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Coming Out to My Homophobia and Heterosexism

Lessons Learned in the Journey of an Ally

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The alarm had been ringing for 10 minutes. It was clear that my daughter was not waking up for school. I bounded up the stairs to try and rouse her. As she smiled in her sleep, I said, “Maybe one day you will have a girlfriend or boyfriend who wakes you up in the morning when you need help getting up.” She smiled again and rolled over.

I noticed the comfortableness of this remark. It didn’t matter to me whether her lover was male or female. How did this come about? My personal commitment to address homophobia and heterosexism in myself, others, and society has evolved as a result of specific lessons learned and reinforced over time in my personal and professional life. This narrative reviews eight of these lessons and draws implications from them for the counseling profession.

The first and most important learning is that I am guilty of engaging in homophobic thoughts and actions even when I may not be aware of them or their effects. I have often been an unintentional perpetrator by expressing misinformation and stereotypes about other groups without understanding their significance or potential to hurt. Accepting that I am unintentionally homophobic has allowed me to be more compassionate with myself when I make mistakes or express prejudices and to also be

more open to feedback that will help me correct them. I have benefited tremendously by having friends and allies from other groups who can point these out. A recent family event provided a reminder when a neighbor and childhood friend related that her first exposure as a young girl to derogatory language about lesbians came from me. When I am open to stories like this one, I hear more of my own mistakes from family, friends, and colleagues. I have thus accepted that I am unintentionally homophobic and heterosexist and learned to welcome these revelations as an important part of my journey.

As a child, I don't remember hearing overt prejudices toward gay and lesbian people. My memories of gay men are limited to stories about child molesters in the newspapers and quiet gossip among adults who wondered about the sexual orientation of the only male teacher in my elementary school. Added to this were the normal adolescent put-downs of teenage boys, who kept each other in line with homophobic remarks that kept me silent despite my discomfort. And although I was never comfortable with the many of the roles I was assigned as a male, I never really thought about issues of sexual orientation and didn't know any gay or lesbian individuals.

My second lesson relates to how I manage my personal discomfort with lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) issues, both inside myself and in situations around me. For example, I love to dance, and in college I sought opportunities to go out dancing. The campus "Gay and Lesbian Liberation Front" hosted the best parties, but I was nervous about attending. I eventually found the courage to go by bringing a female date. Having a heterosexual woman with me was a form of protection that allowed me to feel safe and have fun. Now, much later in life, I often ask male friends to dance and am more comfortable accepting and receiving affection from men. Thus, I have learned to use situations that feel uncomfortable as growth opportunities and actively seek ways to resolve my discomfort by not avoiding them.

Another example of transformed discomfort came later in college, when I was visiting a girlfriend in the city. When I walked outside on the street, I occasionally received smiles and looks from men who were checking me out. At first, I was uncomfortable, but then I realized that I was being complimented. Eventually, I decided that a compliment about my appearance was a compliment independent of the sex of the person making it, and I became comfortable accepting them.

Another way I often experience discomfort is with the homophobic words and actions of others. My awareness of my own homophobia has allowed me to be more open and observant of the prejudices I encounter in others. I can be more compassionate of others' mistakes because I have made them myself. This allows me to be thoughtful and intentional in developing strategies to intervene in the behavior of others.

A third lesson is that my own growth and liberation as a straight man is tied to the liberation and growth of gay men. Recently, a gay friend asked me to explain my commitment to being an ally. I normally answer this question by affirming my desire for justice and fair treatment for all. But somehow his question pushed me deeper, and I realized that I was doing it for myself. To be fully human and healthy as a man, I have to be able to love other men and express my feelings toward them freely. I need to hug men, hold hands with my close friends, and be emotionally connected, and yet I still consider myself to be straight. When my friend made this comment, I saw how the homophobia that he experienced as a gay man was also limiting for me as a straight man and that our liberations were intertwined as men. In a unique sense, confronting homophobia is a form of being an ally to myself.

My first job was as a counseling psychologist at a college where I provided therapy and supervised resident advisor (RA) hiring and training. At that time in my life, I saw myself as completely accepting of gays and lesbians. One of my first clients was a gay man who was struggling with the process of coming out on campus. I thought I was very tolerant and understanding of his dilemmas and pain, in the neutral and nonjudgmental way I had been taught. Thus, I was very surprised to receive feedback from a colleague who knew that this young man had doubts about my support and acceptance of his sexual orientation. I was counseled to be more open and clear about my acceptance and more outspoken as a therapist about myself as an ally. I realized that my clinical tolerance and neutrality left this client confused about my feelings and triggered his internalized homophobia. If I wanted to be a good therapist and provide a healing environment, I had to be active and clear about my position and commitment to being an ally. This experience led to my fourth lesson: that being an ally is an active and conscious process in which I must take responsibility for demonstrating and acting on my convictions, in the therapy hour, with friends and family, and in professional circles.

A fifth way in which I have learned to be an ally is to create opportunities for LGB individuals to tell their own stories. For example, during RA training I brought members of the local LGB Alliance to speak to RAs. Hearing the stories and experiences of others has been another important lesson in my journey. As an ally, it is my responsibility to use my privilege and access to resources to create these opportunities. In doing so, I also acquire new information that allows me to further my own growth.

A sixth lesson has been to understand my privilege as a straight White person. For example, when I am outspoken in meetings and at conferences, colleagues from oppressed groups often make comments such as, "I'm glad that you said that, because when I say that, no one listens." As a result of these comments, I became aware that I had a voice as a straight White male that others did not have. Similarly, as I learn from others about

their experiences of oppression, it has been clear to me that I am not subject to the same mistreatment. I have struggled with how to act on this awareness. These realizations have helped me be more conscious of my personal power, earned and unearned, and how I use it in personal and professional situations. Knowledge of my everyday unearned privilege has enabled me to be a more forceful and active agent of change, and I try to act on this understanding in a number of ways. First, I continually remind myself that I may not understand or be able to speak for the experiences of others, and I actively try to listen and see myself as a learner. I have also learned to use the opportunities provided by my privilege to undermine it. For example, when conducting trainings and giving lectures, I strive to be very inclusive and create opportunities for comments and input from groups that are traditionally denied voice.

Recently, I became aware of my privilege as a heterosexual and of my unconscious heterosexism. I felt that I was actively affirmative of LGB issues. But I noticed that I made many assumptions that were based on unacknowledged heterosexual privilege. For example, I didn't ask LGB friends whether they planned to have families. Now that I do, I hear many beautiful stories about friends' desires to share their lives with children. This has generated a new awareness of my privilege and increased my commitment to using more inclusive language and actions.

My activism on behalf of others led me to notice a contradiction. While I was outspoken on behalf of other groups, I was closeted as a Jewish person. Rather than claiming my identity, I was leaving it as unspoken and unacknowledged. I could affirm and embrace the traditions of others but did not disclose or share my own. Through some powerful experiential workshop experiences, I discovered previously unconscious fears of being out as a Jew. One of the personal directions that I have taken as a result is to present and affirm my Jewishness. This encounter with my own fears and internalized oppression has been crucial in allowing me to become a stronger ally and advocate around issues of oppression because it has helped me to understand how internalized oppression works. Thus, the need for personal healing and awareness of the hurts we have experienced within our individual identities is my seventh important lesson.

My final lesson is the understanding that the experience of oppression can foster psychological and spiritual strength. A lesbian colleague I knew and her partner had adopted many difficult-to-place children. I was very accepting and supportive of their family and considered them to be perfectly suitable parents. Much later, I realized that as lesbians who had learned healthy ways of coping with a marginal identity, they were actually better as parents of hard-to-adopt, marginalized children than I would have been as a straight person with dominant identities. This realization took me beyond tolerance and acceptance to appreciate the unique gifts and wisdom that come from living on the margin. I now actively strive in my personal

and clinical relationships to identify and affirm the skills and resiliencies that can come from living with mistreatment, as a way of supporting my clients' growth and also a way of learning for myself.

These eight lessons share a common theme: that being an ally is a life issue and not just a professional issue. The important experiences that empower us professionally are often life experiences outside of our professional identities. We must seek out these life-changing experiences and provide the same for our students and clients. We can create friendships, therapy, and learning environments where others can give us feedback about our unconscious prejudices, where personal discomfort can be used as a growth edge, and where LGB individuals can speak about their own experiences. To be an active ally requires a commitment to using inclusive language, learning, and teaching skills to interrupt homophobic behavior and taking personal responsibility for contradicting heterosexual privilege. Finally, we must create opportunities to do our own work and healing in the identities where we have been hurt; in my case, growing up with less resources than my peers, as Jewish, and as a man uncomfortable with how I was taught to be male.

Internalizing the commitment to be an ally is thus a lifelong learning and healing process that must be actualized in word, thought, and deed. As counseling professionals, we can accept this challenge with the understanding that our personal fate and well-being is intertwined with the fate and well-being of others. The opportunity to contribute to this book has helped me to deepen my understanding and awareness of these issues.

