

## “Feeling Comfortable In My Skin”

Rev. Annie Holmes

One thing that has become very real for me, maybe more than anything else in my life, and that is what Marshall McLuen meant when he wrote, “The medium is the message.” I understand that he was talking about the electronic media, but it has proved to be a truth in helping me make sense of what happens every time I tell someone, in the fullest sense, who I am. It doesn't seem to matter who they thought I was before, like - my accomplishments, my hobbies, my children, even my personality, no that one revelation of who I am in the fullest sense, becomes the overriding message. The medium of my life often becomes the one and only one message, the message that I am gay, period. I have discovered, much to my dismay, that I and my life's work, for some people has no other message than the fact that - I am gay.

As children, when we begin to grow and mature, we know there will be some decisions that we will have to make about our lives. We know at a pretty young age that we will have a chance to choose what we would like to do with our lives. We know that we will choose who it is we are to marry. We learn the freedom of picking our schools and our areas of interest. No one of us ever feels we may have to one day choose between who we are intrinsically, at our deepest cores, and let's say keeping our jobs, or to be loved and accepted in our church or to feel that our families will always be loving and supportive places for us to live. And yet, although the evidence seems to point to the fact that gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgendered people are born with these predisposition, the fact remains, each of us faced with who we are as gay and a minority, have to make those other, harder decisions as well.

I am grateful that there is a National Coming Out Day, which is celebrated in October, because each year I am dared to do something that I otherwise maybe would not do, share the journey that I have traveled to finally feeling comfortable in my skin. In some church settings I have been accused of bringing up the gay issue more than is appropriate. What I have come to realize is that even if I don't say the words gay/lesbian etc. just my standing here in the pulpit for some people is the message. I am the medium for the gay message. My straight ministerial colleagues tell me they preach three or four times a year on the gay issue and I may do one, once and am accused of throwing the issue in people's faces. Well, let it be known, that today there will be no dispute, indeed I am speaking on the gay issue and to plead with all of you to allow the message of my life, and all who are gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgendered, that their lives be more than the one medium of the gay issue.

At the age of sixteen I knew I was different. There were no words then for what I was terrified to say I was. There was only this fear and that awful knowing that I was not comfortable with the person in the mirror, or comfortable in my skin. Because I was attending a convent boarding school from the age of 13 until I was 21, there were not the pressures of dating. But I felt pressures, other pressures, I was afraid to understand. For a long time, this world was a very scary place for me. I hid deep within myself, afraid if anyone got too close they might see, they might find out who I really was; a terrible sinner, ugly in the sight of God and one who would surely burn in hell forever.

After I left the convent at the age of 21, I married the first nice man to come along who seemed to care for me. I thought on the day of my wedding, I was ready to do anything to make myself worthy in the eyes of God and my family. I felt there was no one to talk to, no one who I thought would understand this awful sin and pain that was a part of me. And I also learned, at a very young age, there was nowhere to run from myself. I secretly prayed that marriage day, that marriage and children would cure me. I whispered, "Let this help me be like everyone else."

But guess what, marriage didn't help, most of those seventeen years I felt like a hypocrite. I was more uncomfortable than ever. With the fear of going to hell for my sins keeping me at arm's length from revealing who I was, I began to feel rage, rage because I had never been allowed or given myself permission to feel who I was, by loving the way I was meant to love.

I am a woman who is lesbian, who when I was 38 years old, after years of fear, pain, rejection, confusion and dying to one way of life, was reborn to another and in that rebirth finally found a way for me to love that woman in the mirror and a way to feel comfortable in my skin. You see, there is a need for those of us who are gay/lesbian/bisexual/transgender to come and share who we are. I soon realized that it was only because of other brave people who took the time to share with me their lives, that I found the courage and the strength to face all I have faced in the last years. This has been one of my deepest revelations, that gay people cannot change the attitudes in the world by themselves. We as gay people need allies, we need you who are straight, and we certainly need institutions like this UU church.

Being gay in our society is often very difficult. I stayed in my marriage years longer than I should have because of the fear of rejection by my family, the fear of possibly losing custody of my children. My Mother did hire a lawyer to have my children removed from ever seeing me, but my ex-husband would not go along with it. After I drove home and came out to my parents, my Mother and I did not speak for a period of 4 years. At

that initial meeting my Mother said she sincerely wished I been hit by a car and died rather than to have knowingly entered into this life of a mortal sin. She didn't mind my becoming a UU so much, and my Father could face the lesbian side, he was upset by my joining this cult, this ungodly church. Go figure. I knew they were not evil people who wanted to hurt me; they were rather people who decided to believe in their fears rather than believe in their daughter.

You know, I just didn't blurt out to the world that I was gay. I first told everyone I was going to be a vegetarian, and then waited for their response. The response to that was not so bad, so I decided then I would move to the next step. But surprisingly, what I realized that year was that my own inner homophobia was my own worst enemy to my coming out of the closet.

The Lutheran church told me they would not ordain me as an openly lesbian woman. My Mother told me not to come home anymore. My daughter opted to live with her Father full time, because my living with another woman was too hard for her to accept. How could it have been different for her, where are the models for kids for this kind of home? My brothers and sisters were mixed in their reactions, some accepted me and some had a harder time. All of a sudden, I would assume because of the stereotypes, I was a stranger everywhere to everyone who had been my rock, my support, my identity, my foundation.

So, in the space of a month, when I began to come out of the closet, I had lost my career, my income, my nuclear family, my daughter and yet it was some of the happiest years of my life! Go figure.

I can't really explain it, except, I was at peace with myself for the first time in my life. I slept soundly, I cried often. My counselor told me that the cup of life that holds our sorrows and joys was filled to overflowing with past sorrows. All the crying was emptying that cup so that joy could enter my life once again. And it was joyful, joy I had never believed could be mine, joy I had never known before. After all the years of denial and game playing, serious depression and feelings of utter hopelessness, I found myself and liked who I was.

It was virtually impossible for me to give myself the kind of permission needed to make this kind of leap of faith in myself. The permission, the strength, the courage to say, I must confirm the person who I was or die, came from a few people around me who loved me and supported me and helped be brave enough to make the person you see in front of you today come alive. That is why your responses to people who either feel you out to see how accepting you are toward gay people or those who come to

you and do come out, your responses of positive affirmation and love are often life-giving vital feedback.

Another lesson I learned, was that the threat of repercussions on my person, my children, my career, from those in our world who are homophobic paled in comparison to the gift of myself being given to me as I finally accepted who I was. No threat of recriminations from society, the courts, the church or family were as dreadful as the hell I lived in, trying to be someone else. The dragons that held me and bound me and gagged me in this seemingly impossible situation were not as fierce in reality as they seemed to be in my mind, while I was gagged, bound and terrified by my own homophobia.

Part of my homophobia, as a Christian, was how the Bible was so often used against me. The Bible is so often used to condemn those of us who are gay. And today I would like to clear up some of the misunderstandings. There are several passages in the Bible that definitely refer to homosexuality; two are in the Hebrew Bible and three in the New Testament. The first passage is in Genesis, used most frequently as the first and primary example of how God feels about gays. God destroys the cities of Sodom and Gomorra, and as it is taught by most Christian churches, he did so because the men of those cities there were homosexuals.. Right? Wrong. As the angels who were being protected by Lot were being called out into the square to be raped, the rapes were done rather in the form of a common ancient practice for an army or other group to rape its male prisoners as a sign of victory and humiliation. Bible scholars now believe that what is going on in this story, in actuality, is that these cities were destroyed for the sin of inhospitality.

In Leviticus it says it is an abomination for a man to lie with a man as with a woman. But, in the next passage there are other abominations listed; do not eat lobster, oysters, or eat meat with blood in it, or wear clothes that are made of 2 different kinds of yarn, or plant fields with 2 different kinds of seeds, or be tattooed, or have sex with a woman during her period. All of these are equal in their power to be abominations and yet these are not often mentioned. Why single out homosexuality as an abomination and say the others don't apply because we have changed so much in our society. I see a prejudice here, a using the Bible to condemn some certain people. In addition, it was also believed in the ancient Hebrew world that a male's sperm held a fully formed human being. The woman was only the receptacle for this fully formed person. Men having sex with men would kill all those potential human beings.

The letters of Paul are also used to condemn. It is believed by Bible scholars that what is condemned in Paul's letters are the ancient Pagan rituals where same sex couples made love in the temple in order to assure

good crops each year. Paul is railing in these passages against new Christians going back to Pagan practices, not condemning a homosexuality life style. In other passages Paul is speaking to married men who used sex with young boys as a perversion, a diversion in their lives. He warns that those perversions are a sin and that these practices spread venereal disease. Paul here is speaking against pedophiles. In Paul's mind homosexual acts equaled Pagan idolatry and perversion in Paul's eyes.

Now I would like to tell you everything Jesus said about gays....

James Nelson, a Roman Catholic wrote a theological study of sexuality in the 1980's that turned the Catholic church's thoughts on homosexuality upside down. In it he states there could be four responses the religious world could offer those in the world who are gay.

1. There is the **rejecting punitive** stance of which many individuals and churches take.
2. There could be the **rejecting non-punitive** stance, a negative but non-punishing position
3. There is **qualified acceptance** where most of society and many UU churches fall, and lastly, I hope to live long enough to see the day when there is,
4. **Full acceptance.** Nelson challenges his readers that they must look now at specific moral traditions in light of new empirical knowledge, new experience and God's on-going revelation. His book, Embodiment opened the way for many Christian churches to reevaluate their stand on this issue and allowed the United Church of Christ along with our own national office, the UUA in 1984 to establish the first church office in their national headquarters of gay /lesbian/ bisexual/ transgendered concerns, and ordain its first openly gay minister.

I, like thousands like me, live with terrible fear and hate everyday of our lives. So many things the straight world takes for granted we have to be crafty, sneaky or just plain lie about. Think about the anxiety of checking into a hotel as a same sex couple and asking for one bed. There is a tension we have learned to live with within our lives, like the potential for harassment of buying matching rings, introducing your partner of many years at a party or a gathering, or at work as your...what, your roommate, your FRIEND.

How many of you married for more than a year would introduce your spouse as your roommate, or your friend? What about the uptightness many couples speak of when applying for a joint checking account, and wills and joint ownership of land and the rearing of children with two Moms or two Dads. I had the experience of a woman whose partner was in a car accident and this woman was not allowed into the room to see

her partner, nor was she considered family as the Dr. gave vital information to the family about her partner's care. She told me next time anything like that happens, she will simply lie and say that they are sisters.

As gay people we must judge every person and every situation for assurances and safety. Having people ask about your family is often troubling, and many simply change the subject and then hurt inside because homophobia made them ashamed of those people they love the most. We are fearful of holding hands in the Mall or hugging in front of an open window. We are careful even at displays of affection at the movies. Take all these tiny pieces of injustice and discrimination and you can see why most gay and lesbian couples never celebrate their second anniversary. You can see why people think they may come out one year and marry the next. You can see why drugs and alcohol, abuse and depression often claim the lives of people who always feel uncomfortable in their skins. And Pat Robertson says we want special rights, no - how about equal rights!!! And sadly you can see why the suicide rate among gay teens is among the highest of any group in the United States.

All gay people are not brave, or militant or even strong. Yet every time we come out of the homophobia closet and share who we are, we make a potentially political statement. Every time we risk who we are in the world, we take the chance that the medium of who we are will be the only message people hear or see. I consider myself one of the lucky ones. I have my children's love, respect and support. I have a fair working relationship with my ex-husband. I have a career where I can stand up here and say "I'm lesbian" and not be fired for it. But sometimes being lucky seems like a weak prize in exchange for all we give up. I know of no gay person who wants pity. We want acceptance, respect, love and the same dignity as people or couples afforded to straight people.

There is still much work to do in our UU congregations. A fellow minister of mine was forced to leave her church because she came out as a lesbian after she had been called by the congregation. They told her they had not called a lesbian minister. I belonged to a congregation in Illinois who after going through the Welcoming Congregation curriculum, voted no - they would not be open to gays and there we were members of the church sitting in the pews, tears in our eyes. The gays and lesbians of that congregation resigned their membership that day. I was told by one Search committee of a UU church that although they thought I would be good for their church they had enough problems to deal with, my being lesbian was a "problem" they did not want to take on.

Yet even within this crazy world I live in, I am at peace, I am at home in my soul, in my skin. But there are so many looking for sanctuary, looking

for a place where they will be allowed to be themselves. We as UUs need to be vigilant about creating those safe places in our churches and then being proactive about announcing the church as a safe place to be one's self.

My guess is you have gay coworkers who would love to share their lives with you. Statistics tell us you have gay neighbors who are terrified of you because you may find out who they are. You may have gay family members who might rather take an overdose than risk your rejection. How can we interweave them into the pattern of a normal life and the life of this church?

For many reasons, many in our society hide who they truly are from others in order that they not be hurt. Since the Sept. 11<sup>th</sup> attacks many people from the Middle East have been killed and harassed in this country simply because they either look like they are, or they truly are from the Middle East. Many gay people have spent a lifetime perfecting this hiding skill. I'm asking today that you get angry at this situation. Be people who know the symbols of the gay world, like the rainbow flag, the upside down pink triangle adopted because that was the symbol that the Nazis' demanded those who were gay in Germany wear to identify them. You don't have to be gay to know the symbols or display them. In a high school in New York, most of the girls came to school one day wearing Middle Eastern head covering to show their solidarity with their Muslim and Middle Eastern friends. I urge you to do the same. If the ending of hate crimes against gays or those of Middle Eastern descent depends only on those of us who are gay or of that heritage then we are lost. It is only when each of us is brave enough to claim the responsibility for each other and our whole community's actions, that there ever will be any lasting change.

When I let go of the fear of what could happen to me after I came out, I found the place of truth and perfect contentment. May fear never be the reason we may allow prejudice or hate crimes a place in our lives. Stop the ethnic or gay jokes in families or the work place before they begin. Show people you are firm on this point, people will not be used as scapegoats or punching bags in your presence.

As gay people we often don't look or act the stereotypical gay model. Therefore we as a minority may be at greater risk, because we can hide. And this is not always a good thing. The closet is cold and dark and lonely.

For me, I have decided to walk in the mystery. I have no assurance there will always be a UU church that will be able to look beyond how I love and see the minister I am becoming every day. I don't know if laws in this

country will become more restrictive toward gay people, or if there could be sanctioned hostility and violence toward us. But once you become comfortable in your skin it doesn't matter what the world does. As I said before, individual's responses, homophobia in general, can be hurtful but handle able because now I trust the process of my life and I love who I am. May full acceptance of the inherent worth and dignity of all people be the fulfillment of all our days.