

Stepping Outside My Norm

A few months ago, I was talking with a very good friend of mine on the telephone. This friend has been on quite the journey of “finding herself.” She has spent most of her sexual life as bisexual, and had been struggling with “which way she wanted to go” (her words). As her friend, I was there as supporter and comforter. I saw up close a struggle that most people will never know in their lifetime. She is now a proud lesbian, and is happily living with her girlfriend. But that day on the phone, she revealed to me some of the ways in which her “new” way of life had been difficult. She explained how people on the streets looked at them differently if they showed any affection toward one another. They do not hold hands in public, touch or even look at each other in a way that might provoke negative attention from others. In having heard her sadness through her words, I decided to see for myself how she must feel every single day of her life.

I asked a different friend – a heterosexual friend – to be my assistant. I told her about the assignment and what I wanted to do. She agreed with enthusiasm, eager as I was to see what was going to happen. On Saturday, we went to the mall at ‘peak’ hours (from 1:00 to 3:00). I suspected that there would be a mixed crowd of people: older adults, families, and younger peer groups (10-14 years old). For two hours, we walked through the mall holding hands; we went in and out of stores talking like we normally do – our regular conversations. We just acted as if we were ‘together’. We did not act inappropriate at all; we just held hands and laughed together.

Based on what my lesbian friend explained to me, I expected much the same reaction – maybe a little worse. She lives in Austin, TX – so there is quite a difference in our ‘contexts’. It is much more liberal there, and I anticipated that our ‘public display’ would disrupt the more conservative order here. I hoped to learn how she might have felt; I wanted to put myself into

her shoes for just a few hours, because her I really felt how much she was hurting that day on the phone. I hoped to learn how strong she had to have been, and how proud she must be now based on what she's gone through. I realized that my 'being lesbian' for a few hours would be nothing compared to what she has endured for how long she has endured it. But I wanted to be able to tell her "I understand" the next time she confided in me her joys or pains of being a lesbian.

I learned that being a lesbian is not easy. I was only a lesbian for two hours, and it was quite an eye-opening experience. We received different responses from different age groups and different crowds. The older adults (probably 50+ years) acted as if they were being disrespected by our lifestyle. They looked at us – but not too much – I suspect because they did not want us to look at them. It was like they literally “turned their noses up” at us as we passed by. There was not really any difference between the older men's and women's responses – they both expressed disapproval. Another group of people that showed dislike were the “mothers”. Mothers with small children especially, shot hot glances at my friend and I; we both noticed that the moms did not want their children to see us – they tried to stand in front to block the kids' views. But it was not necessarily in a 'hateful' manner; they did not say anything negative or give us “go-to-hell” looks. They simply did not want to be around us, and they definitely did not want their children to be around us either. The younger peer group (10-14 years) did not really respond. They more or less ignored us; they were too involved in 'flirting' with their friends. And for a while, there were quite a few college-age people there (I guess it was the 'Saturday' rush?). The college-age women seemed pretty indifferent; they noticed that we held hands (apparent by their “double takes”), but did not react negatively. Maybe a few of the women acted a little pretentious towards us; but, for the most part they didn't seem to care. The college-age men paid more attention to us than anyone else. They looked once, and then upon realizing that they had seen

two “lesbians” they looked again. Some of them actually stared, and did not seem to care if we noticed that they were staring. In other words, they were pretty open in showing their interest in our behaviors.

I admit I was a little ‘anxious’ about doing this in such a public place. I was looking around a lot, checking to see if anyone I knew was there to see us. That was challenging, because I usually don’t care what others think of me. I am very proud of who I am and what I know about me and my world; so it was a little upsetting to know that doing something like that *actually bothered me a little*. I didn’t expect it – I didn’t expect to be embarrassed.

During this experience, I gained some insight into what my good friend deals with daily. Every day, she is probably looked down upon, scorned, oppressed, scrutinized – you name it. Even though she does live in a place that is (probably-I assume) more accepting of lesbianism, I am sure she endures some form of negative attitudes and behaviors on a daily basis. When I reflect upon our conversation that day on the phone, I think differently about how she described her feelings. I can say that I “see” how she feels; it was not the most comfortable feeling for me, but it was something that I’m glad I did. This experience also made me more personable to all lesbians, not just my friend. I think now I am able to relate – even though only slightly – to their lives and the difficulties in the process of living them. I hope that in the future I will keep this in mind, so that I may be even more considerate and supportive of women loving women.