

Love or Labels, Inclusion or Exclusion?

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Let's assume something beautiful: that, like me, you have been in an incredibly romantic, loving relationship with your spouse for the past twenty or more years. You've raised four gorgeous children together and you can see a relaxed retirement full of love rising over the nearby horizon. For the next few moments, whenever you read the labelling quotations in bold, pretend that you and your spouse have both suddenly been hurtled to another planet, and are part of the family structure there. Eerily, the roles there for heterosexuals and homosexuals are the opposite of those here. Now you are part of the targeted group. Take a moment to really assess your innermost feelings when you read and receive these quotations in bold.

All of us in the homosexual community have heard all these labels, and many more. After each, I explain a few experiences that my friends and I have had with these labels here on this Earth. They are listed in order of the least offensive to the most threatening. I have numbered them for your convenience in future discussions.

1) "Silence is golden. You are, by yourself, welcome in our house." Your brother invites you to his wedding – "but **don't ever mention your lover – and don't bring him/her here, under any circumstances.**" Our friends, Dave and Shane, had to separate like this, one staying home, the other standing mute while watching a brother's wedding. Shane's mother "set as a condition" that there "not even be any discussion of Dave in front of Shane's father and older brother...to preserve some semblance of family unity" and "to create a façade of togetherness". Shane explains "I feel that I am not even a real person when I visit, and every year I grow more silent."

In other words, don't talk about it, no matter how isolated you feel. Don't share this moment of symbolic happiness with your loved one. In fact, pretend you don't have a loving partner at all. Dave and Shane share less and less with their families, who have grown more and more distant.

The mother of my partner Diana, said "I love Robin, but for heaven's sakes, don't introduce her to my friends as your partner!" In other words, live a lie. Diana's mother is a devout Anglican. She also said, "It's unwise to talk about your relationship to your children." So, in her eyes, we must lie to our children, too? We didn't follow her advice, because we believe in modelling the Truth.

As an English-as-a-Second-Language teacher of international students in university, I remained silent about my relationship. It was difficult, because in the classroom, we are supposed to model language and give examples of a variety of everyday discussions, including dating, relationships, marriage and family. Early on at the university, a co-teacher outed me to one of our mutual students. Five of the student's friends from that country boycotted my classes and wrote hideous evaluations. I was almost fired, until upon inspection of my classes, the administrator said she thought my teaching was excellent and said she realized they had to question how much emphasis they place on student evaluations. The student rumours continued to circulate for well over a year, which added a lot to my stress levels. I suffered diarrhea for a year, and problems with angina escalated.

While discussing a MacLeans magazine annual poll of Canadians on a variety of topics and polling students on campus for their reactions to compare to the international students' opinions, one Mexican student said, in response to *How would you feel if you discovered your son were gay?*, that "I

would kill my son if he were gay!” Shaking inside, I lightly said “Maybe you’d like to live in Manitoba, where (at the time) there is the lowest tolerance of gays.” By term’s end, he had met quite a few gays, lesbians and bisexuals on campus, and came to tell me “I see there’s no difference between them and us. I’m going home to tell my friends in Mexico that they’re just as nice.”

A few years later, during a parallel discussion, a Libyan student said, “You know, in my country, we kill people like that!” I skipped making eye contact with him for a few seconds, replied “Oh that’s interesting,” and with my heart rate shooting through the roof, breezily asked other students “And what do they do in *your* country?” This student looked straight into my eyes without having any idea that he was speaking to a person he’d have seen hanging from a rope at home. A couple of months later, after a class outing, when Diana had volunteered as an assistant, we gave this student and his young son a ride home. He asked Diana and me into his home for tea with his wife and the rest of his young family. They never knew.

Keeping the silence includes never talking about innocent everyday things you do together. You’ll never know when you might offend someone. I casually referred to Diana in a Tabi Clothing store, when a fellow customer admired the shirt I was buying. I said “Oh yes. Isn’t that embroidery pretty? My partner works in a geriatric home, and her patients just love it when she brightens their days with sweet things like this to look at.” The woman stiffened up, snapped her lips into a thin line and walked out of the store in a whirlwind of her own, self-imposed, silent fury.

2) “Love the sinners, but hate the sin,” explains the father of our friend, Dawn. He is a Reverend and member of the Board of Directors of the Evangelical Fellowship of Canada, a part of the Inter Faith Coalition. He claims to love his daughter and her spouse, Elizabeth, although he’s fought against their marriage in numerous court cases and made anti-gay presentations to Parliamentary Committees. Of course, his daughter won’t go near his church, knowing how condescendingly they ‘love’ her. His actions speak much louder than his words.

Our friends ask “Does God’s love shine only into an exclusive little circle?” The animal kingdom – 450 species in one scientific study – perform both homosexual and heterosexual acts. So why should such acts by humans be perceived as ‘unnatural’ or ‘sinful’? What about Ruth and Naomi in the book of Ruth, and David and Jonathan in I Samuel, 18-20 and II Samuel, 11? Bible abusers (see References), anxious to whip up homophobia, prey on innocent people’s ignorance of the original wording of the bible, the historical context of those original words and the incorrect translations of the past century.

Dawn and Elizabeth have joined the Unitarian Church, where they feel openly embraced.

3) “You’re wrong. You need to change. You can be saved.” Our friends, Bob and Lloyd, together for 35 years, staunch Christians, tell us of their close friend, Frank, who had run the “ex-gay” ministry at Liberty Community Church at the Burnaby Christian Fellowship. A month before Frank died of AIDS, he told CBC in an interview that the only regret he had was telling so many young gay people that they could change, when he knew from his own experience that it was impossible.

The American Psychiatric Association admitted in 1998 that this type of therapy not only has no shred of evidence to work, but that it can be destructive. They therefore opposed any type of therapy to change a person’s sexual orientation.

Diana’s older brother, the one she always specially adored while growing up, refused to talk to her for 8 years because of our relationship, even though he commented that Diana was a much happier person now that she was sharing her life with me. He opened the doors of communication for two

years, before again saying he couldn't tolerate the idea of homosexuality. "I can see it's your way or the highway," he said, "and I choose the highway." This is the pattern of his communication.

4) "You're sick. You're insane. You're crazy." When Diana finally recognized the truth of her homosexuality and left her marriage, her father-in-law, Tom, phoned Diana's mother long distance. Diana had wanted to wait, to drive the 400 miles east to tell her mother in person, knowing that her mother was totally stressed out caring for her husband who died 3 weeks later of Alzheimers. "Diana is insane," Tom said, "and needs to be put in a mental institution."

When we started work in B.C. as litigants for equal marriage for same-sex couples, we received our first hate mail. The anonymous sender had glued pictures of sleazy photos of women in bright pink on the paper and printed in jagged letters "You're sick!"

Our friends, Peter and Murray, during long months trying to raise awareness of the challenges faced by homosexual students in the B.C. public school system, received anonymous, abusive telephone calls and a death threat through the mail.

5) "We represent God and only our way is the word of God. God hates fags." In other words, there is only one way to love, and keep fags out of the church, even though God created them, too. Our dear friends, Wendy and Sue, have just this spring given birth to identical twin sons. Wendy was raised Anglican and wants to have their sons baptized. She asked us, in quite fearful, hesitant tones, if we knew of any Anglican priest who would be a safe priest to go to. Her dream was to be accepted, and better yet welcomed, so she could feel good about having Samuel and Liam christened there. She didn't want to risk having the church condemn and exclude her, while loving and welcoming their beautiful babies. She didn't want the church to turn her sons against their mothers.

Fortunately, we know of a loving, willing, inclusive-minded Anglican priest to whom they can go. We also know that he is sticking his neck out, and may have to bear others' wrath within his diocese and elsewhere, in order to be so lovingly welcome. What a shame that such beautiful, caring people have to fear the very church that is supposed to be modelling God's Love for them and their newborns!

6) "Your marriage will take away from the stability of society. It could lead to the destruction of our civilization. It's equal to kleptomaniac or homicidal tendencies. It's a wicked lifestyle. You're knocking a hole below the waterline of the ship once called the Dominion of Canada." These statements are just a few of the proclamations during the Parliamentary hearings from the Standing Committee on Human Justice when it toured across Canada to hear what Canadians had to say about equal marriage for same-sex couples.

Many of my friends in Ontario and Quebec heard the first statement above spoken by Richard Hudon, spokesman for the Association of Christian Families. He said that gays and lesbians are "unnatural, sinful, repugnant and could lead to the destruction of our civilization." MP Vic Toews insisted to me that allowing homosexuals into marriage would lead to polygamy. I tried to explain to him that I wanted marriage exactly as it is, monogamous. On national television, an Ontario MP claimed "Same-sex marriage is an oxymoron."

Our friends in a 35-year relationship wryly commented to the Committee that "35 years is an awfully long engagement." We pointed out that heterosexuals have been very destructive of marriage, very adulterous. With the stresses put on homosexuals to be silent, to be portrayed as evil, it directs

attention away from the problems heterosexuals are causing within the institution of marriage and deflects it against homosexuals. Ironically, at a time when many heterosexuals are scorning marriage and living common-law, many homosexuals are wanting marriage. The world, and marriage, needs more such models of committed love, not fewer.

People cry about reclaiming ‘traditional marriage’. The tradition is that many homosexual men, like our friends Bob and Lloyd, and lesbian women like us, get married heterosexually, either masquerading as heterosexuals or so shut down in denial that they don’t acknowledge who they really are. Bob and Lloyd fortunately realized early on that they had to be true to themselves, but divorce meant hurting their wives and children. Now, 35 years of togetherness later, they stand on their apartment balcony in downtown Vancouver, looking over at the men running from their marriages to meet other men in the park near their apartment. Is this tradition, which is carried out in every country worldwide, one that we wish to preserve, or do we want to move to a new tradition – one of equality and honesty and of modelling true love?

7) “You’re an abomination to God! You’re preposterous, unnatural, sinful, repugnant, aberrant, vile, predatory, immoral and a travesty.” As if rejection by family and society weren’t enough, even God rejects us. The message seems to be that LGBT (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transsexual) people don’t deserve spiritual resources.

Our friend, John Fisher, newly retired director of EGALE (Equality for Gays and Lesbians Everywhere) in Ottawa, told us of a phone call he received from a young man who had just told his family he was gay. His father yelled abuse at him, threatened him physically and threw him out of the house. He contemplated killing himself, but then read that the federal government was just then introducing legislation to recognize same-sex couples equally. He found a phone number for EGALE and called for help. If family and/or church couldn’t be there for him, at least the government was.

On John’s first date with his spouse, they passed a street preacher denouncing homosexuality, citing statistics that young lesbians and gays are more likely than heterosexuals to commit suicide, as proof that homosexuality is inherently unhappy. John came to the realization that the preacher, in proclaiming his hate, was using the fact of lesbian and gay youth suicide to justify the very intolerance that contributes to that tragic problem.

During those same Parliamentary hearings mentioned earlier, I listened to proclaimed Christians describe us as “aberrant”, our families invalid and our sexual lives vile or predatory. I prefer not to speak about my private sex life in public. Everything else we do, day in and day out, is the same. We’re really quite boring. Most caring, committed, monogamous heterosexuals feel the same. The world is full of heterosexuals flaunting themselves in TV, movies, magazines, newspapers, billboards and on the street. We find it difficult to understand how the heterosexual community can be so disturbed when they see a monogamous gay or lesbian couple quietly holding hands.

8) “You’re a tool of the Devil! You’re going to burn in Hell!” My son, Joshua, listened to his half-sisters say this about me. “Did you know your mother is a tool of the devil?” they said. “Did you know she’s going to burn in Hell?” They had learned this in their father’s church. Josh laughed at them, for he knows what a loving relationship we have. He knows how deeply we can communicate on any matters of concern to him or to us. He told me that he feels his father’s church scares people into joining them. That they are going to church out of fear, rather than love.

9) “Kill a Queer for Christ!” This magnificent piece of alliteration is a real bumper sticker, popular

in certain U.S. states. Due to a lack of love, lack of support, lack of inclusion – seemingly simple things that caring churches could provide -- 10,000 American homosexuals commit suicide every year and 100 are murdered (see References: “Letter to Louise”.) “As many as 5,500 Canadians die premature deaths each year as a result of homophobia”, according to a study in 2003, by The Institute for Social Research at the University of Saskatoon, who deplored the fact that if this were any other population group in our society, these largely preventable deaths would have governments “tripping over themselves to provide resources to address the problems”.

With such high statistics, each one of us can site a friend or relative who has died unnecessarily. Sandy, a young woman Diana had known and babysat for years, graduated from nursing school, and soon after, at age 21, committed suicide. Her explanatory note said “I’m afraid I’m a lesbian.”

Almost twenty years ago, I almost lost the love of my life to suicide. Fortunately for me and for our children, Diana herself, at age 39, managed to stop from steering our old Volvo off a cliff that autumn afternoon in 1983. Shaking, she returned to our street, our home, my arms. She shared her fears – of loss of respect, of loss of friends, of loss of family, of loss of self, due to homophobia. We sought counselling. Although it did not stop all the losses from happening, it pulled all of us through the terror and helped us cope. We know what facing these labels means, deep inside.

After applying these scenarios to yourself, trying to live with them, what do you think the chances of your loving relationship lasting on that ‘other planet’, would be?

I implore you to look at these labels seriously. The Church has an immense role to play in supporting gays and lesbians. You have a responsibility to look at these labels, many of them espoused by the church against us. That the church condones *any* hate against us is deplorable. In this or any matter, you cannot afford even a *little bit of* hate, for that is akin to being a little bit pregnant. Eventually you give birth to a much bigger hate. Nor can you be just tolerant, for that is like pinching us in a door closing with condescension, making us scream and run, also. You have to embrace inclusiveness, 100%. If you take the time to get to know us, like knowing people of another colour or culture, you will see we are just as human as you. There is no half-way house of equality. If we are equal, then we are equal all the way.

The church is supposed to be the safe place where we can all go to be loved, supported, nurtured and accepted. So far, it is our government to whom we have had to run. It is a rather cold institution, but even so, it hasn’t been as excluding as the church.

If this is not so, ***if the church is the place where we are supposed to go to be hated, where families are supposed to be silenced and divided, siblings pitted against siblings, parents against children***, then Jesus Christ has certainly died in vain. How many of us will continue to have to be crucified before the church is brave enough, like Christ, to stand up and take responsibility? To model to the rest of the world, no matter what the threat against it, how to embrace inclusion?

Love does prevail.

References (Please investigate, before ignorance kills more):

- 1) Steps to Recovery from Bible Abuse: <http://www.truluck.com/index.htm> “This is a response to the abusive use of the bible for gays and lesbians and all others oppressed and alienated by religion.”
- 2) A Letter to Louise: <http://www.GodMadeMeGay.com> This is “a biblical affirmation of

homosexuality” written by a southern Baptist priest.

3) What We Wish We Had Known: http://www.samesexmarriage.ca/docs/Breaking_the_silence.pdf
“Breaking the Silence, Moving Toward Understanding. A Resource for Individuals and Families” by the First Tuesday Group of the Presbyterian Church, Mt. Kisco, New York

4) The International Gay and Lesbian Association: <http://www.ilga.org/default.htm> “This is a world-wide federation of national and local groups dedicated to achieving equal rights for lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transgendered people everywhere. Founded in 1978, it now has more than 350 member organisations. Every continent and around 80 countries are represented. ILGA member groups range from small collectives to national groups and entire cities.”