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FACTS & ARGUMENTS

Friday, June 10, 1994

THE STING OF COMPASSION / Her parents believe that homosexuality is wrong: no compromise possible on that issue. She has found her true self, a partner and spiritual strength: no way to compromise these, either

Loving — and being loved — in spite of who we are

BY NADIA SCHURMAN

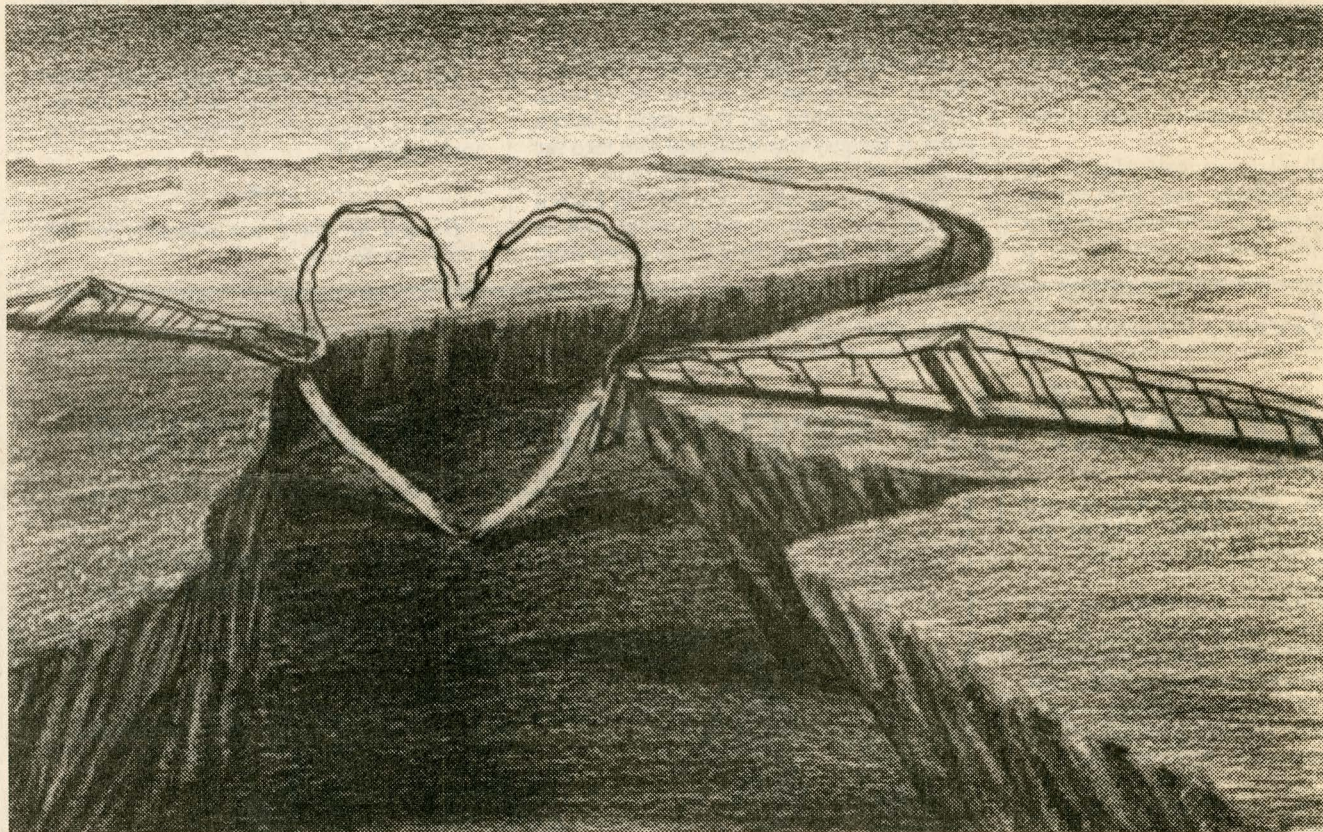
PERHAPS being the recipient of pity packs a similar punch to being loved in spite of who you are. They are alike in that the pitied feel a squeamishness about every gesture, every warm smile. We who are loved despite our perceived failure as human beings, loved because of the moral greatness of the lover, also recoil.

As a dutiful daughter, raised in the strictures of firm Faith, believing that we are put on Earth to serve God, I was reluctant even to tell my parents that I am a lesbian. It seemed so self-serving to indulge this dimension of self when I knew from childhood teachings that God does not want us to serve our own desires. I understood homosexuals have been given a test and nobility could be achieved only by remaining chaste. After all, this life is but the wink of an eye, and that's not so long to be sexually and emotionally inactive.

It takes time to unravel a complex weave of moral beliefs reinforced by fear of punishment. Starting with a defiant first relationship wedged in among my sports and university studies, I defied God. Just being yourself is empowering, and I started slowly to shed my guilt. Within a few years I no longer lay in bed at night promising myself that I would marry and have children to please my parents and their God. Progress was fitful, and at times I would try to wend back to the familiar zone of moral certainty.

But I had left the safety of being chained in the cave forever, and at the entrance saw the light that being a minority sheds on the world. The harsh reality that some acquaintances no longer looked me in the eye and that my parents were reluctant to tell their friends that I am a lesbian was softened by the joy that loving someone in more than one dimension can bring. I stopped caring that swimming gave me very broad shoulders and that some dresses looked rather out of place on me, as if draped on the wrong mannequin. I laughed now that my father told me that "If God had meant for you to be an athlete, he would have made you a horse."

And to add to my delight in just being me, I believed that my parents had started to love me for who I was now. I see that it required a complex veil of denial to believe this. I was able to "forget" that if I talked at home about lovers or how it felt to be a lesbian, a family member in the fold would inevitably



(MATTHEW STRAUSS)

query why I had to bring up the topic all the time. For years I "forgot" that my father had mused out loud about God's intended relationship between AIDS and homosexuality. There was the letter from my mother almost 10 years after I'd come out asking me why I couldn't have endured my test from the hand of God, just as many women suffer silently through painful marriages.

Still, we had many close moments as a family, and my mother and I would talk at times as if there were no barrier between us. We shared so much. Who else would watch videos of *La Traviata* while we all cried (except my father, of course)? Who else could share our family's unique love of poetry and reading out loud? If it mattered that my parents felt that I'd missed the boat and was spiritually adrift, I wasn't going to acknowledge it.

I believe that we only allow issues to seep through the semi-permeable barrier between consciousness and the murky waters of the subconscious when we are able to deal with them. As I matured in the context of a long relationship, the fact of my love's lack of acceptance by my nuclear family began to dawn on me.

But nothing is simple in this ethical quicksand. That I was able to approach a moral paradigm shift, I owe to the emotional and intellectual courage with which my parents imbued me. They taught me to examine my map of reality. But their love is fused with a compassion for the unenlightened, and I began to feel that sting.

I WAS not alone in beginning to feel the implications of my sexual preference. That I had been in a partnership with a woman for several years was not lost on my parents. It no longer appeared that I would gracefully and silently outgrow this stage. My partner and I had made plans together. We started to visit as a couple. My parents' responsibility for my spiritual guidance would need to show its hand. The letter my mother sent me for my 32nd birthday was a plea for me to begin to develop the spiritual qualities she felt were lying dormant in me. The idea that being an exile from my family constructs could have engendered spiritual strength seemed to have escaped notice. It would have taken more self-deception than I

could stomach to deny that I am being loved in spite of who I am.

And so I armed myself with the pride I've developed in being who I am and told my mother how compromising it felt to be loved with an element of rectitude. "I am not about to embrace homosexuality if that is what you want," was her response. No moral compromises.

Initially I could not accept the implications: I kept telling myself that if only I could explain it better the scales would fall from their eyes and they would love me — especially for the courage it takes to be gay. But I began to see that I too had refused compromise.

I cannot exchange my identity for the acceptance of my old world. I cannot force my family to leave the cave of known realities. So I face the hard truth that they can only love me with this mixture of compassion and sense of higher understanding that they call grace.

And in a fashion, I can only love them in spite of themselves, in spite of the fences that their Faith built between them and their daughter. And I do.

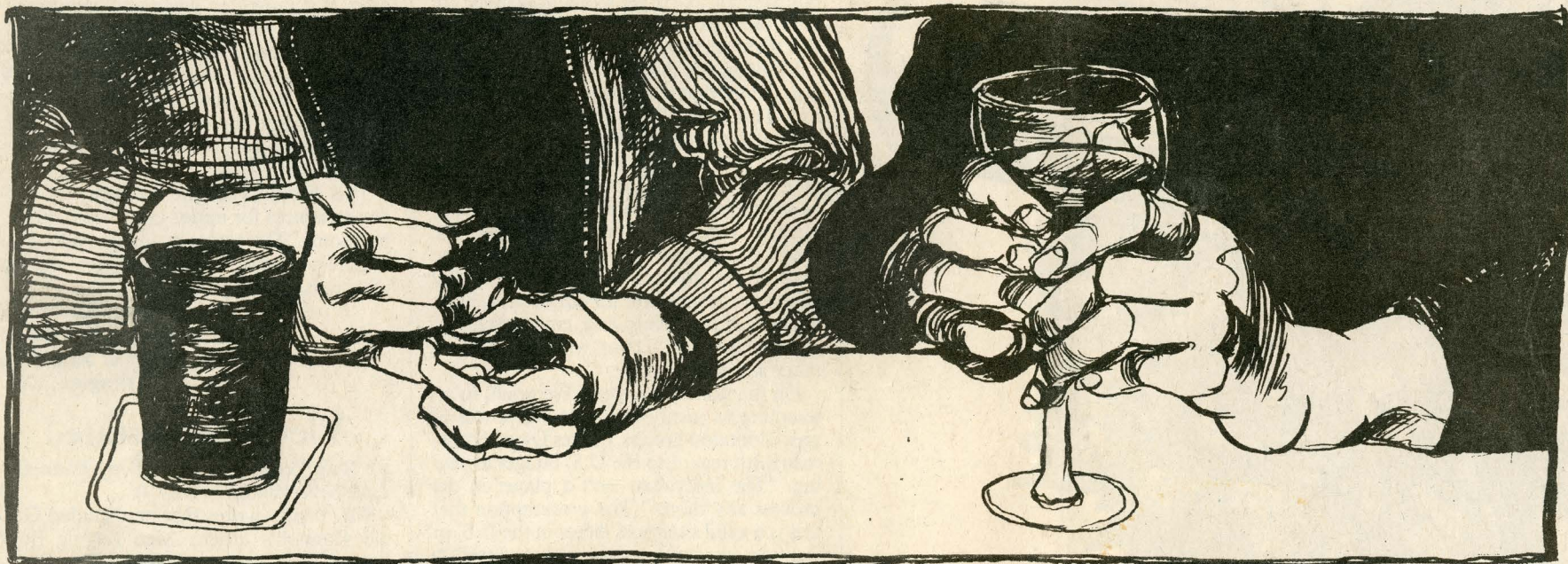
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Wednesday, July 20, 1994



(LEANNE SHAPTON)

RELATIONSHIPS / *My father and stepmother are not your average couple: They are two distinct individuals who are in each other's company simply because they adore it*

Tales from a multifunctional family

BY ALISON WEARING

MY father and stepmother have been together for 13 years. They met, ahem, in a bar. My father spotted my stepmother sitting under a ventilation shaft, plopped himself on the next bar stool and opened with the line, "So . . . what have you been up to tonight?" Miraculously, a conversation ensued. They spent the rest of the evening talking about opera.

The next morning, my stepmother handed my father a telephone number and said, "Now call me, make sure you call me, I'm not going to say this again: CALL ME."

A year later, they moved in together. Now they have two dogs and a subscription to Opera magazine. But they're not your average couple. They're both fulfilled. In fact, they have the sort of relationship I admire. They are two distinct individuals, who are in each other's company simply because they adore it.

They're also not your average couple, because they're both men. Which means that my stepmother is actually more of a fairy stepmother, if you know what I mean.

My father "came out" in the late seventies. It was more than anyone was

ready for. Most of his immediate family disowned him — apparently they'd rather see him a miserable hetero than a jubilant homo — and everyone else took a giant step back. Members of the community followed every twist and turn of the scandal with devotion and zeal, and the independent thinking of lemmings. There were a lot of hushed tones around the neighbourhood. Pitying stares from the neighbours. The telephone went silent. Dinner parties stopped. I felt like our house had been quarantined.

I was 13 when I was told, "Your father loves men." Having grown up in a small town in Southern Ontario, I was unprepared for this news. I thought it meant that my father loved my brothers and not me. But that didn't last long. You'd be surprised how quickly kids can figure things out.

I spent the rest of my teen-age years learning how to be a good liar. I came up with creative answers to questions about my parents' divorce, about why my father lived in Toronto, about the man he lived with. I even remember telling someone that my father used that funny "s" when he spoke because he had just had a stroke and part of his tongue was paralyzed. I kept my father behind a protective layer of stories, as if I were hiding an alien under my bed.

I hated it. I hated the paranoia that came with having so many secrets. I hated being told that I came from a dysfunctional family (and, it was implied, should therefore prepare for a life of crime, moral destitution and general unspecified misery), by people whose "functional" families seemed often to be cesspools of muzzled emotions. And I never understood why it was okay that some fathers were sexist, beer-guzzling sport thugs, but the fact that mine was a mild-mannered opera queen was unacceptable. I decided to refuse everyone else's definition of normal. I liked mine better.

TODAY, I look around and breathe a sigh of relief, grateful to have been exposed to alternative lifestyles at such a young age. Imagine being given the opportunity to question traditional relationships before you are old enough to get into one.

I hold my father and Michael's relationship in very high regard. In many ways, I emulate it, though as an incurable heterosexual. There is something about their relationship that feels very much alive. They never fall into traditional roles, because there aren't any;

they are being invented and reinvented as we speak. They have a rapport that is vibrant, a playfulness you don't often find in suburbia. It's not just that they have a good sex life. But that's probably part of it.

My father's parties are never work-related bores. They are a panoply of men of all ages and backgrounds: students, singers, teachers, dancers, writers, lawyers, librarians and mail carriers. Having a gay father means that I am surrounded by charming, attractive men. None of whom is trying to pick me up.

Having a gay father also means that I can talk to him about my sex life. And he understands. We giggle like old friends and compare notes. Occasionally, he offers advice; and get this — it's *helpful*. No, I'm not lying.

Okay, okay. He's a father like any other. He never runs out of financial advice, he worries when I travel, he is anxious for me to settle down and find a "real" job, and lately he's even starting asking about grandchildren. But I forgive him this. After all, it is he who taught me what it is to forgive.

Alison Wearing is a Canadian writer and calls herself the proud daughter of a homo.

CH 12/12/90

Has AIDS made gays society's new lepers?



PETER DUFFY

Were your ears burning on Monday? Did you know you were being talked about? Well, you were. It was the 42nd anniversary of the universal declaration of human rights. Quite a mouthful, but its heart is in the right place. It's supposed to be an umbrella that covers you and me and everyone in this poor old world of ours.

Supposed to. It was a big day for a lot of people. In Halifax, the province celebrated the event with ceremonies that included speeches by politicians, a student choir singing about peace and fellowship, awards being presented and, as an appropriate finale, a citizenship court presided over by Judge Helen Gillis.

I was there, enjoying the good

feelings flying around. Kind of nice to feel part of one big family, especially at this time of year.

I browsed through a copy of the declaration of human rights. It made interesting reading. Some of the rights seemed quaint, at least to my western democratic eyes. It decrees, for instance, that: everyone has the right to a nationality; everyone has the right to marry and to found a family. They are entitled to equal rights as to mar-

riage, during marriage and at its dissolution; everyone has the right to change his religion or belief; and everyone has the right to rest and leisure.

So I'm reading this document, and only half listening as three high school students took it in turn to speak on the theme: What Human Rights Means to Me.

One of the young men said there were a number of black students at his school and that there were few problems. Nice to know. And then he dropped a bombshell, but so casually that it took a moment to register.

"If a known homosexual came into the school," he said, "I shudder to think what the outcome would be."

It was such a stunning statement that, for a moment, I wasn't sure I'd heard right. Don't get me wrong, I'm not blaming the lad for saying it. It's what's behind the words that is so unsettling and distressing.

Are gays becoming the new "lepers" for some in our society? It used to be blacks, and before them, the Jews, who suffered because they were different or misunderstood and therefore feared. Now the gays?

I rechecked the declaration of human rights resting in my lap. I couldn't see anything in it that protects people because of their sexual preference.

Or their illness. Like AIDS. Is the AIDS-homosexual association

why gays are in danger in at least one Nova Scotia high school?

I once sailed from England to South Africa. On the two-week voyage we stopped at a tiny chip of land named Ascension Island in the South Atlantic. It holds a British-U.S. radar base and is famous for its giant turtles.

A few of us went ashore and roamed around. We came across a sad, strange little graveyard dating back to the 19th century. It was mostly piles of stones and crudely-carved headstones.

Buried there were seamen who had contracted yellow fever and been dumped ashore by their crewmates to die. Each day a party of soldiers from a nearby British base would leave tin trays of food.

The soldiers returned at night, firing muskets in the air to warn away the fever victims and thus avoid contracting the disease themselves.

The troops knew the victims had died when they returned to find the food where they had left it. Such a sad story. I thought it as likely that those poor sailors died from being ostracized as from the disease.

Those graves were in my mind Monday as I sat clutching my copy of the declaration of human rights. I fear that, for as far as we've come down this road, we have as far still to go.

Peter Duffy's column appears every Wednesday and Saturday.

Metro

What's natural is in the eye of the beholder

AT ALDERNEY GATE this week we talked about the difference between what's natural and what isn't.

You might think that this is a simple distinction but actually it's not — not, at least, if we are talking about human behavior.

Here's how it came up.

We had been talking about homosexuality because in my Diary last week I argued that it was immoral to disapprove of homosexuality. Well, I pointed out that homosexuality alone does no harm to anyone, that it's not a disease or anti-social, and so, if it does no harm, then we should not disapprove of it.

It is immoral, I argued, to try to limit freedom unless you can show that someone is likely to be harmed.

But at the discussion on Thursday a number of people came to say that homosexuality is



BUSKER'S DIARY

Peter March

still wrong, wrong just because it is unnatural, because it involves the use of sexual organs in unnatural ways — whether or not it harms anyone.

The idea, of course, is that if you can show that a practice is "unnatural" then you have shown that it is immoral.

Well, OK, let's clarify the problem of what's natural by looking at the meaning of this word "natural" — as it's used by the person on the street.

"Why that forest is absolutely natural, not a thing's been done to it." Here natural means "has

not been changed by us, in any way." Here "natural" just means "pristine."

Then there's quite a different use of the word, "Natural? I don't reckon that's natural, no sir, God never intended us to fly, so I ain't agoin' up."

Here "natural" is what God intended and unnatural is anything that seems to defy God's intent. God is seen as the designer of everything in the universe, and we are expected to respect His intentions.

Now the first meaning, having to do with something being pristine, that meaning is clear enough, fair enough. And presumably a thing may or may not be better for being natural in this first sense.

It's the second sense that worries me.

In fact, the second sense rep-

resents a pretty serious mistake — for most of us. Because most of us know enough science to know the scientific explanation of how animals, including ourselves, got our various body parts.

We know that our body parts appeared as a result of mutations and that the uses of these body parts were discovered, by chance, after the part appeared.

Birds didn't fly before they had wings and the wing was not designed for flight. We know of many animal features that have changed their use a number of times over the eons of evolution.

If this is right, then there just isn't any proper use for the body parts of animals, there is no "natural use." There is only the typical or normal use of the species — at a given time.

And animals may find new

uses for their parts without any change having appeared in that part. The whole notion of the "natural use," in the sense of "intended" use, is a holdover from our pre-scientific past.

Our use of "unnatural" in this old sense is silly. It really amounts to no more than superstition. We teach our school kids to know better.

One speaker pleaded for a compromise.

"Look, I'm not saying that homosexual acts are immoral, but I am saying that there is a primary use of the sexual organs and there is a secondary use. The primary use is procreation. And if you don't think the difference matters, just think of how the human race has to procreate to survive."

Should we concede this? Consider a parallel argument: People should not abstain from sex be-

cause if everyone did then the human race would soon die out.

Well, we don't buy this because there is no reason to think that everyone will abstain. Likewise, there is no reason for thinking that homosexuality will threaten the world's population.

Fact is, homosexual interactions are natural in the first sense — they occur in other mammalian species, and we are not deviant as a species — in this respect.

Finally, one gentleman argued that "We don't have the right to burn another man's flag."

He meant that homosexuals have the duty not to needlessly offend those who find their sexual practices offensive.

Well, I suspect that that's another can of worms.

Peter March teaches philosophy at Saint Mary's University and hosts The Philosophy Busk on CKDU.

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Thursday, November 8, 1990

SEXUALITY / *A Toronto writer sends her daughter to a daycare where several of the staff are gay. They are wonderful care-givers. So why do so many people still connect homosexuality with pedophilia? How truly liberated are we?*

Overcoming the final prejudice

BY BARBARA WADE ROSE

LIKE a lot of working parents, we have our child in a daycare. It's near my husband's workplace. It's large, friendly, underfunded — the usual story for daycares these days. We chose it for several reasons: its location, its style, and the fact that there seemed to be an equal number of men and women working there.

We've been at the daycare for more than a year now. Each morning the children from the morning's commute run to their friends or, on bad days hang on to the legs of their parents. They spend the day as they usually do, building playdough monsters, dressing up as firefighters, dining with plastic bowls and spoons and napping on small cots. Their parents walk away from the daycare as they usually do — with a nagging sense of some valuable left behind.

The men and women who look after our daughter have proved to be extraordinarily kind, thoughtful and loving. We've been surprised by the time they've given to the children. One of the men once patted our daughter's back for two solid hours at nap time to lull her into sleep because he wanted her to be refreshed for a party that evening. One woman spends most of her spare time thinking up creative activities the children might enjoy.

In spite of working 35-hour weeks with groups of 15 children, they seem to have more patience than parents with only one or two. Some of them have special training in early childhood education, some of them don't. A lot of them have worked at the daycare for more than a decade; several of them, men and women, are gay.

Our early reaction — well, more of a slow awakening — to the sexual orientation of some of our daughter's care-givers was an unemotional, "Well, that's curious." We were, my husband and I assured ourselves, too sophisticated to mistakenly connect homosexuality with pedophilia. We knew that an interest in partners of the same sex had nothing to do with an interest in sexual relations with young children.

In the ensuing weeks I watched care-givers, both gay and straight, wipe wet noses and tuck small arms into sweaters. I began to realize that saying "that's curious" really meant, "what are they doing here?" I had assumed that gays and lesbians, because their sexual relations didn't produce children, didn't really care for them.

The evidence to the contrary was all around me. We call one of the care-givers the Patron Saint of Troubled Chil-



MAUREEN PAXTON

dren, since the biters and howlers and the kickers flock to him. I've seen him stand patiently near one 2-year-old as she writhed on the ground in a fit of rage she didn't care to explain. He merely stood witness to her misery and made sure she didn't hurt herself until she worked the rage out.

At a daycare party one of the women on staff (who, when she referred to her girl friend, I finally realized, really meant it) watched the dancing children near her feet and wondered wistfully whether she would ever have one of her own. Where on earth had I got the idea gays didn't — or couldn't — love kids? The fact that their sexual lifestyle didn't include procreation began to appear in its true light a coincidence and, in this case, an unfortunate one.

Upon further reflection I began to flip around the variables in my mind. If sexuality is an expression of love, the gender of the recipient doesn't have much bearing on the issue. Of course, gay people or straight people could be equally

loving of children, or old people, or dogs, or anything. A subsequent informal survey among friends has told me that this is common: many gay people choose the care-giving industries of nursing or daycare or social work. One friend commented on a banner she had seen at an exhibition in the United States. It said simply "THEM EQUALS US." Yet other friends continued to ask the same question: do you really feel comfortable having them around your kids?

The answer is a resounding yes.

In the aftermath of what was supposed to be the sexual revolution we have shown a remarkable talent for boxing ourselves in with supposedly liberated terms. Words like "orientation," which implies a turning toward one direction and away from another. (Who is capable of restricting their loving this way?) Terms like "gay lifestyle" that are essentially meaningless. (Who among us has time to have a lifestyle?) Love is remarkably resistant to being put into a box. We can only wish ourselves — and our children — more of it.

The personalities among the various

care-givers at our daycare range from loud and funny to wise and quiet, from full of hugs to respectful pats on the back. They do have one thing in common. It is a way of sounding strangers out, a way of listening to a comment on gay issues and then venturing an opinion in a sideways manner, testing the waters to see if being gay is going to cause problems. It may be only an issue of privacy, of course. But it reminds me that the society I think is free and open really isn't.

Recently, a father at the daycare told us his story. At his office a loud and angry discussion was centred on whether a contribution should be given to a workplace committee whose mandate included researching homophobia. Another man in the group was incensed at the father's stance in favor of supporting the committee. "For heaven's sake," the man said, "do you want these people going to work on your children?" "Well," the father grinned, "As a matter of fact..."

Barbara Wade Rose is a Toronto freelance writer.