's and gay liberation, there are no "objective" studies or criteria by which to pass clear judgements on the issues in these movements. Perhaps this is good. Maybe the penchant for objective statistics in psychology and sociology has sometimes abstracted the doubts and hurts

of the people in these movements into virtual irrelevance. Regardless, even though these viewpoints are subjective, this does not mean they are meaningless. It means they are formulated from the realm of personal experience—a dynamic interchange of ideas, frustrations, and joys experienced with gay people.

In this article I list a few of the personal experiences as told by some of the participants. Sometimes these accounts have been scaled down or edited for the sake of brevity or clarity. But the essence of the original statements remains intact.

From the discussion there crystallized several ideas which warrant emphasis. One fundamental point is how gay people have contributed to society's general understanding of gay sexuality. The courage many gays have shown during the last two decades by "coming out," telling their parents and work associates about their homosexuality, and working toward self-acceptance, has forced sociologists, psychologists, and the medical professions to start recognizing homosexuality as a sexual alternative rather than as a social disease. And

these professionals have begun to see that choosing for homosexuality is influenced by many factors which the individual encounters from childhood all the way up through adulthood. Thus accepting the fact that homosexuality is not an esoteric aberration which is anomalous to society, professionals have been able to better discover, delineate, and even accept the mystery of the origins of gay identity. Hence, whether in judging another person's sexuality, or trying to understand one's own, the gay person is now better able to look at familial and broader social parameters to see how his sexuality emerged, how it is or isn't healthy, how it might be refined, or what impediments must be removed to allow it to emerge fully.

In a similar vein, gay people have shown that one's sexual identity is not static and fully determined. It has its causes, but there is an element of choice too. Sexuality can thus be looked upon as a joint process of self-discovery and self-creativity. Orientation may fluctuate somewhat, or it may focus on certain avenues of expression, but it need never be looked upon as a fixed, unchanging attitude. But if it

does become more or less fixed, this is something which the individual helps determine.

In these ways, gay people have contributed not only to their own sexual freedom, but also to the general atmosphere of sexual freedom in society as a whole. There are many problems, however, which still plague the gay person's struggle for sexual freedom. The main focus of this article is to look at some problems which are unique to the gay male, and see what can be done to remedy them.

Pointing out such problems, of course, immediately raises the issue of how to avoid putting forth overly rigid or confining stereotypical attitudes about gays. Avoiding such stereotypes allows men to better assess whether they themselves conform to such stereotypes, and it can help some gay men delineate routes by which to escape such stereotypes if they have already succumbed to them (perhaps have even helped create them).

It is important to see that gay men need to evaluate two aspects of their identity: gay, and male. Although there are many exceptions, it seems that gay

women question their identities as women as well as their gay identities. While many gay women are feminists of one sort or another, it is not commonly true that gay men, however interested they are in gay liberation, are also interested in men's liberation. Which means that gay men are perhaps involved in only half the soul searching they could profit from. Many have fled from a male identity to a gay identity, but are often unaware of the many ways they continue to embody old male attitudes which continue to oppress them.

How do gay men do this? One way is that they, like straight men, do a disservice to their bodies by treating themselves as sex objects. This happens when they respond to, and even help create, a tendency to idealize the male body in ways which distort their ability to accurately perceive their own and other men's bodies. Feminists and gay women ask for acceptance of the female body as it is—in all its variety and its ordinariness (for want of a better word)—instead of believing that only one type of female body is beautiful or acceptable. Gay men, however,

often do something quite different. The gay magazines, advertisements, and the general attitude of many gay men is to idealize lean, muscular bodies that are young, sleek, and well tanned. Even a movie such as A Very Natural Thing, although it admirably examines many issues and problems faced by the gay person, nevertheless uses for its main actors men with beautiful, perfectly shaped bodies who are passed off as being in their early twenties.

Gay men are so burdened with preconceptions about the "ideal" body that they have difficulty seeing that an idealized body is not the usual body. They end up feeling inferior by comparison, and disappointed when they relate to other, normal-looking men. This tendency may be especially problematic when gay men, like many straight men, have a genital fixation with regard to sex. Gay men complain of a lack of touching, hugging, and general warmth in their sexual encounters. "There's always the quick grab for the cock." Also, many gay men feel compared and inadequate when it comes to penis size. "I'm never at a party where I don't hear at least one comment about how well hung somebody is," says one

man. Another observes, "I know it's not good to be concerned about penis size. But I do wish I were larger, and I would probably choose a partner with a bigger penis." One person, however, with what seems to be a healthy attitude, put his feelings this way: "I generally find that if my lover cares about me, he thinks I'm large. If he thinks I'm small, it usually seems that he doesn't care about me." It does not seem, however, that this man's confidence is shared by most gay men. The general feeling is that gay men do not like being compared and judged according to penis size; yet they often find themselves wanting, or fantasizing about, lovers with large penises.

Another closely related question about bodies is the fear of aging. As one person complains, "I'm only twenty-five, and I'm already competing with the younger guys; you know, the eighteen-year-olds." And an elderly man say, "We all want a nice, mature relationship. Yet there's always the roving eye. You think you've scored with someone, but meanwhile he's looking everybody else over. You get the feeling that you're too old. And then I turn around and do the same thing. I go after the

young boys. I get turned down and feel disappointed, but I can't feel self-righteous, because I know that would be hypocritical. What sense does it make to talk about an emotional relationship when I'm after the young boys too?"

Another important issue is the general problem of initiating or pursuing contact with another gay man, especially when there is sexual interest. Gays do not have all the usual social mores and "growth stages" behind them that straight people have gone through as they were learning their sexual identities. By the time a man realizes he is gay, he usually is already in the midst of a social milieu that is highly charged with sex. And if he isn't a self-confident person, he feels unsure about how to initiate sexual encounters, when or how to draw the line when he doesn't want someone else coming on to him, and what emotional expectations he might reasonably have toward someone after a sexual encounter. As one fellow in his thirties put it, "Gays don't have a context. Straights do. If a straight man doesn't know exactly how to approach a girl and make it with her, then maybe he's clumsy, but he isn't a total

idiot. Problem is, those of us who are gay, we don't know what to do. Except just do it. And that makes for paranoia. Everybody's skittish, nothing feels comfortable."

Too much sexual communication between gay men gets confused and distorted because it is initiated, or consummated, in a context of parties, alcohol, or drugs. Walking into a bar looking for sex is a good indication that a gay man is putting his personality aside, his wants for closeness and affection on hold, and his body on parade. Even in the more subdued setting of parties, if drugs and alcohol are used, an artificial way of lowering inhibitions is being substituted for open communication between potential lovers.

Impersonal sexual communication happens in straight society too; but why should gay men, who are dissatisfied with the usual modes of sexual communication in straight society, adopt its games? Sexual communication among straight people, unsavory as it can be at times, has several variables which slow it down to a pace which can allow the individual to assess

his or her needs. Of course, men are sometimes insensitive or predatory, women sometimes manipulative or seductive; but on the other hand, there are tacit codes of male chivalry, and female injunctions which appeal to virtue or etiquette: "I want to be sure I love you," considerations of, and requests for, "respect," or, "We need to get to know each other better." And there are many other escape routes when the going gets uncomfortable. No doubt these escape routes are often so artificial as to be poor substitutes for open verbal communication. But at least they slow the pace of sexual approachment between straight people, and thus allow room for attempting more healthy avenues of communication.

In gay society, however, such escape routes are not clearly defined. Gay men often conduct themselves in a sexual atmosphere that is hurried and frightening. Seductions are accelerated to a frantic pace because there are no easily identified intermediate stages one can have recourse to while getting to know someone intimately. Such sexual encounters, scarcely assessed in their initial stages, render little that is

emotionally satisfying, and hold little promise of communication beyond the initial encounter. Things may happen so quickly that, because the person isn't sure what he wants until it's all over, he never has a chance to grow within the sexual experience. As one person aptly summed it up, "It's that ugly feeling of waking up with someone you don't really know, and you're both trying to politely get away from each other as quickly as possible."

These problems with sexual communication are not isolated from problems with other aspects of communication. Gay men, like straight men, need to learn how to better express emotions to one another without feeling inhibited. Straight men who are locked into the old traditional roles are often so confused that they construe emotional rapport, touching, or soulful contact with another person as a prelude to sex. For many years this has caused difficulties with how straight men relate with people. They have deprived themselves of the joys and simple nourishment that come from hugging, touching, and communicating closely in nonsexual ways. Any natural desire for physical

communication has been converted into the attitude: "If I'm feeling something physical for someone, then it must be sexual." If their physical feelings are for women, they think they must somehow bring in sexual innuendo, even initiate sex, or their manhood will be put into question—if not by others, then by themselves. If, however, their physical feelings are for men, then they immediately get scared and back off, again afraid that such feelings put their manhood into question.

Within this way of reacting to feelings, straight men relate to women as sex objects, treat themselves as sex machines, and react to other men with fear. Gay men, to some extent, get caught in a similar bind. Physical closeness is too often seen as an invitation to sex. Hence, if you are not interested in sex, don't touch. If you are, don't dally with interludes of friendship or preliminary dating. Throw yourself into the fray and get it over with. End result: confusion, dissatisfaction, and the sense of isolation and loneliness that result from lack of sufficient physical contact. The cause: gay men conforming to—succumbing

to—the same values and practices that too often oppress straight men.

Of course, while these problems with sexual and emotional communication between gay men need to be aired, it must be recognized that gay men are not alone responsible for the existence of these problems.

Saddled with the stigma of appearing anomalous to the society they live in, it should not be wondered at that they have difficulty finding social settings in which communicating—sexual or nonsexual—can happen in a way that can allow either the spontaneous or the gradual disclosure of one's personality.

In attempting to lay foundations for better communication among gay men, it is necessary to assess what avenues of viable communication already exist. There are the parties and dances. Sometimes, despite the drinking and loud music, good communication does take place. There are formal, political groups. These give a certain degree of social identity, which can help a person feel less alone. But even here there is a problem. Not enough people are politically involved, and when they are, their commitment and dedication is

often sporadic and unpredictable. Too often they prefer a passive voyeurism to real participation. This can be painful to those who are especially committed to the political spectrum of gay rights. As one man remarked, "You show up at a rally, and you're scared of all those straight people out there and the antagonism you feel coming at you. That's bad. But what's really depressing is to be there and discover that all those people who were with you before, who came to the meetings and said they'd show up at the demonstration, aren't there. That's when you feel really vulnerable and alone."

Are gay men passing up opportunities for actualizing their movement? Many gay men observe that the gay women in their communities have informal groups and spontaneous gatherings where interpersonal support can be given and received. Gay men, however, seem for the most part to confine their rapport to social parties and politically oriented programs. Often these programs are concerned with how to reach out and help gay people. The problem here is that although there is a lot of talk about "outreach," there is little evidence of "inreach." Newcomers at meetings are seldom

introduced, and it is rare that questions are directed to them personally, even though many new members would welcome a simple question about what their needs are.

A final matter which deserves discussion is how the androgynous standard affects gays. It may be that the notion of androgyny has been somewhat over-used these last few years. Whereas androgynous persons supposedly have attained some kind of holistic, happy, spiritualized state of sexual being, people who do not measure up to its ideal seem, by implication, stunted in their personal growth.

No doubt many gay people could profit from looking ahead to a further or higher stage of sexual growth. As a case in point, some men who describe themselves as bisexual say they get a definite feeling from gay men that their bisexuality is somehow a threat to them. "It seems they don't know how to categorize me. If I'm not straight and I'm not gay, then how can they trust me?"

A related question bears scrutiny here: When considering the option of androgyny, does being bisexual mean that you are androgynous? Probably not. The mere fact that a person can relate sexually to

members of both sexes does not mean that he has it all together, sexually or otherwise. If anything, it may imply a split, or lack of unity, at the center of one's personality. As one man says, "I relate to men, and it's one world. But with women, it's a totally different world. I like both worlds, and I'm not willing to give either one up. But in myself, as well as out there in society, I don't see where the two come together."

No doubt every human being could profit from trying to move toward a more holistic state of being in which all sexual, emotional, and social tendencies are united. To deny any emotional tendencies, or to nurture only those which a person feels safest with, perhaps limits one's capacity for self-actualization. But while this may be true, a person has to start from where he is, and move at a pace that is constructive. It is important to assess one's sexual identity, but this should not be done so rigorously that a person can not enjoy his identity. As long as any sexual orientation is not indulged to the point of being intolerant toward other orientations, and as long as it does not become a

stultifying disinclination toward personal growth, then it should be accepted as a healthy state of being. And while men are defining their sexual identities, they must be aware of the many barriers that can impede their progress. Gay men need to recognize that these barriers exist not only out there in society, but also in the attitudes they have internalized. I am emphasizing that many aspects of the gay man's male identity often limit him, and as long as he is unaware of this, his chances for becoming happy with his sexuality will be severely hampered. As one gay man summed it up, "Sometimes when I'm in public with my lover, I put my arm around him and we walk down the street together. But we don't get to feel love. All we feel is tension. I'm angry at people. I'm angry at my father. I'm angry at other men. Things may have improved politically and legally, but I don't believe things have improved at the interpersonal level over the last thirty years. At least not much."

His conclusion could be disputed, but his hurt and his anger cannot be. There is no easy way to escape such pain. But if gay liberation can join hands with

the men's liberation movement, then we might begin to find ways for healing such pain.

POSTSCRIPT

It bears noting that this article was originally published a little more than 33 years ago, and in fact was written a little over 35 years ago back in early 1980. However, what got published wasn't quite this article. The editors, although they had promised to publish my article "as is," took considerable liberties with my prose while in no way consulting with me about the changes they would make. Grammar was bent askew, sections were left out, and (most egregious) several tawdry insertions were clumsily shoved in.

The journal I had submitted this piece to, and its editors, were oriented toward the "feminist man" perspective, and their imperious attitude (as usual) flouted many of the rules of common decency which feminism, as a creed, supposedly (but almost never) adheres to. In fact it bears mention that, upon submitting this piece, I received a phone call from one of their editors—Michael Biernbaum—sternly inquiring as to my own sexual identity, making it clear that although they wanted to publish the piece, they would not do so if I myself were not gay. Apparently they felt that, if I were not gay, then I lacked the credentials for this kind of thinking and writing. (I quelled the temptation to remind this boorish interlocutor that the time-honored novel Black Beauty was not written by a horse.) Well, I flat-out lied to the fellow. I did not want to tell him I was gay, since that would have been very far from the truth. So I settled on what felt like a safe lie. (It would give me many a self-satisfied chuckle.) I told him I was a celibate bisexual. The option of healthy celibacy, as an experimental sexual (or nonsexual)

lifestyle, had taken hold in our culture for a time then, and I thought this would get me by. It did, except Michael Biernbaum wanted me to write them a letter stating this about myself. So I discharged this small (if disingenuous) task, which got me off the inquisitorial hook.

Lying certainly is not an easy or frequent part of my personality, but given how inappropriate the question was, I felt justified in doing so—and still do. However, since I try to be thorough with my writerly history, I below list the bibliographical information for that first (and skewed) publication of this piece.

Given that this article was written a little more than 35 years ago, I can not but give some consideration as to whether it now is dated. Sadly, I must conclude that it is not. So here, with no small sense of social duty, I take opportunity for presenting this article as it was originally written.

Following is the bibliographical evidence for finding (if you wish) those earlier editorial transgressions, insinuations, and amateurish meddlings:

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