

“Let’s *Talk* About Homosexuality”

Part 2: Putting a Human Face on Homosexuality

Introduction

“This work [a treatise entitled ‘Love and Responsibility’] is open to every echo of experience, from whatever quarter it comes, and it is at the same time a standing appeal to all to let experience, their own experience, make itself heard, to its full extent: in all its breadth, and all its depth.”¹

...Karol Wojtyla (Pope John Paul II)

“I would emphasize that we need to listen to the experience of homosexual people, just as we need to listen to the experience of people in all other areas of human activity.”²

...Bishop Raymond Lucker

In Part 2 of “Let’s *Talk* About Homosexuality,” we ask you, instead, to *listen*.

Listen to the “lived experience” of parents of gay and lesbian children. Listen to their sons and daughters. Listen and learn what it’s like.... “For being gay is far more than being physically attracted to persons of the same gender. It is a way of being in the world.”³

Theologian Fr. Andrew Dargis states, “As our society and churches come to grips with the issue of homosexuality...[personal experience] provides a living example to consider.”⁴

Along with scripture, tradition, church teaching and expert opinion, the lived experience of individuals is part and parcel of forming the Christian conscience. Indeed, God’s revelation continues in human experience.

At the same time, as Luke Johnson cautions, this understanding of the experience of God in human lives needs amplification, lest it appear “careless, if not cavalier.” He explains:

“Nothing could be more offensive than to challenge tradition on the basis of casual or unexamined experience, as though God’s revelation were obvious or easy, or reducible to popularity polls. The call to the discernment of human experience is not a call to carelessness, but to its opposite; it is a call to the rigorous asceticism of attentiveness. I repeat: an appeal to some populist claim such as ‘everyone does it,’ or ‘surveys indicate’ is theologically meaningless. What counts is whether *God* is up to something in human lives. Discernment of experience in this sense is for the detection of good news in surprising places, not for the disguising of old sins in novel faces. Yet, it is important to assert that God does, on the record, act in surprising and unanticipated ways, and upsets human perceptions of God’s scriptural precedents.”⁵

Is God “up to something” in the human experiences we offer here?

Segment 1: Parents Talk of Their Experiences

Mary Black and her husband Jerry have a lesbian daughter. They are co-founders and leaders in a Detroit-area ministry called “Putting a Human Face on Homosexuality.” This is Mary’s story.

My daughter Meg was born in the spring on a day when the magnolia trees were in bloom. She was a beautiful baby with a very peaceful nature. She grew up like any ordinary girl in America.

She loved to go to her grandparents’ house, eat cookies, play with her toys and her friends. She was a sensitive child who seemed to worry about things that other children her age didn’t even think about. She once told me that she didn’t want to grow up because life was too hard for grownups. Her father and I were concerned when we heard this and took her to the school counselor to see if she thought there was reason for concern. The counselor told us that Meg was a well-adjusted little girl who was just sensitive and not to worry about her.

Her grade school years at St. Mary’s of Redford were not the happiest times for Meg. She wore braces on her teeth and was tall and thin and awkward. She was teased and shunned by many of her classmates and withdrew from socializing at school. She developed a sharp sense of humor, which helped her deal with her feelings of inadequacy. When it was time for her to go to high school, we all decided a change was in order and we chose Bishop Borgess High School, which was larger than St. Mary’s. She had stopped growing by the seventh grade and remained 5’7”, the braces came off and when she started high school, she was a lovely young girl with talent, a strong faith in God and wonderful sense of humor.

She blossomed in high school and went on to win many awards, including a scholarship to the Goodman School of Drama at DePaul University in Chicago. She

dated in high school and had many friends of both sexes. She had a wonderful future and we sent her off with only the normal concerns of parents in the 1980's.

Soon after she started school in Chicago, we saw changes in Meg's personality. She became withdrawn once again and her appearance changed. She lost weight, cut her hair all off and wore dark, dreary clothes she had purchased at a flea market. At first, we felt she was just having trouble with all of the emotions of being away from family and friends, and trying to find her way in a new place. Her visits home, which were few and far between, became troubling times for the whole family; we knew something was wrong with Meg, but she would not open up to any of us. For four years we worried and prayed and hoped that things would change.

After a year of no success, she returned home and stayed with us for a while to earn money to move to Los Angeles. During the time she lived at home, she seemed to be happy and well-adjusted, but there was an edge of sadness I could see that troubled me. We had many long conversations and she would always reassure me that she was fine and that she would find success and happiness soon.

She left for California at the age of 25, full of hope and promise. But almost immediately, we could detect depression in her voice and she was evasive when we asked how her career plans were going. She took odd jobs and kept to herself. She said she was too busy to come home for a visit and made excuses when we said we would come see her. We knew she was struggling with something, but she would not tell us what was wrong. We prayed for her constantly, saying novena after novena to St. Anthony, the patron of things that are lost.

In the spring of 1994, our daughter Jennifer announced her plans to marry at Thanksgiving time and Meg was to be maid of honor. When we all gathered in Ohio for the wedding, Meg still seemed to be struggling to keep up her spirits. The day after the wedding, we drove her to the airport and she gave us big bear hugs and openly cried as she got on the plane. We were all exhausted and thought she was just reacting to the emotions of the wedding. What we didn't know was that she had just mailed each member of the family a letter telling us that she was a lesbian and could no longer hide her true identity.

My world changed forever when I read her letter that fateful day. It was Friday, December 2, 1994. I felt as if I had lost both my daughters that week. It was as if Meg had died. All of my hopes and dreams had vanished in an instant and for a while I could only think about ME. What had I done wrong that made her reject my life and me? Why was she doing this to me? The silence and condemnation that surrounds homosexuality in our society meant that I had no role model of how to react to this news or how to be a good mother to a lesbian. I cried myself to sleep night after night and withdrew from family and friends. I began a long period of intense praying, asking God every day to change things.

In addition to praying, I read everything I could find on the subject and joined PFLAG [Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, a national support organization]. Somewhere along the way on my journey, I learned what my daughter had gone through on her own journey, with no one to comfort her. Like so many gay and lesbian people, she didn't know where to turn. I learned that it wasn't about me – I didn't cause this – I don't have that kind of power. I also learned a lot about love, acceptance and compassion and, hopefully, how to be a better person.

On Meg's birthday a few years ago, I was looking at our beautiful magnolia tree in the back yard and I realized that God had indeed changed things – only in a way I had never expected. I now experience joy in being the mother of a lesbian.

In his story, Meg's father Jerry tells about the help he and Mary received from the organization Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays – recommended to them by a couple in their parish who had gone through a similar experience. Listen to a part of his story as he describes their feelings when he and Mary started their journey, and where they are now.

When we received Meg's letter (telling us she had finally admitted to herself that she was a lesbian), we were totally devastated. We wept and clung to each other hoping that it was all a mistake and that she would soon come to her senses. Although we knew people who were in homosexual relationships and accepted them as friends, we had grave questions on morality. We are practicing Catholics and had been through sixteen years of Catholic schools. We had raised and educated our children in the same manner. In addition, we were terribly concerned about the welfare of Meg. We knew that she would face discrimination and were afraid for her physical and mental well-being. We also faced the loss of our dream of what her life would be like: a successful career, marriage and children. The one thing that did not change was the love we had for her and the respect we felt for her as a person....

It is now more than nine years since that first letter arrived and both my wife and I have gone through a major change in our feelings on Meg's lesbian orientation. Along the way, we passed the milestones of admitting to friends and family that Meg was a lesbian, meeting her partner, staying under the same roof with her and her partner, coming to a personal conviction that religions are wrong in their condemnation of homosexual acts within the confines of a committed relationship, and becoming an activist for gay rights in churches, schools and community. It was a change that took much reading, prayer, meditation and the help of other PFLAG members. Sometimes it seemed like we would take two steps forward and one step back. Many emotional situations arose and at times a sadness still overcomes me – but now it is at the intolerance of churches, governments, organizations and other individuals. We feel that we are now better people for the experience, as we are much more tolerant of diversity of any kind.

It can be emotionally and intellectually difficult when your lived experience is contradicted by another – even when there is no malice intended. This is especially true when that experience relates to your children. This is Leonard Szumiloski’s story. It was published in the Rochester N.Y. “Democrat & Chronicle.” The story was headlined “Enfolding Gay Son Elevates a Family.”

As a practicing Roman Catholic, I sat in my pew on “Holy Family Sunday,” the Sunday between Christmas and New Year’s Day, and heard our wonderful deacon, a most dedicated, pious and sincere man, give a homily on some of the “evils in our society which threaten family life.” Homosexuality was one of the “evils” suggested.

Ordinarily, I find great consolation, peace and fulfillment in my faith, but his comments struck me as a dagger as I listened. I tried so hard – with great frustration – to assimilate his comments into my life’s experiences.

Three days earlier, on Christmas Day, our three sons gathered from great distances at our home to celebrate the beautiful holiday of Christmas with their mother and me. How peaceful and content my wife and I were, knowing that each of our three sons was happy and at peace with himself and with the Lord: two sons with their wives, one with his two stepchildren, and our third son with his same-sex partner, committed to each other for over five years now.

Our Christmas dinner began with a grace as we all held hands around the table, each one thanking God for the gifts and full lives we have and for His love which fills and guides us.

The respect for others, the love and happiness we saw around that Christmas dinner table were such powerful spiritual forces that as I thought back to that moment I had to ask myself, “Where was the ‘threat’ to our family life around that Christmas table?”

My wife and I remembered back to the days prior to learning of our son’s orientation, knowing now how he suffered by himself in silence, afraid to tell us about himself; we remember how he became withdrawn, remote, depressed, carrying that secret all alone. *That* was a very real threat to our family life.

Once he came “out,” the relief he felt was a like a “breath of fresh air” to him as well as to us; he was finally being himself, being truly *honest*.

We also remembered five years ago when our gay son told us, “I have found someone to share my life with, someone in whom I see a reflection of God.” Those words echoed my own thoughts of many years earlier when I fell in love with his mother. Was I to say he should not feel that way because I don’t understand such a feeling toward

someone of the same sex, or tell him he is evil for these feelings of love. I was totally unable to say, “This is wrong, this is a ‘threat’ to our family life.”

Some may say this Christmas scenario presented a “threat” to our step-grandchildren, young and impressionable teenagers, sitting with us at the holiday table and sharing the love we all showed.

A threat to what? Do some think that the sexual orientation of their uncle and his partner, both of whom they love, will “rub off” on them, that they will want to replicate their uncle’s inner feelings?

Nature has already determined those youngsters’ sexual orientation, and if it is homosexual, they will walk the same road to self-discovery. But if their orientation is heterosexual, nothing they observe, hear or read will change that orientation. Sexual orientation, the way we feel, the way we *are* deep inside as part of our very being, does not “rub off”! However, what *will* “rub off” on these children – and we already have seen very strong evidence of this – are feelings of acceptance of others (especially those different from themselves) tolerance, understanding and love – rather than feelings of mistrust, prejudice, rejection and fear of those who are different, or worse – feelings of hatred. Which set of feelings is really the “threat” to family life!

How false and disastrous it would have been if our gay son had not “come out,” but instead had decided to secretly live a lie by attempting marriage with someone of the opposite gender (not because he wanted to, but because society expects it and would be more accepting of him), possibly even have children, but then deep inside hate himself for living that lie, for being a hypocrite. Wouldn’t that façade have been a much more dangerous and more far-reaching threat to total family life than his living his life honestly, accepting and being himself, loving and caring truthfully?

If my gay son were living a promiscuous life, being with many partners in uncommitted relationships, that would certainly be a “threat to family life,” no doubt about it! But is that any more of a threat than if my heterosexual sons were living promiscuous lives, being with many women in uncommitted relationships?

Then perhaps to more accurately express the spirit of our deacon’s comments would be to rephrase this statement to say: “*promiscuity* is a threat to family life.” I doubt anyone would argue with that.

We hope we have truly grown from the self-serving disbelief, anger and shock we felt at first learning of our son’s homosexuality.

Over time, this experience has taught every one of us, from grandchildren to grandparents, not just tolerance for those things we don’t quite understand in others, but compassion, love and a deeper sense of spirituality than we ever had before.

The family consisting of members in caring, sharing, unselfish loving and committed relationships is indeed the bulwark of society, the “building block” of our culture. Homosexuality certainly is *not* a threat to *this* family. Rather, it is truly an enhancement!

When your child comes out, life changes. Frequently, you do too. Randi and Phil Reitan discovered a new parental role as spokespersons for justice and leaders in the work “to make life better for all in the gay community.” A retired teacher, Randi told their story in an article she wrote for the Minneapolis Star Tribune entitled “Her gay son led journey from grief to pride.”

Three little words changed our lives: “I am gay.” Our youngest son said them to us when he was 16. We were so ignorant. We were so unaware of what it meant when he said them that we were devastated and filled with a grief that is hard to explain.

We spent the first months grieving for the dreams we had for our dear son. Phil and I shared such a wonderful marriage and family. In our ignorance, we wanted that same life for all of our children. When Jake told us he was gay, we thought he would live a life alone, without a family. That thought brought tears that didn’t want to quit.

We didn’t know where to go for advice or help. We knew where the church stood, and it was hard to even walk into a church during this time. We did seek out a clergy friend, and he told us Jake could change. He told us he knew many who had done it through therapy. So our next stop was the medical community.

The reaction there was to love Jake as he was, and if we needed help accepting him, then *we* should seek therapy. Our problem wasn’t accepting Jake. It was understanding how best to fight all the discrimination he now faced and how we, as his parents, could learn to understand homosexuality.

We read books. I spent more time in bookstores in those months than I have any other time in my life. I read book after book. Many of the books shared family stories, and that is what I needed to read. They reached out to me and gave me the hope I needed to get our life back.

But what was most extraordinary was our son, Jake. He was loving and patient with us as we searched our hearts and minds for the right path to take as a family. He led us to work to make life better for all in the gay community. We watched him start the first gay/straight alliance at his high school. We watched him talk with friends about what it meant to be gay. We watched him reach out to others who needed a kind voice.

A parent is supposed to lead a child, but our son led us. He taught us how important it was to work for change. He taught us to spend our energy and time on making life better for him by educating ourselves and others. There is a great deal of misunderstanding concerning this issue.

This has become a journey for us as parents. We have met many wonderful people on our way to fully understanding and loving our son. The gay community is remarkable. Its members are treated horribly by the church and society, yet they continue to live with grace and love. We realized we didn't really understand the word grace until we saw it in action time and time again in the lives of our new friends.

I wouldn't have missed this journey. It has given me joy beyond measure. It has given me a passion that I didn't know existed in my soul. It has given me many new friends to love.

Someone has asked me, if you could snap your fingers and make Jake straight, would you? It is a hard question to answer. The initial response would be, "Yes," because life is much easier that way. But that doesn't take into consideration the whole picture. Jake is gay. Jake always was gay and that is part of what makes Jake gifted in so many areas. I see those same gifts in many of our new friends. Jake's gayness is a part of what we have grown to love in him throughout his life. It is so much a part of Jake that we would not want to take it away.

June is Gay Pride Month. We have heard people complain about the use of the word "pride," but I am bursting with pride in my son. He lives with amazing dignity in the face of discrimination. I want to thank him for taking us on the journey of our lives. I want to thank him for teaching us what it truly means to love as Jesus loved. I want to thank him for teaching us how important it is to work for acceptance and equal rights for all. I want to thank him for the love he shows in all he does every day he walks this earth. No one has more pride in her heart than this mom for her gay son.

So as we approach the first day of June, from this mom to all the GLBT children, happy Gay Pride Month! My love to you all.

Mary Ellen Lopata and her husband Casey have a gay son. Theirs is a remarkable 20-year journey. It started not unlike most others – full of fear, confusion and questions. Over the years, however, Mary Ellen and Casey found their answers, and then devoted their talents and energy to pastoral ministry in the area of homosexuality. They are co-founders of Catholic Gay and Lesbian Family Ministry, a group that advocates for and facilitates pastoral care for Catholic gay and lesbian persons on behalf of the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester, N.Y. In 2004, they founded "Fortunate Families," a ministry working nationwide to provide resources and support for Catholic parents of LGBT children. The Lopatas have edited and authored numerous materials and have served as presenters in parishes, high schools and conferences. Here, in part, is Mary Ellen's story.

In November, 1983, my oldest son Jim (then 19) sat on our living room sofa and, with tears in his eyes, said, “Mom, I’m lonely. I’m lonely for another man.” He wasn’t referring to any man in particular at that time. His words, “I’m lonely” simply and poignantly described his personal experience of longing for companionship, partnership and love, as a gay man. It was the beginning of my education. I was learning that being gay is not about just sex, but about love, affection, caring, nurturing, support, trust, good humor...all those things that we hope are present in healthy heterosexual relationships too.

It was a long time before I appreciated the pain *he* was in as he told me, how much courage it took for him to tell me, and how much trust he had in me and in our relationship. I wish I could say I took the news well. But I was shocked and confused. I cried and cried. Born and raised in a traditional German Catholic family, nothing in my 12 years of Catholic education had prepared me for that news. There was little talk of sex when I was growing up and I don’t recall that I ever heard or even read the word “homosexual” before I was married and had children. I certainly was not aware of ever having actually met or talked to someone who was gay. All I had were what psychologist Mary Borhek calls, “unconscious assumptions” about homosexuality – all of them negative. But Jim was the first gay person I ever actually knew and just by being himself, he challenged all the stereotypes of gay people that I had picked up along the way.

The only thing I knew for sure was that I loved my son. Everything else was confusion. Why did this happen? How did it happen? Am I to blame? What does it mean ...for Jim...for his family? Is this a sin? What about Church? How can we ever tell our friends? What, if anything, should I do now? And what about AIDS? Each question raised more.

I prayed, “God, please help me understand!” Understanding didn’t come quickly, but I found comfort in knowing God loved my child.

I looked for information and support. Twenty years ago, there was little information on homosexuality available and even less that addressed homosexuality and the church.

Jim had confided in one of our parish priests and told me I could talk to Father Tom. Days later – still crying – I called him and simply said, “Jim told me.” Father’s response was quite pastoral, but what I remember most was his trying to comfort me by saying that at least Jim didn’t have a terminal illness. This was true, and for that I was grateful. I knew Father was just trying to put my worries into a clearer perspective. But he really didn’t understand what I was grappling with. I needed to talk to someone who understood...who had lived through the grieving, the fears, the emotional and mental upheaval and had come out on the other side of those emotions whole and healthy.

Finding that kind of person was virtually impossible, especially given my reluctance to even say the words “homosexual” or “gay.” If Jim was the only gay person

I knew, it followed that I surely didn't know the parents of any gay person. Or maybe I did, but since nobody was about to tell me that had a gay child, there was no way to know. This self-imposed isolation just continues the cycle of unhealthy secrecy.

I satisfied my need for information by stealing books from the public library – afraid someone would wonder why I was interested in such books. I did return the books, but before I did, I learned many helpful things....

It took a long time for me to overcome my fears. It was three years before I had the courage to tell my best friend, nine years before we told our entire extended family and a total of ten years before we were completely comfortable talking about the joys of having a gay son and the sadness, anger and frustration that comes from the attitudes of society and our Church toward our gay sons and lesbian daughters.

How different things would have been if *Always Our Children*, the 1997 U.S. Bishop's Pastoral Letter to Parents of Homosexual Children had been available to us in 1983. The Bishops describe *Always Our Children* as "an outstretched hand...to parents and other family members, offering them a fresh look at the grace present in family life and unfailing mercy of Christ Our Lord...." As one reads of the emotions parents feel when they learn their child is gay, it is clear that someone in the institutional church is finally listening to the lived experience of these parents and heard their pain and struggle and their love. The document begins by admitting that church teaching on homosexuality may be a source of confusion and conflict and goes on to list emotions parents may experience: relief, anger, mourning, fear, guilt, shame and loneliness and, lastly, parental protectiveness and pride. Virtually all of these emotions were cited on a survey of 220 Catholic parents of lesbian daughters and gay sons, which I conducted in 1998. The survey results showed parents experience these emotions: *fear* (78%), *confusion* (56%), *grief/mourning* (49%), *acceptance* (43%), *guilt* (39%), *loneliness/isolation* (34%), *anger* (27%), *shame* (25%) and *relief* (13%)....

The majority of parents experience fear and grief. They fear their child will be rejected, harassed, discriminated against, beat-up, perhaps even killed. They also fear that they themselves will be rejected by friends, family and the church...that people will "blame" them, when in fact, they have done nothing wrong and there is nothing wrong with their child....

Parents need acknowledgement and affirmation from their Church when they initially learn a child is gay. But the crucial role of faith and the critical need for support from the faith community do not diminish, and often increase, with time. Many parents draw strength from their faith and the sacraments even while their Church, their parish, ignores, dismisses or denies their need

Some Vatican documents can be confusing, even hurtful and parents may have great difficulty distinguishing between the philosophical and psychological meanings of words like "disordered." They may long for more compassionate and pastorally sensitive proclamations from Rome, but what they want and need most is the support of their local

Church, their diocese , their parish, the faith community that is (or should be) the loving hand and heart of Christ in their day-to-day lives....

The whole faith community needs to understand, to affirm, to support and to welcome because there are children in every parish, like Mike, who is gay, but doesn't know it yet, and Mary, who is lesbian, but doesn't know it yet. If Mike's mom and dad and Mary's mom and dad have experienced a supportive Christian community and have access to resources when they suspect their child might be homosexual, or when they actually hear those words, "Mom, Dad, I'm gay," or "Mom, Dad, I'm lesbian," they will be able to reach out to their child in love, knowing that they are not alone, that God's all-embracing love is there to draw on and is made manifest in the support of their faith community. And they will know that theirs is a fortunate family with a child "gifted and called for a purpose in God's design," in whom "God's love is revealed."

In other stories that have been told, there are differences, of course. But there is so much that is universal. The few stories told above are accurately representative of so many others – including the millions of untold stories. The storytellers above have simply decided it was time to “break the silence.”

In the next segment of Part 2, we will listen to a few gay and lesbian persons tell their stories. What is it like for them?

Notes _____ \

Part 2: Putting a Human Face on Homosexuality

¹ Karol Wojtyla. *Love and Responsibility*, trans. H.T. Willetts (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Girous, 1981; 1st Polish edition 1960) 10.

² Raymond Lucker. *Insights from Bishop Lucker*, transcript, April 18, 2001 presentation, Guardian Angels Parish, Lake Elmo, MN.

³ Andrew Mattison, Ph.D. David McWhirter, M.D., forward to Brian McNaught's *On Being Gay: Thoughts on Family, Faith and Love*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1988) xiv.

⁴ Anthony Dargis, associate professor of Theology, Assumption College. Quoted in *No Longer Behind the Mask*, the story of major league umpire Dave Pallone, forced out of baseball because of his sexual orientation.

⁵ Luke Timothy Johnson. *Disputed Questions: Debate and Discernment, Scripture and the Spirit*. "Commonweal," January 28, 1994.