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The Teacher and the Homosexual

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Several weeks ago, I informally asked some of my college students whether or not gay teachers who worked in elementary or high schools should "come out." All my students were against the teachers announcing their sexual preference at those academic levels. These usually articulate students, however, were unable to spell out their arguments.

I played the "devil's advocate" and suggested that since there was a growing acceptance of minority positions, e.g., women and blacks, and since there were courses in college for people whose rights have been neglected or violated, I thought it was logical for gays to speak out and to be acknowledged. I asked, why not provide models for students with similar sexual preferences? I argued that to deny the homosexual open and fair treatment was to deny our purposes of education, the development of the individual to his/her fullest potential.

I can continue to argue persuasively for gays, but I think the question of the homosexual in education needs to be explored more critically and more analytically so that the various sides of the concern can be seen in perspective. My public and critical reflection on this topic has arisen from the lack of adequate understanding of my students as they prepare to teach, from the lack of precision in language and directives of boards of education, and also from the strong approach of the gay liberation movement in the critical area of education.

With those ideas in mind, I called the co-spokesperson of the Gay Teachers Association of New York City, a contact I had noted when watching a three hour television marathon on gay issues presented on public channel 13 in New York. In our conversation, I mentioned that I thought another revolution in education was approaching, one not noted by the people who normally stand guard defending the old values. He agreed. Following his suggestion I made contact with a gay bookstore in New York city, and I discovered a growing source of material on campus organizations, student groups, legal appeals, and support statements for gays from churches, unions, and public corporations.

Much of the available material, of course, is related to the university and college level. The development of consciousness, however, present in students and administrators in post secondary

level will work its way to secondary schools. The movement and openness of college faculty to declare themselves homosexual will prompt many secondary and elementary teachers to run the risk of public declaration.

Most of us, hopefully at this point, are aware of the rapidity of value and community change. A routine glance at the present set of issues in the diocesan papers, or in the secular journals, gives proof to Toffler's ideas in *Future Shock* that we must be prepared to live with change. Tension issues, for example, in the Church of ten years ago such as birth control, language, celibacy, priesthood, authority, have been so openly discussed or so radically rethought that many of us are at least prepared for change as a way of life. The "hope" of some that homosexuality will disappear or fade away should not be considered. If anything, some awareness of how change can come so soon should prompt legislatures, administrators, educators to look at the present scene and begin to prepare for the growing issue of homosexuality and education.

What are some of the possible issues in education and homosexuality? Here are three areas from a policy statement of the Gay Teachers Association of New York City:

AFFIRM that gay is proud.

AFFIRM our rights to educate all people about the outstanding contributions of gay writers, gay painters, gay historians, gay psy-

chologists, sociologists, philosophers, and a host of other gay people who have invested their talents to the culture of a world society.

AFFIRM the beauty and legitimacy of our life style.

Basically these three affirmations relate to three major areas of concern:

1.) the basic purpose of the American school as a value transmitter and assimilator; 2.) the place of curriculum material as reflective of the community values, and within the general intellectual and cultural heritage of our society; 3.) the role of the teacher as model and transmitter of knowledge and values.

Each of these areas needs scrutiny and exploration and I think each should be seen in as full an introductory context as possible.

Basic Purposes

American schools have talked and are continually talking about the overall development of the person, of the individual, a growth that encompasses more than just traditional academic learning. And, of course, we view our public and private schools as instruments of value transmission and assimilation.

The key words in recent American educational vocabulary have been adjustment, socialization, fulfillment, personhood, uniqueness. There were some vague assumptions underlying these words, assumptions of stability and continuity of values, especially sexual values. We have come a long way, but we still have limits. We pushed for the growth of the

individual, for his uniqueness, but always we have presumed a certain constant: heterosexuality.

At present I live in a small community near New York City. I went to the local public library and obtained a copy of the community school board's philosophy of education. I read it carefully, and discovered that much of its language is open to affirming the individual, his potential, and his adjustment to society.

The purpose of education in the schools of this district is to facilitate the development of the potential of each child to the fullest. The school staff seeks to recognize individual differences and to engender achievement and progress, not only in basic skills but in the ability to think independently and critically.

Education is the guidance of the child through learning processes to the end that he becomes personally effective in a dynamic society. As each child grows, there is constant (though not uniform) mental, physical, social and emotional development.

The Board of Education, reflecting to the best of its ability the concerns and desires of the citizens for an excellent public school system, recognizes its responsibility to provide a broad educational program consistent with the mental and physical potential of every child in our school community.

The Board believes that each individual should be accepted into our educational program *as he is*, (italics added) and that he be provided with a stimulating environment and opportunities for learning experiences designed to promote behavioral changes that will effect continuing satisfactory adjustments to life.

. . . To accomplish its purpose, our school system must foster a high level of moral and ethical beliefs as guidelines for influencing the actions of students, staff and community.

The statement certainly provides an opportunity for a minority group, such as the gays, to request help in the school for any individual who feels his/her potential is to the gay world with its own adjustment to society. The final statement of a "high level of moral and ethical beliefs as guidelines" may not be the bulwark it once was in our society. We now have word that homosexuality is not to be considered an illness. And although the Vatican Declaration on Sexual Ethics in 1975 considers homosexuality intrinsically evil (and hence a very difficult topic for some Catholic schools to handle), public or secular morality has different value components for sexual activity, e.g., birth control, abortion, extra-marital sex.

Special programs for people of heterosexual preference are already in evidence; marriage courses are acceptable and even mandated. And should not students who are homosexual have the advantage, during their formative years, of a choice of role models, and/or public counseling and development?

Given the reality of the situation, what questions or assumptions need examination? I think, perhaps, that statements about American education will become more explicit and precise. The

function of the school will need to be more carefully delineated, and the articulation of goals will require a broader look at our contemporary society and its components.

School boards may need to ask whether their schools are to be more formative or informative. The limits of the school as value transmitter will come under scrutiny more and more. (It must be noted that in this particular time of American life, some retrenchment and some degree of conservative reaction among school boards is surfacing, e.g., the censorship of books on Long Island this spring semester.)

The argument that homosexuality is so unacceptable to American society that any attempts to set up new rules or precautions is unnecessary is not particularly a strong one. It negates the possibility of working through and establishing norms, or the possibility of dialogue about differences, or the reality of the present situation. I think the adamant "the problem doesn't exist" approach is obviously weak. Yet I question the statement of the Gay Teachers' Association that there is a need to affirm the beauty and legitimacy of the gay life style.

In my hesitancy, I am aware that the American public and private school actively supports and encourages the "practice and skills of family living," a position that doesn't basically allow for the positive affirmation of another sexual/social style.

My reservations are in the areas of affirmation, proclamation, of protest. It amounts to a proclamation of values, of acceptance of differences or of new norms for public behavior, but these need to be spelled out more definitively, more clearly, with more specification of norms.

If American society (and rather specifically the Catholic community) has learned anything in the last two decades, it is that change needs to be discussed, analyzed, and carefully dialogued so that all of the sides receive a good measure of clarity and consideration. Minority groups have achieved change by reason of the examination of public documents, of the careful questioning in the public order of what has been assumed privately or quietly.

The gay affirmation of its position is not necessarily a good for all, but unless it is acknowledged, met, discussed, the issue of concern for all humans that we profess in our statements will not ring true.

Curriculum Material

As a teacher of some twenty years in both secular and Catholic education, I am well aware of the changes in curriculum content in the last two decades. Certain forbidden topics have surfaced almost everywhere in education, e.g., sex, race, pacifism, even the topic of change itself. Books that were normally hidden in paper bags, such as *Catcher in the Rye*, would be welcomed by some conservatives today as a pleasant change from contemporary litera-

ture. At my own public institutions, credit bearing courses in ethnic and racial studies will soon be followed by women's studies. If the topic of homosexuality has come out of the closet, it will soon appear in the catalogues for credit.

A 1975 booklet, *Gays on Campus*, listed courses at University of Nebraska, Rutgers College, California State University at Sacramento, Swarthmore College, Concordia University (Montreal), University of Massachusetts (Boston) in such departments as English, Anthropology, Sociology and Psychology. Titles of the courses were: Pro-seminar in Homophile Studies; Sex Role in Literature; Literature and Homosexuality; Laboratory in Human Relations; Gay-Straight Male Encounter; Sociology of Homosexual Behavior; The Other Face of Love; Studies in Gay Male Literature; Homosexuality in Western Literature; History of the Gay Movement; Sexual Variance; The Contemporary Homosexual in Life and Literature; Contemporary Civilization and Homosexuality.

A different situation for some educators and citizens comes when it is the area of the less than formal inclusion of homosexuality as a factor in our curriculum. And the concern is greater when the issue of homosexuality surfaces at the elementary and/or secondary level. Peter Fisher in *The Gay Mystique* writes what he thinks is missing from our curricula:

Heterosexual propaganda begins in the school from the very start. All the primers have nice little girls and boys, but you don't find close, affectionate relationships that might be interpreted as homosexuality. If you encountered anybody who by the furthest stretch of the imagination might have been homosexual, it was probably in the form of a warning against taking candy from strangers. There are no gay couples in reading texts—all adults are heterosexual, and most are married.

In later school years, as students encounter literature written by homosexuals, or history concerning individuals who were homosexual, this aspect is completely obscured. (pp. 174-175)

The cry is for more openness of the content of our traditions. The question for educators goes back to the purpose of the schools, to what values the school is willing to share and wishes to make public and continuous.

There are, of course, special purpose schools—e.g., for religious groups, for certain economic levels—where the contribution of members of the particular group are given special emphasis. I remember reading about certain Catholic authors who were of particular significance to my identity and to my groups' cohesiveness.

What the gays are asking for, then, is not unusual in terms of our American education tradition. What becomes significant is the value/tension level for the community, and another issue that has not yet surfaced with sufficient emphasis: the readiness of secondary/elementary students to handle certain topics in sex-

uality. A great deal of work has been done on sexual development that covers the readiness of students from pre-school to early childhood to elementary to secondary levels to work with and through topics of sex (or very significantly, what is commonly called family life education).

It would seem fitting that the inclusion of gay studies or the informal inclusion of gay material at the secondary/elementary levels needs to utilize the resources of the specialists in sexual development. The absence of any mention of homosexuality in most cases at the present doesn't mean the blanket introduction of the topic to fill the void. And certainly at the secondary level, some aspects of the gay movement will need to be included in the very near future. With the present emphasis in American education on relevance, the civil, social, and legal aspects of the gay movement cannot be avoided.

But perhaps the major problem that may surface in the future will be the issue of the homosexual teacher, since it is the person of the teacher who is rightfully considered the prime influence on the student.

The Teacher and Homosexuality

The role of the teacher in twentieth century America and also in other areas of the industrial Western world has been in process of great change. Although the gay is now calling for his civil rights, he is joining the whole teacher movement in a call for

freedom of life style. The gay teachers have not been the only teachers with problems: teachers as a group were, until recently, confined to narrow roles in terms of conduct, dress, income, status, power. The present call of the gay teacher to affirm his/her identity has been paralleled or preceded by the teacher union struggles for rights to an adequate income, privacy limits, freedom of dress codes, rights to protest or make grievances. The *teacher as a person* is a relatively new situation.

Some of the established traditions of teacher selection and behavior can be traced as far back as Plato and his *Republic*. Teachers are to be civil servants whose life and life style are dedicated to the needs and use of the state. Wisely, Plato saw that the young are the gift of the future. That future is brought forth out of the youngs' experiences of values and models. Plato's guardians were exemplars. So too, the gay community sees that tradition in its own light. In a 1974 "Welcoming Address" at a Conference of The Universities and The Gay Experience, the speaker, a professor at Barnard College, put it very well:

The universities in our world are custodians of human culture and the major factories of new knowledge: we educate the young and carry on the work of the mind. How many gay people have participated in this human endeavor throughout history we will never know, but what we do know is that today many gay people all over the world are partaking in this human and

hopefully humanizing work. The world must know, as indeed we must too, what our role in culture and education has been, is, and will be. To accomplish this we must put a stop to the shoddy theories which pretend to explain us and the shady images which pretend to represent us. We must write our history and each of us tell our story. It is up to us today to begin this task of uncovering and discovering ourselves. Yet we cannot do this singly or silently. Rather we must stand together before all, before professors and administrators, publishers and editors, parents and students, legislators and legislated, saying: "We are here; we will not go away." (pp. 221-22)

There's a twofold theme running through Professor Gustafson's remarks. We educate the young; the young must take us as we are. What may be critical here is the role of the society that is only now beginning to accept a teacher as person, but still wants that person to fit into a standard form of service or subservience to community values.

I think Professor Gustafson is correct in his projection of the present and the future. "They are here; they will not go away." I am not sure that the larger American society has yet to come to a working understanding of where the homosexual group as educators will have its freedom.

There seems to be little disagreement, in theory, on the question of the civil rights of the homosexual who wishes to be employed as a teacher. The gay movement has documented enough evidence to make it clear to boards of education and local

communities that anti-gay rules are discriminatory and illegal. Growing support for civil rights of gays and some progress in positive legislation are coming forth. At my own university public declaration of homosexuality seems to be acceptable.

The question of the homosexual as active role model in the classroom is the major issue, although I know the legal battle for discriminatory hiring practices is far from over.

On a recent television show, the question of the homosexual as role model for some adolescents was stressed. The need for available role models who are not hidden is stressed in Fisher's work. He writes:

It should be clear that a gay teacher is in no position to proselytize, and if he were and wished to he wouldn't succeed. Unfortunately, in some instances it would be highly advantageous if a gay teacher *were* free to be open about his homosexuality.

Speaking from my own experience and that of many gay friends, high school can be hell for a young homosexual. Young men or women who are first becoming aware that they are homosexual are placed under an enormous emotional strain. Why are they different from everyone else? Why do people hate homosexuals so much? How can they hide the truth from family, friends, and school authorities?

How many high school students are troubled by inner conflicts over homosexuality which they dare not express to anyone? How many "inexplicable" youthful suicides can be traced to the isolation and fear imposed on young homosexuals? Just

as a student who is a member of any other minority group can benefit from the opportunity to talk to a teacher who shares his minority status, the chance for gay students to talk about their problems with a gay teacher would be of enormous value. Members of other minority groups can at least turn to family and friends; the young homosexual cannot (pp. 176-177).

The difficulty education will face here is one of values for the school, for the students, for the community. Traditionally we use the teacher as a role model for the young as well as the transmitter of academic content. But what rights do people of in-between moral status have in our society? What rights does a society have to restrain certain changes?

The question of faculty proclamation of sexual preference at the secondary/elementary levels is facing the major hurdle that our society basically holds that homosexuality is a problem which must be closeted in order to protect the young and the adolescent during their formative years. While a discussion of the issue of homosexuality might be considered acceptable at certain age levels, the question of a viable model will cause concern in most schools and communities. The gay community, of course, is well aware of this. Fisher writes:

In most parts of the country, any teacher who lets it be known that he is gay, much less advocates a homosexual life-style for his students, will lose his job, regardless

of his teaching qualifications. Although it is expected that straight teachers make their heterosexuality perfectly obvious and encourage it in their students, it is intolerable for a homosexual teacher even to be known to be gay. Rather than proselytize, the gay teacher must make every effort to conceal his homosexuality (p. 176).

The "coming out" process seems to be primarily concerned about achieving an accepted role in society, and then help for the gay students. The conflict from the community is that the children will be influenced by this teacher whom they have hired to transmit values and to be role model. Therefore, they want that model to reflect the basic community values. Coming out at the secondary/elementary level will provide too much ambiguity for the child or the adolescent about the norms expected in American society of today.

Significantly enough, on the other hand, there is considerable support for the rights of the gays to be hired, provided they don't move into the role models approach. Some support for the gay is support for the right of the individual to privacy.

What is not as clear in all the literature is the problem of community limits for values. Like it or not, the community tends to demand of its teachers that they reflect the community's standards. The gay teacher situation provokes memories of the Scopes evolution trial, the problem of suffragettes, the problem of any

ignored minority. What may surface is the depth or real concern of the community for its values of family, of sexuality, and an attempt on the part of the community to spell out its limits, and for local boards of education to work out some carefully delineated models for employment.

The gays in education have hit home, of course, because they recognize what education means to their lives and future. Because they are a minority they have tried to call forth from the literature and the laws what rights they actually have, and what precedents back their position.

What the gay situation also provides us with is another example of the American political and educational system at its most tried and tested. In each of the recent crises of education, e.g., blacks, women, ethnic studies, *et al.*, each group has called for a re-examination of basic assumptions, has studied the process of compromise, has redefined the limits of curriculum and purpose, and has learned how to use pressure.

Perhaps some general rules will be needed in the continuing dialogue on the issue of homosexuality and teaching:

- 1.) some common ground on human development, the when and what, the why, of the introduction of sexuality to infants, children, and adolescents;
- 2.) distinctions between knowledge, proclamation, affirmation, advocacy;
- 3.) acceptance of acknowledgement that our society has

pluralistic values and practices in sexuality; 4.) dialogues on areas of sexuality to be included in the curriculum. Society has chosen in some areas to restrict or exclude some topics, e.g., religion in the public school. Perhaps there are needs for avenues of curriculum change; and 5.) continuous re-evaluation of the overall purposes of our schools, and the examination of the language we used to express our purposes. This is a

difficult process, but one that is more and more necessary. Conflicts over values are not helped by turning to poor or vague descriptions of values. The call that "everybody knows what we're talking about," is of little value to anyone.

If we ignore this issue, we do marked injustice to our own goals for human development, but if we don't clarify the limits, we leave ourselves open to all possibilities.

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