

Gender Letters

a woman's affinity

Volume 1, Number 2

March 1984

Trull to Perform in Houston

Teresa Trull grew up in Durham, North Carolina where she had ample exposure to blues, gospel and R&B at an early age. Her career began when she sang in her church choir. It has since moved through several vocal styles with power and ease. Trull has performed or recorded with Joan Baez, Meg Christian, Linda Tiliary, Holly Near, Mary Watkins, to name a few.

Barbara Higbie was born in Coldwater, Michigan. She began picking out tunes by ear on the family piano at the age of three. A few years later, she started taking classical lessons. She received her B.A. in music from Mills College in Oakland, and went to Africa on a Watson Fellowship to study and collect traditional music.

Teresa Trull and Barbara Higbie spark a musical energy in each other leaving audiences mesmerized. Their first duo album, *Unexpected* is a dynamic musical synthesis.

Teresa Trull and Barbara Higbie will be in concert produced by Hazelwitch on Saturday, March 17 at 8:00 p.m. at the First Unitarian Church, 5210 Fannin. Advance tickets are available at Wilde & Stein Bookstore for \$7.50, or tickets may be purchased at the door for \$9.00.



Teresa Trull, left, and Barbara Higbie, right, will be appearing at the First Unitarian Church this month.

editorial

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Comments, criticisms and information are always welcome from our readers: remember it's your publication.

The focus of this issue of *Lavender Letters* is the subject of coming out. At first glance, it does not appear to be complex. However, upon further examination of the subject, one finds that there are actually three definitions for this seemingly simple topic: The first is that you come out to yourself. At the onset, the process may appear to be a personal revelation that occurs in a short amount of time, or it may continue on for a period of time. Either way, coming out to ourselves involves a significant amount of soul searching and a series of serious questions. Some of us may have it a bit easier in that we live in a large city and have the opportunity to come out where we might have had contact with other lesbians and gay men prior to coming out. Those of us who live in smaller towns might not be afforded this privilege; therefore, making the experience a bit more confusing. Nonetheless, most of us eventually come out despite the odds against us.

Another definition for coming out is your first sexual experience with another woman. This person is said to have "brought you out". Thus, with this first experience, you may realize that you are a lesbian giving rise to coming out to yourself. Being that we are all individuals, some women come out to themselves prior to having that first sexual contact with another woman. Regardless, lesbians still refer to the first time they made love to a woman as their coming out.

Telling friends, family and co-workers is still another definition of coming out. After you come out to yourself, those you meet outside the women's community are candidates. This continuous process is not easy because once you come out to someone, you cannot go back in the closet. Coming out to people whose opinion you hold in high regard is particularly difficult. Be that as it may, by doing nothing, you make the choice of trying to be something you are not, straight. The decision is yours.

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letters to the editor

Thank you for finally putting together a publication for and about women! Our feminist/lesbian community has never been properly served here in Houston and has only been partly attended by such columns as "The Women's Page" in *This Week in Texas* (which *TWT* no longer carries). Thank you for *Lavender Letters*.

...congratulations on your first issue. *Lavender Letters* has a nice look and is well put together.

N. Davis
Kuumba House One-Plus-One

...I wish to commend your efforts in producing a professional publication. The choice of topics were appropriate and pertinent. The articles were well written, clear in meaning and easy to read.

...I share your energy and enthusiasm. Volume 1, Number 1 is an excellent beginning for a long relationship.

I wish you success and longevity.

L. Park

I just received my copy of the newsletter and I am delighted with it! I just moved to Houston from Baltimore.

...I feel strongly that this newsletter should be supported by all women and particularly lesbians in this area...

D. L. Welch

Congratulations on the success of your new publication *Lavender Letters*. As the editor of the Houston Area Women's Center magazine, *Centerline*, I can appreciate the need in our community for your publication, and the effort it requires to put it together.

...We are looking forward to the future issues of *Lavender Letters* and wish you continued good luck.

K. Barton, editor
Centerline

Congratulations on your first issue! It looks real good. ...Good luck with future issues. I look forward to seeing the next one.

K. Schiller, Managing Editor
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word in edgewise

By Hiliary Baines

Alright, you have finally found someone to love—that one person with whom you wish to spend the rest of your life or, at least, the rest of your love experience. You are overjoyed with having found this person. You want to take her home and introduce her to your mother. Perhaps you want to tell your father she is a doctor. You want her to have turkey dinner with your family. Oh, you poor idealistic thing you!

Go ahead. Take her home. Who knows, your family just might give their blessings. But don't count on it. For centuries we lesbian women have made this move. What compels us to make this mistake is beyond me. Simple observation of what my friends went through with their families has kept me just this side of coming out to the family. And, in turn, inside the family's good graces. This is not fair, you scream. They taught me to love and love is what I am doing. Good, you have a keen sense of life as it should be. Keep that thought.

What you are dealing with here is not a logical step. There are no guarantees in life, especially when dealing with something as subjective as the all American family.

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Mother told me to marry a doctor or a lawyer. I chose a doctor; she didn't specify the gender. Tough luck for mom.

Yes, it is good to love. Yes, you can still love your family.

My two best friends came out to their families. In each case the news of their being homosexual was not taken well. One was banished, the other's mother cried for eight years. I am not kidding, eight years. Every time she went home, her mother took one look at her and began to cry.

My family and I play a little game. Once in a while, I remark how cute I think Tom Selleck is; the truth is I still find a sort of beauty in men. The fact that this man *might* be gay makes my admiration of him all the easier. Of course, the fact that this man is absolutely unattainable chokes my chances of ever having to own up to my comment on his beauty. Convenient isn't it. Fortunately, all men in town fall short of Tom, so Hiliary won't be dating men. Smile, I know you have done the same thing.

Talk to your friends, homosexual or heterosexual. See what the general consensus is. Good for you, being a homosexual, lesbian, gay or whatever term you wish to use is no longer as taboo as it once was. If you are younger and happen to know some older lesbians, see what their experience was.

Try coming out first to your sibling. There are numerous gay siblings out there. As a matter of fact, Kinsey is now doing a study on this very phenomenon. You may be delighted to find out that your sister or brother is also a homosexual.

Unfortunately, my brother was not; he is rather uneasy about my being a lesbian. After 12 years, he still lives in fear that I might break out of the closet. His response gave me some indication as to how the rest of the family might react. You see, with the publicity AIDS has gathered, my family has become more and more vocal regarding their disapproval of the homosexual lifestyle. Saved myself some pain here, didn't I.

However, banishment could be a blessing! If you have had enough of your family and have nothing whatsoever to loose by burning that bridge behind you, tell 'em. Get that and everything else off your chest.

Do me a favor. Because this may be the last encounter with your people for some time, choose your words carefully. You might want to write down your lines ahead of time; rehearse them. If after you come out to your family, they react in a less than supportive manner, depart dramatically. No point worth making is made without the finality of a slamming door. But, if your family reacts in a positive fashion you have lucked out. Your family may already know, or at least, suspect something regarding your lifestyle. Let your past experience with your family be your guide as to whether or not you come out.

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perspective

Coming Out: The Implications

By Dee Smathers

Note: I am a firm believer in the old adage "If it ain't broke don't fix it". This article first appeared in Upfront America (Volume 1, Issue 18) in 1980. I think that the issues involved in coming out remain basically the same. A few changes have been made in response to the more repressive political climate of 1984 (all names have been deleted) and a few simply because writers just can't resist rewriting.

Some of us do and some of us don't. Most of us do sometime and don't sometime. Nearly all of us do more now than we used to. Do what? "Come out" to family, friends, employers, children, etc.

How much to tell, when, how, and to whom is possibly the first question we face when we discover we are gay. Unfortunately, there are no absolutes and few guidelines.

Unless one plans to embark on a path of lifelong celibacy, telling no one is not an option. We all remember the myths of the lonely old maid school teacher, bachelor choir director, or whatever, who probably "was" but didn't "tell" anybody.

On the other hand, announcing it to the world is not altogether advisable either. Whether in a spirit of adolescent rebellion or idealism, I called everyone I knew with the news. Twenty-four years later, I still carry the emotional scars of some of the repercussions.

As a social worker graduate student said, "It's situation oriented." Since our situations are unique, our solutions are generally novel, but, particularly with our families, there seem to be some clusters of events and outcomes.

The first of these could well be termed "Prior Knowledge" or families-are-not-as-dense-as-we-think. Most of the time when prior knowledge exists, various family members have had a chance to work through their feelings before verbally confronting the gay member, and at least some degree of acceptance is common.

Sometimes straight relatives are a bit premature. One of my aunts took me aside and assured me that I'd always be loved and accepted by my family while admonishing me to always be decent in my relationships. I had no idea what she was talking about until I came out six months later.

One young woman reported that her mother asked her if she were gay before she came out.

More often, it's simply a matter of verbal confirmation of what everybody knew anyway. A social worker recounted that she told her parents when her sister was getting a divorce and she was breaking up with a long term lover. Her parents responded that they already knew and everybody cried about both divorces.

One young man recalled finally deciding to "tell Mother". After floundering through a conversation ranging from the weather to changing tires, she finally asked, "Are you trying to tell me that you think you're gay?" And with no small degree of relief he replied, "That's it, that's it."

A second cluster consists of either confrontation or discovery by relatives who did not have prior knowledge. Acceptance, if it comes at all, is gained more slowly.

A minister recalled helping her mother to slow acceptance by "making my mother aware of my involvement in the Church and answering more than she asked."

When told about her daughter, one mother sent "eighteen and twenty page hate letters two or three times a week." Finally, the daughter told her mother not to write any more. "Three months later we got a newsy letter."

During a heated argument about her gay friends, one woman told her mother: "I'm gay. I'm your daughter and you have to love me," and left the house. That approach worked for her because her mother called her later in the day to say that she did indeed love her.

Unfortunately, not all such disclosures have happy endings. Perhaps more typical was the experience of a

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gay writer after a "notorious party and a letter from a lover", his parents threatened to have him committed and his brother tried to pay him to leave home.

Another recounted a struggle of gay friends to gain her release from the psychiatric ward of Jefferson Davis Hospital while she tried to remain sane in the insane situation of involuntary commitment by her parents.

Even if familial reactions are not as drastic as commitment, unpleasant situations are not uncommon.

By far the largest number of people I talked to are neither accepted nor rejected by their families because of their homosexuality. Their families either don't know or choose to ignore the entire issue.

"As long as I don't mention it, she doesn't have to face it."

Another woman said concerning her father, "I've never seen any point in discussing it. If he chooses not to talk about it or to ignore it, that's his right."

Distance, both geographical and social, often makes telling the family a non-issue. "They live 3,000 miles away. What difference could it make to them?"

"I don't really associate that much with most of my family, so I don't figure there's any need to tell them."

One frequently mentioned factor in deciding not to tell is ill health. A woman whose parents are both elderly with severe health problems explained, "It just doesn't seem realistic to fight some sort of battle that would not come to some reasonable solution in their lifetime."

The issue of telling friends appears to be less complex though not necessarily less painful.

Coming out in the work place seems to be a relatively recent issue. One older woman recalled life in Atlanta twenty years ago. "Everybody was so far back in the closet you couldn't see the light. All it took was an anonymous phone call. Even now I'm hesitant about giving my last name."

Another, an engineer, said, "I've been at my job for 23 years and it hasn't come up. I hope it doesn't."

Some work places seem to be more open than others. A male school counselor responded simply, "God, no!"

Another social worker reported, "I've been in the bureaucracy for ten years. Part of the time we had to hide, and now they can't do anything to us. There were some anonymous phone calls and some shit in my personnel record, but that's pulled out now."

Still another social worker said, "I work with adolescents and male social workers suspect, anyhow. I just don't think it would be wise."

Telling children is also a more current issue than it was in years past, as more gays seem to be gaining

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custody or retaining visitation rights. Most gay parents of small children reported that they simply handled the homosexuality like any other part of life and the children generally accepted it as a given.

Others with older children reported varying responses.

"It was sort of like 'we're having carrots for dinner.' If I had it to do over, I'd tell them five or six years sooner."

"He now lives with my mother and I haven't seen him in three years."

"My kids both responded differently, because they have different personalities."

It would appear that parents, siblings, friends, employers, co-workers and strangers in the street respond differently, also. So we come full circle to unique situations and novel solutions.

While we might all agree that it would be wonderful if every gay could leave the closet behind forever, we should be wary of pressuring others. Even some situations that seem to be the same, may not be. I have found it possible to be open in nearly all situations that do not involve "hands on" instructions in a swimming pool. On the other hand, my sister is open in nearly all situations, except those that involve our family. Neither of us finds it our place to question the solution for the other.

To whomever, wherever, however you come out, you are, at least in that situation, forever out. You cannot go back into the closet.

announcing . . .

The Gay Switchboard of Houston will hold a Garage Sale on March 24 and 25 on the corner of Roseland and Alabama, one block east of Montrose. Clean out your closets, attics, and chests so that the Gay Switchboard can have more to sell. Bring the items to the Briar Patch at 2294 Holcombe, to House of Coleman at Roseland and Alabama, or call the Gay Switchboard at 529-3211 to arrange pick up of large items. All donations of articles to this charitable, volunteer agency are tax-deductible. The Gay Switchboard is open daily from 3:00 p.m. until midnight.

★★★★★

The Kuumba House One-Plus-One will present a program entitled Powerful Poetry and Sister Songs on March 18 at 7:00 and 9:00 p.m. Kuumba House is housed in the Midtown Art Center Upstairs Gallery located at 3412 La Branch. Clara Kern is the host of the KPFT radio talk show *A Woman's Place*. She is also a feminist poet who has been reading her poetry all around Houston. Kern will be reciting selected poems chosen especially for this show. Gracie Lee and Lynn Herrick are the founders of A Place in the Sun which provides an opportunity for feminists to recoup, regroup and re-evaluate. They will be performing Sister Songs. Vanessa Estrada, a feminist photographer, is a bright young talent with a fresh outlook on the scene around her. She will be displaying her work along with selected works by Lynn Herrick. For more information, contact Kuumba House One-Plus-One at 524-1079.

★★★★★

River Oaks Theater located at 2009 West Gray will be showing two movies about women loving women on Friday, March 30. *Lianna*, showing at 5:15 and 9:30, is a realistic depiction of a young wife and mother's coming to terms with her own homosexuality. The film is a sensitive study of one woman's courage in accepting what she has discovered about herself. (USA, 1983). The second feature is *A Woman Like Eve* showing at 7:30. It is one of the first films made by a woman director where the majority of the crew being women. The main story line is that of a bored Dutch housewife who falls in love with a lesbian while vacationing in the south of France. This is a powerful film on the subject of women loving women. (HOLLAND, 1981).

★★★★★

This month Choices Unlimited events include: Friday, March 9 at 7:30 p.m.—the last rap session at Joey's Yorktown place. Friday, March 16 at 7:30 p.m.—a women's circle and housewarming will be held at Joey's new Heights apartment. March 30 at 5:45 p.m.—meet for pizza at Birra Porretti's on West Gray, then join us next door at the River Oaks Theater. For more information call Joey at 840-8041.



Gloria Steinem speaking at a Ms. Foundation for Women meeting in Houston.

By Jerilyn M. Gallimore

Gloria Steinem was in Houston on February 5 where she chaired a planning committee of the Ms. Foundation for Women. The topic of discussion was The Stars of Texas Gala which will be held on June 16 at the Westin Galleria Hotel. The foundation hopes that this fund raising event will bring in a six figure sum. The monies will go to support the various programs of the foundation.

The Ms. Foundation for Women is a multi-issue national public foundation in the United States. Unlike other organizations, it does not enlist members, hold conventions or support lobby efforts. However, it does give away money which enables women to help themselves. The foundation has provided \$2 million in start up grants in the past ten years. Their services also include technical assistance, fund raising services and national networking.

The Stars of Texas Gala marks the first time the Ms. Foundation for Women has held a major fund raising event outside the state of New York. The program will include a dinner, show and dancing. The tickets for this fund raiser go from \$125 for an individual to \$5000 for a table of ten. Don't dismay, if you don't happen to have that much money and wish to attend, you may become a participant in their incentive program where you can purchase a ticket for \$25 or \$50. There are three options which include selling a table of tickets, a specified number of raffle tickets or advertising. Contact Harla Kaplan, the event coordinator, at 526-0487 for more specific information.

viewpoints

By Grynd'I

You all have already seen me—I was the most attractive one in the photo on last month's front page. Allow me to introduce myself; my name is Grynd'I; my age and lineage are unknown as are my antecedents. I am, however, beautiful, crafty, and highly intelligent; I have managed to attach myself to a couple of large but doting bipedal animals known as dykes. One is a sleek, lithe black and white who purrs almost continuously. The other is a fat, rather lazy neutral colored tabby who spits and growls much more than necessary. For obvious reasons, I call them Prrr and Spft.

Although Prrr and Spft are basically urban creatures, they have moved out of town to a small plot of land with a dilapidated house. The place is called Trash Acers, and they are doing something they call "getting it together". I'm not sure what that means but it has something to do with the stacks of sheetrock, piles of boards, and buckets of paint, mud and spackling that are my indoor playground. They have also cut trees, pulled out bushes and torn up the ground to grow things. No self respecting cat would touch the things they grow, but Spft drags them into the house as proudly as if they were fat mice, and she and Prrr eat them.

Shortly after I took up residence at Trash Acers the real fun began. We had a hurricane. The wind was so wild and the rain so furious, I curled up on the kitchen table to watch the elements; but, as it turned out, the real show was inside. Prrr sounded almost like Spft as she watched the trees fall—ten of them. (Dykes make a lot of F, D, and S sounds when they spit and growl.) Spft wiped tears from where her whiskers should be as she watched the ceiling drip onto the floor. Then she went back to bed while Prrr prowled the house. (How catlike dykes can be!).

I don't think that Prrr and Spft liked the hurricane, but I thought it was great. It's much easier to climb trees when they are lying down. Five trees squashed the place where Spft grew things so she no longer brings in that weird food. Best of all, they put in a wood stove especially for me to warm myself in front of this winter.

They don't think I notice, but I can tell the downed trees are slowly being turned into a stack of firewood. Prrr and Spft are talking about "cross cut saws" and "planting". I'm afraid my outdoor playground will soon be gone, and Spft will start dragging in strange food again.

I do wish they would stop "getting it together".

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book reviews

By Jerilyn M. Gallimore

Mary Borhek discovered that her son, Eric, was gay by accident. She suspected something was not straight with Eric, and while visiting her daughter she asked, "Is he a homosexual?" To which her daughter replied, "I promised I wouldn't tell."

Because of her fundamental Christian beliefs, Borhek realized she was having difficulty accepting her son's lifestyle. Not long after she found out about Eric being a gay man, she began recording her progress giving rise to her first book entitled *My Son Eric: A Mother Struggles to Accept Her Gay Son and Discovers Herself*. The book is written for people like herself who have religious values which seem to be incompatible with the lives of lesbians and gay men, even though such people may be psychologically and emotionally healthy.

Recently, Borhek has completed a second book entitled *Coming Out to Parents: A Two Way Guide for Lesbians and Gay Men and Their Parents* in which she identifies several issues that must be faced by children and their parents when confronting homosexuality.

According to Borhek, the two major pitfalls to coming out to your parents are gaps in religious values and sexual morals. Many parents believe that their lesbian or gay children may not be able to claim their place in heaven. Borhek feels that traditional biblical interpretations of homosexuality are not intended to apply to people who are drawn toward members of the same sex, but instead refer to particular excessive sexual practices during certain historical periods. Some parents hold the stereotype that lesbians and gay men have rebelled against their upbringing and religious principles. Although this may be true in some cases, the existence of the Universal Fellowship of Metropolitan Community Churches is sufficient to indicate that this fear is unfounded.

Sexual morals are dictated by the Old Testament patriarchy. This does not permit discussion of, let alone deviation from the supposed socially acceptable norms which are a subservient woman and a dominant man. Given the biblical prescriptions and proscriptions, it is not surprising that parents actually ask their lesbian or gay children what they do when they make love. This only succeeds in pitting parent against child. Borhek suggests that you do not tell your parents what you do in the same way you do not ask them to explain what they do when they make love. The point being what occurs between yourself and your lover is your business and you do not have to tell other people what, how or why you do what you do.


Grief is generally the most intense emotion parents feel when their child discloses the fact that s/he is a lesbian or gay man. In actuality, parents do not lose their children; however, they do lose the image of the child they thought they had or would like to have had. This initial shock may affect parents similar to the grief process people experience when there is a death of a loved one. Additionally, the parents may feel guilt, anger, pain, sorrow and rejection—sometimes all at once. The joy you may feel in coming out and dealing with your natural sexuality probably won't be felt by your parents. Don't expect your parents to be as delighted as you are. Thus, not everyone should come out to their parents.

Before telling them, Borhek advises that you consider the type of relationship you have with your parents. If your fundamentalist parents are geographically distant and contact between you is limited, you don't want to hear "the lecture" every time you visit. Why tell them about your lifestyle? The same holds true if the relationship with your parents has not been all that great.

The circumstances surrounding each situation are unique and only you know whether or not you can continue to play the game of being straight in front of your parents. If you feel that your parents will eventually be able to handle your lifestyle, then you might want to come out to them. Prior to coming out to your parents, however, Borhek suggests that you read her book. Her work will help you to better understand a parent's point of view and has tips which are sensible and easy to follow.

Both books can be purchased at Wilde & Stein Bookstore.

Original article appeared in Gay News and was written by Phil Nash.



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spotlight

Parents FLAG Houston Meets Regularly

By Jerilyn M. Gallimore

Lesbians and gay men are everywhere, healthy, naturally homosexual and part of the family. They come from "model" families, single-parent homes, those with dominant or submissive mothers, weak or strong fathers—all kinds. They are the only child, the youngest, middle, oldest child, one of twins. In some families one child is gay, in others two or more. There is no pattern. Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays (Parents FLAG) not only believe the above statements, but they are an organization that supports lesbians and gay men.

Parents FLAG meets at the Presbyterian Center at 41 Oakdale located behind the First Presbyterian Church which is situated in the 5300 block of Main Street. The meeting begins at 2:00 p.m. and is held on the third Sunday of each month. Parents FLAG seeks to provide support for those people who have significant contact with lesbians and gay men. After the business meeting, they have rap sessions and an occasional speaker adds the necessary variety so that members don't want to miss a single meeting.

At the meetings, participants learn from each other in an effort to accept and understand their lesbian and gay family members and friends with love and pride.

The president of the local organization would very much like to see a larger participation of gay men and lesbians at their monthly meetings. Parents FLAG strives to speak out and act whenever necessary to defend and enhance those human and civil rights we should all have. As a small way of saying that we want to thank them, we need to attend their meetings. What can be better than the real thing to help them with their rap sessions and question and answer sessions.

For more information contact Freda Jerrell, president at 464-6663 or write 1720 Moritz #24, Houston, TX 77055.

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