



Coming Out

by Beth Reis

WHY do people come out as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender or intersex (LGBTI)?

Some people don't have any choice. Somehow they've been recognizable as LGBTI since they were infants. Their most natural, honest gender expression differed enough from their culture's stereotypes that they were "out" before they knew themselves.

But other gay, lesbian, bi, intersex (and some trans) people are not particularly different from heterosexual non-transfolk in their gender expression or, at least, they fall somewhere within an acceptable range of "normal" gender roles for their culture at their time in history. And they may *decide* to come out. Why? For all kinds of reasons:

- Because it feels phony to pretend to be someone you're not and nobody can get really close to you when you're pretending.
- Because you can't tell whether the people who love you are just loving your mask or the real person behind it. So it's lonely.
- Because it isn't fair that other people can have boyfriends or girlfriends and you can't or that other people can walk and talk and sit the way they like while you may have to watch every move you make.
- Because watching every move you make can be exhausting; it can sap emotional energy that could otherwise go into being a better student or better at your job.
- Because you may feel as if you're betraying your people by not standing with someone who's harassed or discriminated against for being lesbian, gay, bi or trans.
- Because it may mean preventing yourself from hanging out with people who have this important thing in common with you, if you're worried that people will see you with them.
- Because the opposite of coming out is actively hiding, an act of fear or shame. And at some point, as your fear and shame diminish and your confidence and self-respect grow with maturity, it just makes sense to stop hiding.
- Because your health care providers and counselors can provide you the best of care when they know your whole biological, emotional, social self.
- Because, as the Human Rights Campaign says, it's "a powerful thing you can do" for the movement. Public opinion polls indicate that people who realize that they know someone LGBTI are more likely to support laws and policies of equality. You can correct people's stereotypes, assuage their fears and open their hearts.
- Because it's a powerful thing you can do in support of those who aren't ready to be open yet, letting yourself be a role model, demonstrating that there are healthy, happy, "normal" LGBTI people in the world ... even people of your particular race, age, disabilities, etc.
- Because nobody should have to pretend to be someone else in order to get an education, hold a job, get respectful health care, or be loved by their family.

BUT know that it is also OK to work for human rights in quieter ways if it isn't *safe* to be "out" at this point in your life or in your particular home or work environment. So if your school is a dangerous place, if you are pretty sure your family would kick you out or beat you up, if you can't afford the emotional or practical costs of coming out right now, know that you are entitled to walk the journey at your own pace. Nobody else gets to decide *for* you when the costs of silence outweigh the risks of openness. Don't let people guilt-trip you into taking steps you aren't ready for. Someday you will find peace in bringing your whole self to work or school and especially sharing your honest, unmasked self with the people who love you. Until then, know that your life is still a gift to the world. And there are still actions you can take to end homophobia!

NOBODY SHOULD ALLOW SOMEONE ELSE'S enthusiasm about human rights activism to pressure them into coming out before they're ready. We're each on our own personal journey!!



WHY do people come out as heterosexual allies (or as children or other family members or friends) of LGBT people?

- Because sometimes allies have more clout than members of a targeted group in moving people's hearts. They aren't perceived as "having an ax to grind."
- Because they can; they have heterosexual privilege. It may be safer for them to do this work than it might be for an LGBT person.
- Because it just seems unfair to them that *they* can hold hands with their girlfriend in public, or put their husband's picture on their desk at work, or join the military and live on base with their family, or get married, but their sister or dad or whomever they care about who's LGBT can't do the same.

ACTIVITIES teachers and GSAs might consider:

- Host a "coming out" assembly where you bring half a dozen diverse LGBT alumni of your school to speak to the student body.
- Create a "coming out" bulletin board featuring LGBTIQ staff, alumni and other heroes and role models.
- Write a "coming out" article for your school paper, co-authored by everyone who is willing in your gay-straight alliance, not necessarily outing any of you in particular, but explaining why secrecy can be so self-destructive to the soul.
- Interview an African-American elder who once had to "pass" as white to get a job or marry the person they loved. Ask about what secrecy was like for him or her.
- Interview someone who has intentionally lost their accent and changed their name to sound more Euro-American and hide their ethnicity. Ask about what secrecy was like for him or her.
- Interview a gay, lesbian, bi or trans elder about times in their lives when they "passed" as heterosexual to get or keep a job or for other reasons. Ask about what secrecy was like.

Consider celebrations that would empower people to come out:

- as gay, lesbian, bi, trans, queer or however they describe themselves ...
- or as the proud child of GLB or T parent(s) or the proud sibling or niece or nephew or grandchild of someone LGBTI or Q ...
- or as the proud parent or step-parent or grandparent or foster parent of someone LGBTI or Q ...
- or as a proud straight ally and advocate for the human rights of GLBTIQ folks ...
- or as a safe adult who respects and admires and will protect youths of all sexual orientations and gender identities!