Cultural Daily

Independent Voices, New Perspectives

As Marriage Equality Advances, Walls of Silence Shatter

Sherry Angel · Thursday, July 4th, 2013

A few months ago, I was among a select few in the audience at a reading of a new play written by my son, Erik Patterson. It's called "The Sex Lives of Strangers," and one of the characters, Mick, is a long-married, middle-aged gay man who is still in the closet.

As the story unfolds, the secret takes a terrible emotional toll on Mick and his wife and grown daughter. The play, which is still going through readings and rewrites on its journey to the stage, left me brooding about all the people out there who are not out. And remembering the relief I felt when Erik came out to me just over a decade ago at 23.

I asked him about the connection between his own angst about coming out and the development of his character, and he responded with a poignant email: "A lot of things have gotten better since I was a kid, and with historic changes like the Supreme Court rulings on gay marriage, it's getting better every day. But we still have a lot more ground to cover, and that's where I was coming from when I created Mick. He represents the path I could have taken if I hadn't embraced my own differences and come out. He's a product of this society, and he's internalized all of the homophobia he grew up with and let it define him. And now, in middle age, all of his lies are coming to a head. That's what I wanted to explore."

I now know that for Erik, coming out to me was as scary as stepping off a cliff, even though he had every reason to believe there would be a soft landing. I began to realize he was gay when he was 16. His stepdad and I talked about this gut feeling of mine, and we worried about how long it would take Erik to tell us and how difficult it would be for him.

We were both acutely aware of what my sister, Jill, had gone through. She is now among those in California making plans to exercise her new marriage rights, but she didn't come out until she was in her mid-30s. She brought the whole family together in her therapist's office to share what had long been a shameful secret in her life. She had confided in me earlier, during the period when she turned to fundamentalist Christianity in an attempt to reform herself. "What keeps me out of homosexuality now is my belief in God. I truly believe it's *wrong*," she told me. I tried to help, but words could not break through her shame at that point. When religion failed to provide a "cure," she began to think about suicide. I am so grateful she managed to get the right kind of help in time.

Although Jill had been coming to family gatherings for years with girlfriends, no one had questioned this or seen how much agony she was going through. For much of her life, she had felt very alone as she struggled with self-hate and the conviction that somehow she had to change. My parents, my siblings, our spouses – we all felt terrible that we had been so clueless.

I was determined not to make the same mistake with my son. But I didn't want to push him, either. If he was, indeed, gay, it was up to him to decide who to tell and when. So I waited. I tried to help by giving him signs. For example, I complained loudly when Dick Cheney's lesbian daughter was not invited to the podium during the 2000 Republican convention. I championed gay rights

whenever I had a natural opening to do so. And finally, on a December afternoon during a break from college, Erik gave me the best gift I will ever receive. It was this letter:

Dear Mom,

Merry Christmas. You asked me to give you a letter for Christmas. Thank you for asking. The moment you asked, I knew what I wanted to say.

I want to be more emotionally open and straightforward with you. I want to be able to communicate with you to the fullest extent possible and not have any secrets.

There's a conversation that you've been trying to have with me for a long time. I've seen you try to start it and then I've shut you out and ended the conversation as quickly as possible. I've been a brick wall of silence. I'm sorry for that.

I've begun this letter before, but never finished it. I once dreamt that I wrote it and in my dream, I was extremely eloquent—but then I woke up and I couldn't remember the words.

Every time you've tried to start this conversation, I've been afraid to continue it.

I don't know why I'm afraid. It's just a difficult conversation to begin. So here goes, I'm going to begin it now: I love you, I'm gay, let's talk.

Love,

Erik

After I read the letter, we cried, hugged and finally had that talk I'd been hoping for since he was 16. I learned that Erik had been aware since the age of 12 that he is gay. (Why didn't I see the clues? At that time, his room was covered with posters of Michael J. Fox, and he kept scrapbooks with photos and news clippings about his heartthrob.) Erik told me he had first come out while studying drama in London for a semester during college. When he returned, he came out to his friends here. That helped him work up the courage to tell me. And then his stepfather. And the next day, with me sitting at his side, he told his Aunt Jill, who by this time was in a long-term relationship and was raising two beautiful children fathered by a sperm bank donor.

It took a while longer for Erik to tell the rest of his family. "Do you think you could start a rumor?" he asked me. "Then the news would spread by itself, and everyone would just know." Nice try. I can't remember how the word got out, but it happened without any drama. So why was Erik asking me to say the words for him, and why didn't he tell me sooner? "I knew my incredibly supportive family would be okay with it," he says. "The problem was, *I* wasn't okay with it. When I was a kid, the most common playground insults were 'you're so gay' and 'faggot.' Every time I heard those words, they stung. Because even if those words weren't aimed at me, they still landed on me. They taught me at a young age that being gay was a bad thing, worthy of taunting. It was the worst insult you could sling at someone. I learned to police my behavior: Don't speak in certain ways, don't dress in certain ways, don't do anything to give yourself away, don't let anyone know you're the thing they make fun of.

"I grew out of that, thank God, and embraced myself, and came out, but every time I hear about another young gay kid killing himself after getting bullied, my heart aches because I know what that kid went through. Why does the word 'faggot' still have such an impact on playgrounds? Why do the bullies still have the power to make 'gay' a put down, to make homosexuality worthy of hate and ridicule?"

And here's another question: Why does it still have to be such a big deal when someone in the public eye comes out? NBA player Jason Collins made national headlines several months ago when he became the first openly gay male U.S. athlete in a major professional sport. It's time to stop keeping track of firsts like this. Jason wrote in the May 6, 2013 issue of *Sports Illustrated*: "I wish I wasn't the kid in the classroom raising his hand and saying, 'I'm different.' If I had my way, someone else would have already done this. Nobody has, which is why I'm raising my hand."

Each hand that gets raised makes it easier for the next one to go up.

And to make it easier for people like Jason, we all need to raise our hands.

I'm proud that Erik is using his writing talent to do this. He is doing his part to awaken others to the change we all need to help bring about at home, in our neighborhoods and communities, in the workplace – wherever we have an opportunity to counteract the impact of hate and ridicule with kindness and acceptance.

My son has promised me grandchildren. I want them to grow up in a world in which no one needs to make announcements about their sexual orientation. It should be something that just *is*. This is what Erik said to me right after I read his Christmas letter, when I said, "I'm so grateful that you were finally able to tell me who you are."

He gently corrected me: "No, mom, this isn't who I am, any more than being heterosexual is who you are. It's like having blue or brown eyes. It's the way you're born. It just *is*."

Images: Top: Supporters outside the Supreme Court (Photo by Photo Phiend/Flickr Creative Commons); bottom: The author and her son Erik.

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