

OUTING YOURSELF

How to Come Out as Lesbian
or Gay to Your Family,
Friends, and Coworkers

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Foreword by Betty Berzon, PH.D.



R A N D O M H O U S E

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SIGNORILE



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“IT’S OKAY FOR OTHERS, BUT I COULDN’T POSSIBLY COME OUT MYSELF”

Due to the work of mental-health professionals, gay activists, and much of the media, many people have learned that living their lives in “the closet” robs them of a full, rewarding life and forces them to live in fear and shame—even though they may initially have been in denial about the stress the closet creates for them.

But “coming out” of the closet doesn’t necessarily mean telling everyone you run into that you are gay, lesbian, or bisexual. What it really means is no longer worrying about being “discovered” by friends, family, or coworkers.

Obviously you are in the closet if you are afraid to admit to yourself that you are gay or bisexual even though you are sexually attracted to people of your own gender. But if you have come out to yourself and still fear that someone will find out your secret, then you are still in the closet. Many of us—most of us, in fact—are out in some aspects of our lives but still closeted in others:

If you have come out to one or two heterosexual friends or relatives, but have sworn them to secrecy, you are still in the closet.

If you have told a fair number of close friends and acquaintances but haven’t been honest with your family—specifically your parents—you are still in the closet.

If you have told most of your friends and family about your homosexuality but have kept your secret from your coworkers—especially if you have allowed them to believe that you are heterosexual—you are still in the closet.

But if you have picked up this book, you don’t want to remain in that closet. You have taken a preliminary step on the road to outing yourself.

You have probably come to the realization that living without lies and without fear of disclosure would be a liberating, powerful, wonderful thing to do, that being honest would make you feel better about yourself.

But you probably also believe that revealing your homosexuality to the people who know you and love you would be a horrifying, even dangerous action, one that seems completely out of the question for you. You may in fact be saying to yourself, “It’s okay for others, but I couldn’t possibly come out myself” or “It’s fine for some people, but nobody understands me and my life” or “Nobody knows how utterly unacceptable it would be to tell my family, my friends, or my coworkers.”

You probably feel that your situation is unique—and it is, everyone’s is. You may believe that although other people have come out and continue to come out, it will always be impossible for you to come out fully.

You probably believe that your family, your friends, or your coworkers are far different

from those of all the other people who've outed themselves.

You probably believe that when it comes to your sexuality, the less your family and friends know, the better.

You may believe that it would be nice if they could accept you, if you didn't have to live and live in secrecy, but that telling them the truth about yourself would be an utter disaster—one that would ruin whatever good relationships you have with them now, as well as deeply hurt them—or possibly even kill them.

These are all normal, natural feelings, genuine concerns that need to be taken seriously. Worries or beliefs that are very strong and very real and should not be casually or quickly dismissed.

That is why the program for coming out of the closet this book puts forth has no time limit. The process may take you six months, five years, ten years, or a lifetime. The coming-out process is one of self-discovery, and each person has his or her own personal timetable, journey, and destination.

Quoting Yourself provides preparation for the process, a guide for that journey, and a friend you can turn to for comfort when the going gets rough, which it will. But once you have decided that you will be happier not living in fear any longer, *Quoting Yourself* will help you deal with the inevitable stress. Because the stress of coming out will never be as hard on you as the stress of staying in was.

Although many family members and friends often have less of a problem with homosexuality than we fear they will have, you can never predict how your own family and friends will react. This book cannot promise that they will unconditionally accept you, but it can prepare you for the various responses they may have and help you to deal with them honestly and openly.

Once you step outside the confines of your closet, you will find yourself at the beginning of a quest for inner peace and self-acceptance. No matter how others may respond to your homosexuality, you will always know that living in the closet is far more destructive than the trauma of coming out. For your own mental health and well-being, you have decided that you are now ready to come out. Do so, at your own speed and when you know it's safe.

Congratulations, and good luck.

FOREWORD BY

BETTY BERZON, PH.D.

The weekend of my fortieth birthday I arranged to be alone. I wasn't sure why I was doing that on Saturday morning, when I awoke from a dream in which I was running desperately from hotel to hotel looking for somewhere to check in, somewhere I was supposed to be. It was not immediately clear, but slowly I realized that the time had arrived to face the runner in the dream—to allow the runner to stand in a quandary rather than flee from it, to seek while awake the elusive answer that drew me into the mad pursuit of my dream.

For eighteen years I had lived a heterosexual life, determined to overcome a brief foray into homosexuality in my early twenties. I lived in a closet elaborately furnished with satisfying work, a thriving social life, and romantic relationships with a lot of very decent men. On the outside I was not different from anyone I knew. On the inside I fought back the knowledge that I was different in an inescapably essential way.

During this weekend of coming out to myself I struggled with all the implications of accepting and integrating this alien part of my identity. Would I still be the same person? How would others feel about me? What would I do differently as a lesbian than I had done as a straight woman? Where would I meet other lesbians? Would I know how to act with them? When should I tell anyone? What should I tell? What should I say?

I was reeling as these questions rapid-fired through my brain. I saw that I had a lot to learn, a lot to adjust to, to work on, but the one thing that had somehow established itself that I did not want to let go from, was that I was finished with subterfuge and self-deception. I was going to be authentic for the first time in my life, whatever it took, whatever changes I had to make. That was it—the end of trying to be something I was not.

I don't know why the weekend of my fortieth birthday became the crisis in which I outed myself, but there began a journey of many years in which I overtook the runner in the dream and settled down both down to a place where we absolutely are supposed to be. It wasn't easy. I uprooted myself and moved to another city. I see now that that was really not necessary, but this was before the Stonewall riots in New York in 1969, which ushered in the modern gay-rights movement and brought many men and women out of the closet: There were not then the myriad of gay and lesbian support services that have become available since, almost everywhere.

There was not a book like this one to guide me, to give me the structure to make sense of it all, to know what to expect and how to cope with the bandits, outside and inside, who would steal my courage and try to push me back into the closet. Like so many others who had to go through the process before help arrived, I winged it, made mistakes, acted the fool, calmed down, and finally got it. I didn't have to turn my life inside out. I was the same person I had always been, only better, more real, ready to love and be loved, willing to experience the newness of life without a cover.

I cannot emphasize enough the strength I have gained from becoming an open and honest gay person. I have been enabled, as a therapist, to reach out to countless men and women struggling with the decision whether to come out or to come out further. I have listened to their fears, explored with them the minefields of family and career, watched them overcome inertia and disclose who

seemed earthshaking only to find merely minor tremors and relief greater than they had even imagined.

These experiences inspired me to translate the insights of my own self-discovery into two books: Positively Gay, New Approaches to Gay and Lesbian Life and Permanent Partners, Building Gay and Lesbian Relationships That Last. In other forums—lectures, workshops, and media appearances—I continue to challenge gay and lesbian people to reinvent their lives, elevating pride over prejudice, raising the logic of the heart over fear of the unknown.

I have been witness to the trend of people coming out earlier and earlier—not waiting until their fortieth birthdays—using the support offered by college groups, even high school groups, gay and lesbian community agencies, and models of proud gay individuals such as the author of this book. Help for coming out has arrived in many forms, but the special value of this volume is its carefully designed step-by-step plan for making your way through the phases of outing yourself.

For many of us there had been no such preparation available for this most important experience of accepting, integrating, and disclosing our gay or lesbian identity. Mom and Pop were no help because they were in the dark about it. As youngsters our peer group offered no support, because they either didn't know or didn't understand enough to get beyond their negative stereotypes. But times are changing. Gay is everywhere. They can't escape it, you can't escape it.

Being in the closet now is no longer the silent retreat it has been in the past. The activists are out there imploring you to emerge. The burgeoning gay and lesbian community lures you. The media have a newly found fascination with the lives of gay men and lesbians. You realize that you are one of many and that others have freed themselves from the imperatives of a fictional identity. Your closet is becoming less a sanctuary, more an unacceptable constraint. You are ready to become known, heard, seen, and acknowledged for who you really are. With this book, you are in the right place to begin that process.

As I read through this text I am excited by the image of thousands of gay men and lesbians connecting with one another “on-line,” through their computers. What a wonderful new frontier for exploring being gay, unraveling the dilemmas, supporting and guiding one another. Access becomes a magical concept—access to information, to contact with others like yourself, to the comfort of kinship. A line in Outing Yourself sums it up: “To help others is really to help yourself, and to help yourself is really to help others.”

One of the chief virtues of this book is that its fourteen-step guidance program is based on the real stories of real people. As they are presented here, they are a varied lot, in age, background, and temperament. They represent the immense diversity of gay and lesbian people—no stereotype could possibly fit all of these folks. They are different from you and yet the same, because each must be the agent of his or her growth and change, just as you must be.

The voices that echo through these pages offer companionship in the struggle to honestly confront yourself and others. Coming out is not an event. It is a long path along which you will travel for the rest of your life, the trip becoming easier, the rewards more gratifying as you progress. But you must still be vigilant, because the heterosexual assumption will always be operating and you may, from time to time, have to correct the record: “There's nothing wrong with being heterosexual. It's just not what I happen to be.”

This is a gentle book, easy to read and absorb—a primer for personal change. I believe it will be around for a very long time, because the need to come out, constructively, will be around for a very long time. I hope you will be inspired here to pursue your coming-out journey no matter what, and

if you hit some rough patches in the road you will have this resource to help you keep going.

The freedom to be your natural self is elementary to your mental and emotional health, but you cannot achieve freedom as long as it is an abstraction. Only when you step into the reality of outliving yourself can you begin to feel the potency of self-affirmation—the first heady signs of it all coming together in body, mind, and spirit—a fresh start, a vital new option.

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WHY OUT YOURSELF?

Every day, more and more lesbians and gay men are realizing that the continuing process of coming out dramatically improves the quality of their lives. We have come to realize that so many of the things that make our lives as lesbians and gay men miserable can be traced back to the closet. As mental-health professionals have long told us, the basic predicament of living like a second-class citizen and actively hiding the truth about ourselves diminishes our personal dignity and our self-esteem—even when we might not be aware of it—and our impaired self-esteem leads to many complex emotional problems.

Jonathan Rotenberg, a corporate strategy consultant who lives in Cambridge, Massachusetts, denied his sexuality throughout his teen years, burying himself in his work and his studies. He didn't date girls or have any interest in that regard; he thought he was just an "awkward" heterosexual. During college, after briefly wondering if he might be gay, he recoiled from the notion because homosexuality didn't fit in with the man he thought he wanted to be. "There was a tremendous amount of grief at that time," he told me when I interviewed him for my first book, *Queer in America*. "I would pour myself into work and try to ignore it. I kept giving myself warning signs that there was a dilemma, but I ignored them too and just kept punching away. A lot of problems developed, all of these irrational things: fear of flying, just a total meltdown. I just was fighting this so hard."

Shelley, a twenty-three-year-old Baltimore college student, has come out as a lesbian to herself, has made some gay friends, and is dating a woman, but she hasn't told her family or any of her straight friends. She constantly feels a sense of shame, that she is doing something behind their backs. That pressure and stress take an enormous toll.

"I've always had a bit of a weight problem," Shelley says, "but it is exacerbated by stressful situations. Since I've been living this secret lesbian life, I've gained twenty pounds. I just eat myself into oblivion sometimes; I'm nervous and scared a lot of the time, and food becomes my escape valve. I know if I could just relieve the pressure, and just tell my parents and my sisters, a lot of this behavior would stop. And that's what I'm working toward."

The stories of Jonathan and Shelley, as well as those of the countless gay people who have come out (and the countless more who still struggle with issues of honesty and openness) attest to the ways in which the closet has been a destructive force in too many of our lives. For some people, like Shelley, the closet has aggravated or even created weight problems. For others, it has led to alcohol and drug abuse, depression, insomnia, phobias, stress, and other even more serious emotional disorders. These emotional problems can then lead to or exacerbate physical disorders, such as hypertension, heart disease, stroke, and even cancer.

When they discuss how they came out, many people use the imagery of a great burden being lifted from them, that they feel like the free souls they were meant to be. This may not happen initially—coming out itself can be stressful and difficult, especially when family and friends react negatively—but in time most gay people say they are happier out of the closet.

than they were when they were in the closet. They feel better about themselves in general and this positive outlook carries over into their day-to-day activities.

“Each time I tell someone new—a cousin, an old friend from school, or even a new friend at the gym—I get a certain kind of confidence boost,” says Kathleen, a thirty-six-year-old Dallas advertising executive who recently came out to her family and is now planning to tell her coworkers. “It not only makes me feel better about myself, more honest and less secretive, but asserting myself in this way really gives me an overall self-assurance that carries through at work and even in my relationships. It’s as if coming out is contagious: The benefits spread to every aspect of your life.”

As Kathleen’s comment illustrates, outing yourself changes your life in subtle ways that make you less afraid of the world around you and better poised to take on real challenges and lead a more productive, successful, and happy life.

Coming out of the closet is a process that gets you in touch with the real you, the person you were meant to be before you were forced to wear the mask of heterosexuality. Coming out means you no longer feel like a freak who must hide a terrible secret; instead, you feel like a normal person who is proud of who he or she is, the way normal people tend to be.

“The personal is the political,” goes the old feminist adage. In many countries around the world today, coming out is also a political act—whether you are an explicitly political person or not. Being gay in the 1990s means being part of a large, diverse community of people who are under attack by people who don’t understand homosexuality and are thus afraid of it. Beyond the personal reasons to come out, many gay men, lesbians, and bisexual men and women are also reaching the conclusion that they have a responsibility to a community of people, just as other groups—such as women, blacks, and Jews—feel an allegiance to their communities. These newly politicized bisexuals, lesbians, and gay men have decided that it is time to stand up and be counted, to be identified as part of a community, and to make gay people so familiar that they no longer induce fear. Coming out instills a sense of duty, a sense that you are helping your community in the most effective way possible: by giving it visibility.

Visibility itself builds self-esteem, and thus the process of coming out creates a powerful cycle in which the personal fuels the political, which in turn fuels the personal. Outing yourself brings you to an understanding of a simple but often overlooked fact of life: To help others is really to help yourself, and to help yourself is really to help others.

COMING OUT WISELY

While it is important for you to come out of the closet, it is equally important to come out in a *smart* way, which means making sure it is safe and making sure that you won’t be in physical danger or risk losing your home or livelihood.

If, for example, you are a teenager with little money and are dependent on religious fundamentalist parents who will immediately throw you out if they find out you are gay, it is probably not wise to come out to your family just yet.

If you live in a rough city neighborhood or rural area where you are absolutely certain that you will be physically harmed by a homophobic gang, you probably shouldn’t risk coming out to friends and neighbors.

If you live in a place where you are not protected by law against discrimination in housing and employment and your boss or landlord is extremely antigay, and you are certain that he or she will throw you out of your home or job, you'd have to change some of your living circumstances in order to come out to neighbors and coworkers.

That said, however, many of us exaggerate such circumstances as a way of avoiding the coming-out process: We make the obstacles seem much worse than they are, because we don't want to face our own fears about telling others we're gay. The first seven steps of *Outing Yourself* will help you proceed with caution. By Step 7, not only will you see past the self-loathing that all gay people experience but you will also have others around you who can offer their perspective. You will then be able to judge for yourself if it is time to proceed to the next seven steps.

PLANNING FOR THE DAY

If after completing Step 7 you still feel it would not be wise to proceed in coming out to friends and family, you can take a break and plan for the day when you are able to move on and accomplish more. The teenager with the fundamentalist parents, for example, can wait until she is able to successfully live on her own. The gay man living in the rough neighborhood can save his money and plan for the day when he can leave and be able to live freely. The person with the antigay landlord or employer can plan on moving to another place or possibly getting a new job.

Planning for the day when you can come out—literally picking a day in the future and possibly even marking it down on a calendar—is a hopeful alternative to feeling locked in your closet. But if you are to grow into a strong sense of self-worth, you must, in time, come out fully.

This book is meant to be a manual for people at any stage of the coming-out process. The fourteen steps are meant to provide a structure that can make the process easier. Some readers who have already completed some of the steps will feel a need to move on to other steps quickly. Others will find it essential to begin at Step 1, Identifying Yourself, and move slowly and cautiously through the process. In any event, read through each of the steps: Very few of us have completed any one step as fully as we might like to think. Coming out is a lifelong process, and we can all benefit from going over the basics every now and then.

WHY STEPS?

Soon after the publication of my first book, *Queer in America*, a study of the closet and how it harms people, I began to receive hundreds of letters from gay men and lesbians who said they now realized their lives would be greatly improved if they came out of their closets. They wanted to know how to go about doing that.

I remembered my discussions with Jonathan Rotenberg, the Cambridge corporate-strategy consultant, when I interviewed him for a chapter in *Queer in America* about the lesbians and gay men in the computer industry who are using technology to fight for gay rights and empower people to come out of their closets.

While he was still in high school, Rotenberg was at the forefront of the burgeoning computer industry. At the age of thirteen, in 1976, Rotenberg founded the Boston Computer Society, a group dedicated to helping people learn about the personal computer at a time when this technology was completely alien. Within a year, the society experienced a 300 percent growth in membership, from ten people to several dozen. Heading the society—whose membership would eventually top 31,000 worldwide—Rotenberg became a teenage CEO and was soon internationally famous. By the time he was nineteen, he had been on the front page of *The Wall Street Journal* and named one of the ten most eligible bachelors in Boston by the *Boston Herald*.

It was not until almost ten years later, however, that Rotenberg dealt with his closet. “I realized how similar homophobia was to computerphobia,” he told me, only half joking. “I saw so many parallels. People who grow up with computers and are fluent in them have no fear of them at all. Similarly, people who grow up with gay people don’t see what the problem is. I began to think about how in business school we were being trained to take on complicated problems. We have a whole set of techniques to do so.... I figured if coming out could be broken down into a series of little steps—rather than one big one—it would be easier for people.”

Rotenberg’s analysis was similar to what many other people have told me over the past several years, including several gay-supportive psychotherapists. I began to correspond with some of the many people who’d written me letters looking for help in coming out, and found that a surprising number of them were also seeking a step-by-step system.

“I would like a program that takes you through, a little at a time, without any timetable but that is direct and forthright,” wrote Bill, a thirty-five-year-old businessman who lives in a small Texas town. “A program that shows you how other people have dealt with this. Something that is understanding of the hell I’m going through but that will gently pull me along, step by step.”

Karen, a seventeen-year-old high school student who lives in upstate New York, told me it would be a lot easier for her if she were empowered to view coming out as something she could do incrementally, rather than as a monumental, one-time task: “For me, at my age, this is all so scary. I would like to know that each day I could do something little, something that I could tell myself is a good thing and is part of my getting out of the closet. The way it looks right now, it’s like this big thing you have to do all at once, so I don’t even want to face it. I like to be shown a process that moves that way, a system for coming out. I want to be able to do something today, and then do something tomorrow, and then something the next day, and the day after, so that over time it’s done.”

Eventually, I culled a great deal of information from a diverse group of people, including the hundreds of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual men and women who’d written me letters, as well as those I reached out to on gay computer-bulletin-board services. I interviewed some people directly on the telephone. Others filled out a lengthy questionnaire; some of these people I later interviewed by phone as well. The questionnaire and interview subjects ranged from those who’d come out of the closet fully, to those who were only partly out, to those who were still deeply closeted. Because people were at very different steps of the coming-out process, I have changed all names and localities (for the latter, a comparable urban, suburban, or rural locale has replaced the true one).

In consultation with psychotherapists, I derived the steps and exercises in this book from the techniques and strategies that my lesbian and gay subjects had said worked best for them in their own coming-out processes. The key, in almost every successful coming-out story—whether the reaction to the coming out was positive or negative—was to have worked from a well-thought-out plan. *Outing Yourself* will help you devise that plan.

IF NEWS GETS OUT TOO SOON

Sometimes, however, the coming-out process does not work out according to your plan. Parents, friends, or coworkers might find out you are gay without your having told them. Suddenly you may feel powerless, as if they are using information against you, confronting you with it, making you feel bad for being gay. The important thing in such a crisis is to take the power back from them as quickly as possible. You can regain power by making yourself the most immediate and positive source of information on the subject.

If, for instance, your parents find out you are gay sooner than you would have liked, go directly to Step 8, That First Talk, and follow this advice as closely as possible:

Do not deny you are gay or appear sorry or unhappy about it.

Above all, do not apologize. After all, how can you expect them to accept it when you see sad and distraught about it yourself?

Sit them down and tell them what you already know about your homosexuality.

Dispel their myths, and answer as best you can any questions they may have.

If you are inadvertently found out by friends or coworkers, follow the same advice and go directly to those steps in *Outing Yourself* that apply to friends and coworkers. This may be exceedingly difficult. You may not have acquired all the necessary information you need and you may not have built the support groups that become vital, but with a lot of deep breaths and calm sense you can rise to this difficult occasion.

The best approach, of course, is to make sure people don't find out until you are ready to tell them. While this is usually within our control, we sometimes trip ourselves up: It is not uncommon to inadvertently leave hints around so that people find out without our having told them. It may be tempting, but being direct is usually better. For instance, do not leave this book on your desk until you are actually ready to let your coworkers know you are gay and until you are actually ready to discuss it with them.

Remain in control of information about yourself.

Be smart—and be careful.

While you must proceed with caution as you out yourself, always be aware that you are embarking on an exciting and rewarding journey. Try to enjoy it. Coming out may be difficult and stressful at times, but it is a rebirth. You are at the very beginning of a new life, one in which you will, for the first time in a very long time, be able to live in freedom, honesty, and pride.

PART I

**OUTING YOURSELF
TO YOURSELF**

IDENTIFYING YOURSELF

Perhaps you have had one or two homosexual experiences. Perhaps you've merely thought about it. Neither scenario necessarily means that you have told yourself you are gay.

Such thoughts and actions don't actually mean a person *is* gay. In some cases a heterosexual person, particularly an adolescent, may simply be experimenting—mentally or physically.

"People may be experimenting and seeing where their sexuality lies," notes Dr. Richard Isay, a clinical professor of psychiatry at Cornell Medical College and the author of *Being Homosexual*. "However, if someone has persistent homosexual experiences—and not necessarily encounters but day dreams and night dreams—and has had them for a long time, then that person is gay."

Some people are truly bisexual, equally attracted to both sexes. "I was always really turned on by men," says Sheila, a thirty-six-year-old rural Tennessee health-care worker.

Then in my early twenties I realized I was also really turned on by women. At first I thought I must be a lesbian, but my realization that I liked women did not stop or cover up my strong sexual attraction for men. I've accepted that I'm really bisexual, and I realize there aren't many people like me.

The vast majority of people who have recurring homosexual thoughts or experiences, however, are truly homosexual, although they often don't want to face the fact. Society has placed such a terrible stigma on homosexuality that even *thinking* about sex with someone of the same gender can be frightening. After having had several homosexual experiences, many people still deny that they are gay. They tell themselves that they are really heterosexual, they continue to live as heterosexuals, and they maintain that their homosexual incidents or thoughts don't and can't mean anything. Perhaps they tell themselves that they are bisexual as a way of holding on to some form of heterosexuality, some form of what they have been told is "normal" and "right." This is common, and has made many homosexuals—once they have fully come out—unfairly suspicious of the existence of true bisexuals.

Rudy, a twenty-four-year-old northern California law student, remembers how he couldn't face the truth when at age eighteen he began to realize his homosexuality.

I had what I guess you could call a crush on a guy at school—I mean I used to dream about kissing him—and every time I saw him in class my heart would start pounding and I'd turn red. I would then get this queasy feeling in my stomach, like I was sick, because this feeling of liking the guy made me ill, because I thought homosexuality was disgusting.

I convinced myself that I was bisexual, and that I could control the gay side and not act on it. But I soon realized that I didn't like girls in a sexual way at all. Two years later I began

dating a girl who really was bisexual—I mean, she liked girls and guys and had had relationships with both. And, well, she and I had very little sex. After a lot of long talks she eventually said to me, “You’re not bisexual. You’re gay.”

I went home that night, and for the first time wrote in my journal, “I’m gay.” Then I crossed it out. I just couldn’t face it.

DECADES SPENT WITHOUT IDENTIFYING ONESELF AS GAY

For some people, this first step of identifying oneself as gay or lesbian (or even bisexual) can take many years to complete. Doris, a fifty-four-year-old Buffalo, New York, business owner, was married a man and had four children before eventually coming out as a lesbian and divorcing her husband—after thirty years of marriage. “Ever since I can remember, I wanted to be near women, to be physically close to them in a way that I really never wanted to be with men—even though I forced myself to be with men in that way,” she says.

I admitted those feelings to myself for a very long time. But still, in those days that didn’t matter. If you wanted to do well, you got married. Besides, I wasn’t able to deal with the feelings anyway. They were too frightening, too eerie and weird, you know?

Then, after years of just barely acknowledging to myself that I had a longing to be intimate with a woman, I finally did experience it with a very close friend who was also married. But to actually identify myself as a lesbian? Oh God. No, it was years and years before I could actually do that.

“From the moment one begins to suspect that one might be ‘different’ from others the seed of doubt is sown, sending out corrosive roots to obstruct and inhibit the process by which self-esteem naturally grows,” declares author and journalist Mark Thompson, who has written much about the coming-out process and the dynamics of gay life. Thompson stresses the notion of “coming out inside,” coming out to oneself. “There’s a valuable part of ourselves that was stolen at an early part of our lives,” he says, “and we need to get it back. The doubt is sown deep inside of us because society still carries the message that being gay is bad. We internalize all of that.”

UGLY WORDS

Because of the social stigma attached to them, the mere words “gay” and “lesbian”—not to mention “homosexual,” “fag,” “dyke,” and “queer”—are terms that most people don’t want associated with themselves. It’s amazing how powerful these words can be. Some people, even when engaging in sex with people of the same sex, many even in their first same-sex relationship, still cannot bring themselves to say that they are lesbian or gay. For some, the reluctance is subtle: They get around such identification by saying that they shun “labels” of any kind and don’t like “categorizing” themselves. For others, the unwillingness to identify themselves as lesbian or gay is more conscious, tinged with internalized homophobia.

“I liked being with guys and having sex with guys, but I kept telling myself that I wasn’t

‘gay,’ or a ‘fag,’ or any of that,” recalls Ramon, a twenty-six-year-old Miami sales clerk.

My family is Cuban, and in our culture being macho is very important. So I’d tell myself that I was every bit a man, and that the men I was sleeping with and hanging out with were real men—we just had sex with each other, that’s all. “Gay” was something else.

To me, it was all the stereotypes—effeminate men, drag queens, you know. I wouldn’t have sex with someone who identified themselves as “gay.” I believed that if I didn’t say I was that—even to myself—then I wasn’t.

BEGINNING A JOURNEY

Ramon’s experience resonates for many gay men and lesbians who refuse to accept their homosexuality. But many people who think they accept their newfound homosexuality have never really identified themselves as gay or lesbian. Self-identifying is a way of starting the coming-out process: You can’t tell other people that you’re lesbian or gay until you’ve told yourself. It’s also important to identify yourself as gay as a way of rejecting the hatred directed at you and the lies told about you. Identifying yourself starts you on a long journey.

“I first identified myself as gay when I was about twelve or thirteen years old,” says Lincoln, a nineteen-year-old West Virginia college student.

It was a scary situation but one that sticks out permanently in my mind. I was in my bathroom, brushing my teeth, looking at myself in the mirror. All of these feelings I had been having but not really understanding were flooding into my mind while I looked at myself—all of these thoughts about men and a kind of realizing I was a homosexual. I began to cry, and then I prayed to God to change me because I thought it was evil or wrong. But then, from that point on, I underwent a tremendous inner healing. From the “mirror incident” I learned to accept for myself that I would not be changed; I was gay.

Lincoln’s “mirror incident” is something we can all learn from. By looking himself in the mirror and facing the truth about himself, no matter how painful, Lincoln was able eventually to find inner peace and come to terms with his homosexuality.

The following exercise is the first of many in this book. These exercises are based on the actual experiences of many lesbians and gay men who, like Lincoln, stumbled upon some rituals that helped them. Depending on where you are in your coming-out journey, you will either want to read the exercises and think about them or actually *do* them. But this overall process is about coming out: Actions will help you more than words, and words will help you more than thoughts.

EXERCISE 1: “MIRROR, MIRROR”

Go to your bathroom mirror. Pick a time when you know there is no one around and when

you know for sure that no one will walk in on you or hear you. Run the water in the sink you want to be really sure no one will hear you.

Look at yourself in the mirror and study your face. Take a few minutes to get to know yourself and your face in the mirror. Feel good about this person who is taking charge of himself or herself.

When you are ready, say softly and sweetly “I am gay” or “I am a lesbian.”

Say it slowly, over and over again, no matter how painful it is, no matter if it makes you cry. As the gay film historian and activist Vito Russo once said, “The truth will set you free but first it will be a pain in the neck.” Hear the truth, and accept the pain, which will eventually subside. For now, feel it and don’t hold in your grief.

Mourn the fact that you are not the person you thought you were, the person everyone else wanted you to be. Think about that person and think about all the things about that person that did not represent the real you.

Say goodbye to the old you forever, someone who helped you out through thick and thin. This may be a sad experience, but it is time for that person to go. Eventually, you will celebrate the real you, the person you are now allowing to come out.

“Basically, coming out is a death and rebirth experience,” says author Mark Thompson. “To come out, something has to die—whatever it was you thought you were. That’s a painful experience. In a sense, you’re killing a former constructed identity and creating a new one.”

Do Exercise 1 as often and as long as you feel necessary, then go on to Exercise 2.

EXERCISE 2: “I AM WHAT I AM”

After you have done Exercise 1 a few times, go to a quiet, private place where no one will walk in on you—the woods or a park, if you have to—and bring a pen and paper. For the first time that you are doing Exercise 2, divide the paper lengthwise into three columns. In the left-hand column, beginning at the top, you will write “I am gay” or “I am a lesbian.”

I am gay
I am gay
I am gay
I am gay

Then, next to that phrase, in the middle of the column, write down a negative word that describes homosexuals—one of the many ugly words that you have heard over the years from your family, your friends, or even your teachers. Go down the page, writing down another ugly epithet next to “I am gay” or “I am a lesbian.”

I am a lesbian	dyke
I am a lesbian	lezzie
I am a lesbian	butch
I am a lesbian	diesel

Read all of the words you have in the middle column over and over again. Face the words that are used against you, desensitize yourself to them, and move on. After you have read the words several times, fold the paper and put it somewhere inside this book. (You will use this piece of paper again, in Step 2.)

The next time you do Exercise 2, divide the paper into two, not three, columns. Simply write down the words “I am gay” or “I am lesbian” in the left-hand column and the epithets on the right. As you write the words, accept them as a description of the new you. As in Exercise 1, say goodbye to the old you and feel the accompanying pain and grief.

Each time you finish this exercise, rip up the paper and throw it away. But remember to keep the three-columned paper you have folded and put in this book.

NO TIMETABLE

Do Exercises 1 and 2 until there is little or no pain associated with the epithets or with saying goodbye to the old you. You will know when you are ready to move on.

You may not feel good about yourself yet, but that will happen in time, after several more steps in the Outing Yourself process. The goal of this first step is for you to face the truth, verbalize it and write it down. You'll know it's time to move on when the grief you've experienced is replaced by a desire to move and grow and change, an urge fueled by excitement and/or trepidation.

RECOGNIZING SELF-LOATHING AND CREATING SELF-RESPECT

Some people would have you believe that abhorring homosexuality is “instinctual” behavior among most of the population. That is the big myth. Hatred of homosexuals is no more natural than hatred of blacks or hatred of Jews.

While most people are not attracted to people of the same sex, the outright disgust and fear that many people harbor for homosexual acts is instilled in them from a very young age by our society. If society stopped teaching people to revile homosexuality, most heterosexuals would view homosexuality the way that homosexuals view heterosexuality: something that just doesn't interest them.

Since the vast majority of people are heterosexual, learning to hate homosexuality causes them little if any internal conflict—at least until their friends and loved ones come out. But for those of us who are homosexual, society's teachings cause much conflict internally. Unlike everyone else, from the day we realize that we are gay, our attempts to process society's antigay attitude lead to emotional conflict and psychological damage. Plus, we feel compelled to keep our conflict a secret.

Society teaches us that there are grave consequences for us if we do not keep our sexuality hidden, that we will pay a price if we come out of the closet. We are threatened with the destruction of our livelihood, our lives, and even our souls. We are taught that we will be scorned and ridiculed. We are made to believe that we will lose our jobs, our homes, our families, that we may put our very lives in danger.

Staying in the closet, on the other hand, is rewarded in our society. Gay men and lesbians learn that if they want to be loved by family and friends, and if they want to make it in business and career, they must pretend to be heterosexuals. The closet is thus firmly embedded in all of our cultural, political, and social institutions. It exists at home, at work, at school, and even on television. For most of us, there is no escaping its overwhelming power.

In that way, the stress that the closet imposes on each of us as individuals cannot be overestimated. It often robs us of a happy, fulfilling life, forcing us to live a lie and tremble with fear, afraid that we will one day be exposed. Put simply, the closet is dangerous, and staying inside can often lead to dire consequences.

“I was always depressed as a teenager, for a lot of reasons that had to do with low self-esteem, not feeling I was pretty, and being subjected to racism sometimes, but when I realized I was a lesbian, that was the last straw for me,” says Julie, a thirty-three-year-old Minneapolis waitress.

I think being black and being a lesbian or a gay man is harder in a way. It's not that black people are more homophobic than whites, but I think racism makes some black people look at it differently. A lot of black people who are pretty

accepting and might actually be cool about it under different circumstances don't like when you go public because it's like they're afraid of what kind of image it portrays of blacks, that it makes it look like blacks are more likely to be "queer" or something.

When a lot of black gays and lesbians first figure out they're homosexual, they think it just can't be true because the little bit that they even see of gays and lesbians in the newspapers, on TV, and in the movies is about white gays, so until they find the black gay political organizations and social groups and nightclubs and whatnot, they think they're selling out or something just for having those feelings.

I know I kind of felt that at first. And a lot of homophobic black straight people try also to make you believe that it's a white thing.

Julie was sixteen when she first realized her lesbianism and plunged into a deep depression.

There was a girl at school who was real butch, you know, very masculine and with short hair, and everyone at school would be calling her "dyke" and she would just give them the finger. I thought she was so cool. I couldn't figure out why I liked her, but I wanted to hang with her.

So I did. I became friends with her. Then, after a while, it happened—we had sex. And then I was totally crazy. Cried for days and would not talk to her or meet with her again. I just told myself that this was it—my life was finished—because I knew I couldn't be, you know, "normal"—I mean what I'd been told was "normal"—and get married and have kids, because I knew I just was not interested in having sex with a man.

Driven by self-loathing, Julie did what far too many gay men and lesbians have done at one time or another: She attempted suicide.

I took a whole bottle of my stepfather's sleeping pills. But they found me on the floor, sick, and I wound up in the hospital getting my stomach pumped. It got things out in the open, forced my mother to deal with it and get me some professional help, but it was a dumb way to do it.

After I was seeing a therapist for a while, and after my mother and stepfather talked it over with me and with the therapist, and after I found so many other lesbians who'd been going through the same stuff, things got a lot better and I felt supported. I realized that this was what I should have done from the beginning: Look for help, talk to people, read up on the subject, and not keep it all bottled up.

I would say to people going through the same thing that it's so much easier if you deal with it and look for the help yourself rather than do something drastic and dumb—like what I did.

There are so many loving people out there who want to help. And the fantasy world where there are people just like you, where people do accept you, really does exist. You just have to find it.

THE ORIGINS OF SELF-LOATHING

Self-loathing can lead you to self-destruction. Conversely, self-respect leads to self-enrichment, which is what you are striving for. Like Julie, you too may have found yourself at rock bottom. And, like Julie, you may have contemplated or attempted suicide. If you have not yet begun to battle the self-loathing that you have experienced all your life, you may still have those thoughts now.

When you are consumed by self-loathing, you experience a sense of powerlessness and hopelessness. You may feel as if you cannot live any longer unless conditions “out there” change, and yet you sense that it will be impossible to make those conditions change. What you must understand—and tell yourself over and over again—is that while you cannot change conditions “out there,” you can attack the feelings inside that are causing you to feel that way. You can fill yourself with self-respect—no matter how many people hate homosexuals, no matter who hates you for being one.

And once you are filled with self-respect, no matter how insurmountable your problems seem, you will never think about self-destruction again.

Before you successfully confront self-loathing, however, you must understand where it comes from. Self-loathing is imposed upon you by the most well-intentioned and inspirational people and institutions in your life: your family, your school, even your house of worship. This is itself difficult to accept: Who wants to believe that the people who love you most—the people who have been most important in your life—would do something bad to you? How, you ask yourself, could the people who care most about you want to make you feel so terrible that you have contemplated destroying your life? These questions are so difficult to comprehend that we dismiss them and begin to tell ourselves that *we* are the ones with the problem, that our homosexuality—which we did not choose—is what’s wrong. It is precisely at that moment that we cave in to self-loathing: *I must be really awful to make them think so of people like me. I must never let them know the truth.*

THE VICTIMS OF HOMOPHOBIA

The best way to understand how hatred becomes self-hatred is to think of homophobia as a *disease*, similar to alcoholism and drug abuse—afflictions that cause people to behave in irrational ways, even as they are often in denial about what they are doing and saying. Then it becomes easier to understand that the people we love can be homophobic. Like the people we know and love who may be alcoholics or drug abusers, they don’t mean to hurt us, but they do. They are driven by an ugly disease. We must have compassion for them and understand how familial predisposition and societal pressures have caused them to behave and think in the manner in which they do, and we should summon up the courage and patience to deal with their disease. *But we must not allow them to harm anyone, emotionally or physically, especially ourselves.*

Though we may love and care for someone who is an alcoholic, we would not allow that person to get behind the wheel of a car while intoxicated and we would certainly not let that person drive while we were in the car. Similarly, we must not allow those whom we love who happen to be homophobic to make us feel terrible about ourselves, so terrible that we

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