

# Parents Live in Closets Too

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- I lived for about a year in the closet. Every time I heard a 'queer' joke, I squirmed and wanted to shout, "Stop! It's not true." However, I said nothing--but my silence only increased my feelings of hurt and anger. When people asked about my children, I began to notice that one got shortchanged, quickly glossed over for fear that they might ask further questions based on the information I had just shared. I learned how to answer the does-he-have-a-steady-girlfriend question honestly, yet evasively: "No special girl," I would say, "he seems to have a number of friends."

I lived for about a year in that closet. More precisely I should say: I existed in that closet. It was hardly living. Because I was in fear someone might fling open the door and find me there, I added a lock on the inside that only I could open. Even with the inner lock, I never felt safe. It was difficult to breathe. God, how I longed for fresh air and sunlight! I knew I had done nothing wrong, but I didn't know how to control the demons that seemed to possess me.

Then one day I read about a support group for parents of lesbians and gays. I went to their meeting and for the first time in a year I felt understood and accepted by others who had walked in my shoes. So, once a month I cautiously unlocked my closet door and went to a parents' meeting--only returning home a few hours later to barricade myself in for another four weeks.

It was at those meetings that I began to replace a lifetime of misinformation with reliable facts about homosexuality. There, too, I met other parents who shared my feelings and experiences. Some of them seemed freer of the demons and fears that haunted me. They, in a sense, held out a vision of what was possible for me too. I vividly remember a parent saying, "I'm proud of my daughter; she's a wonderful young woman. I wouldn't trade her for the world." I, too, was proud of my child. But something held me back. Although I tried to analyze that hesitancy on numerous occasions, I never arrived at a satisfactory explanation.

One feeling that I did recognize was that of being disloyal toward this child whom I loved. I also began to realize that being closeted for that length of time required emotional and psychic energy that interfered with other close personal relationships. Before I spent an evening with friends, I'd have to recall exactly what I'd told them on previous occasions. During the time we were together I kept a diversionary discussion topic ready at a moment's notice to interject into the conversation if necessary. On the way home I wondered if what I'd said was consistent with our previous times together. I was beginning to feel paranoid about keeping all these things straight in my mind. There were times I felt a scorecard for each family and friend was the only solution.

The secrecy and burden with one close friend became increasingly difficult. I felt disloyal to my son because my silence seemed like an admission that I was ashamed of him. I felt disloyal to my friend because I was keeping a very important part of my life out of our friendship. So, I explained to my son that the cost of silence was taking its toll on me. We agreed that I could share with close friends the fact that he was gay, but the disclosure to family members was his responsibility. Coming out to family would be done by him at times and methods of his choosing.

The relationship with my friend had evolved both personally and professionally. In addition to working together, we occasionally went to the movies, sailed the Chesapeake Bay and shared family meals in each other's homes. Our families were close; in fact my son had been a babysitter for his children. I knew I could trust him. I just didn't know how I was going to tell

him. One day while at work someone said something in our presence that provided an opportunity to discuss the matter. I followed him to his office. "Russ," I said, "I've been wanting to talk to you for a long time." My mouth was dry and I could hear my heart beating. I don't recall how I followed up the opening statement. I only remember that it began awkwardly as I struggled to find the right words-- and it became easier as I progressed. He responded as I knew he would: surprised, but accepting. He asked questions about my son, our family and homosexuality in general.

It was just over two years ago that I first opened the doors of my closet. That small ray of light and whiff of fresh air felt wonderful! It was safe to talk to a trusted friend. Just the other day Russ and I were having coffee at work. In the course of our conversation he asked about the courses Mike was taking at school this semester, his plan for summer employment and all about his relationship with Bill. The conversation was natural and easy. We were able to talk openly about things that are important to us as parents, as well as matters important to our children.

There's been no standard method of disclosure to close friends; each approach is tailored to the person and the circumstances. There are, however, a few observations that can be made: 1) Generally speaking, the sexual orientation of my son need not be a matter of discussion with anyone. Therefore, any conversation related to it must be approached with high respect for his rights as an individual. 2) When keeping the secret requires emotional energy and begins to interfere with a close personal friendship, that is perceived as a signal that maybe it's time to re-evaluate the secret. 3) I usually discuss in advance with my wife my need to share with friends we have in common. On one occasion we might approach the matter with them together; in another case we will decide which of us will address the issue privately with that person. 4) The occasion of disclosure comes at a time when we are feeling good. We don't take the risk of rejection unless we can handle it. 5) The catalyst for disclosure usually arises naturally from the general conversation.

Slowly the door of my closet has opened. Each inch is a liberating experience Friends now come and ask questions about things related to gay issues they see or read in the media. I no longer have to evade the questions of those who are important to me. On one occasion a friend asked me if I'd talk to a woman who just found out her son was gay. With people who matter to me and who know my family, I no longer have to hide. I think I've lost one friend who's been unable to deal with it-- although I'm not positive that's the reason our friendship seems strained. But it really doesn't matter. If our friendship was built on that fragile a foundation, then maybe I misjudged the level of mutual commitment.

I doubt that I'll be fully out of the closet; I have no need to be. Each time that door opens an inch, I feel better. I have taken the risk and have not yet been disappointed. I'm affirmed when people say, "I've known your family for years and you have reason to be proud of your children--all your children."

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