

Marie Claire Blais

Michelangelo

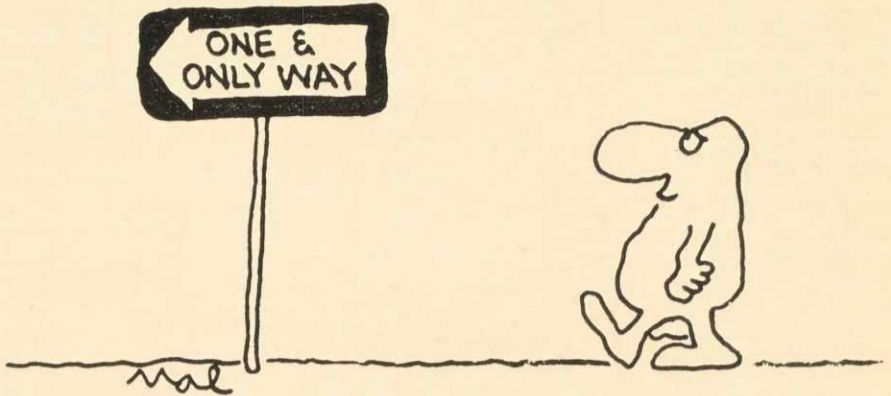
Lily Tomlin

Leonardo DaVinci

M. Hainey

GROWING UP

QUEER



by Edgar Z. Friedenberg

My perception of reality and my interest in society was influenced by the experience of growing up as a boy attracted to young men in ways defined as sexual. A process has continued through the years — of which there have now been almost 70 — to determine what I noticed about the world I lived in and the other people who shared it. I came to see more and more clearly how our established ways of looking at the world prevent us from understanding it well enough to challenge its arrangements effectively.

All cultures depend on appropriate taboos as sources of mystification to keep their members too confused to make trouble: and to mobilize hostility against those who manage, even inadvertently, to penetrate the veil that conceals their *modus operandi*. But cultures vary considerably in what they regard as threatening and seek to repress. Why bother to make a special stigmatized category and a series of federal cases out of young men who love other young men?

My reason for specifying *young men* is that adolescence is when the social crunch comes and the rest of your life depends on how you handle it. All young men, I suspect, are in varying degrees erotically susceptible to other young men; and they have to do something about their feelings, if only to repress them.

Clearly, what our society fears and punishes is tenderness and special affection between male lovers, not just acts defined as homosexual. I am setting aside for the moment the prior and even more fundamental question of why a society should distinguish certain actions involving particular parts of the body as *sexual acts*, and therefore to be stigmatized and punished as immoral *per se*.

Certainly, what I learned to fear in childhood and continued to fear for most of my life was not sexual contact with other males. In my youth, I didn't even realize that what I wanted was considered sexual. I knew boys sometimes did nasty things together; but I would have been frightened, mostly of my own abysmal social ineptitude, if any boy had tried to mess around with me. None did; I didn't know many kids my own age, and those I did know had very little interest in me, sexual or otherwise. That was why I was miserable.

Though lonely, I didn't even dream of being accepted as an equal by a bunch of other kids. I knew I didn't have the social skills to handle that. What I lusted for was physical love and affection from strong young men who would let me love them in return. I wanted to hug them and be hugged back; I wanted to feel the warmth of their bodies and the texture, preferably rough, of their clothes. My climatic but shameful fan-

tasy was of being spanked, affectionately by a guy a few years older than myself. Since parents were expected to spank children, especially boys — though mine never did — nobody could call spanking dirty even if I really got off on it. It would be a socially acceptable way for a young man to get into my pants, where I wanted him. It wouldn't hurt that much; he wouldn't spank me unless he cared about me; and after such intimacy he couldn't just throw my ass out of his life. We might become friends.

Separating the men from the boys, though, takes a long time and hurts like hell. It's a major operation. It cannot obliterate their erotic response to one another; it can only repress and distort that response, often intensifying it and occasionally driving it into tragic and even hideous modes of expression. For at least ten per cent of North American males and probably far more it fails. But when it does succeed, what has happened?

Most significantly, one has learned not to notice; to ignore messages about one's own existence with an obstinacy proportional to their urgency. To remain oblivious to strong feelings and deeply felt needs is no passive condition; it drains energy continuously. The process of not noticing is deeply incapacitating; it requires a reorganization of one's view of the world, so that impressions that manage to slip through one's selective inattention will have nothing to connect

with, and will remain meaningless.

If boys are initially responsive to the erotic appeal of other boys and young men, what does it cost them to become numb to this appeal; cost them in terms of their ability to notice and understand what is happening to them and around them — not just with respect to sexuality but with respect to anything that might impinge on their attention? I don't really know thank God, but I can imagine. My best clue to an answer comes from the intensity and persistence of my desire for closeness, physical and emotional with young men. If I hadn't been able to notice and respond to that, I couldn't have noticed anything but my own anxiety, and that only partially.

Two recollections seem especially relevant. The first is of sitting in compulsory chapel at Centenary College in 1934, with boys on one side of the hall and girls on the other. I was 13, and the other students were from 17 to 21 years old. Chapel in this Methodist college was not meant to be erotically arousing, but it was very comforting, especially in September when Louisiana was still very warm and the students didn't wear any more clothes than they had to. Our chapel was so authentic it smelled of high Heaven. The second, just 10 years later, was of lying awake in a Navy barracks at boot camp. Much as I hated the Navy and feared its harsh authority, the moments before I fell asleep, listen-

ing to the breathing and snores of the other recruits around me, were filled with joy and peace. There was no lust in this — I felt plenty of that at other times — but this was like good meditation, a sense of alertness and heightened awareness, even of grace: of having come down, though not yet out, where I ought to be.

If I had been unable to acknowledge these feelings to myself and accept them, despite my fears of being beaten up or locked up for having them, I would have learned nothing and been nobody. I would also have been in much greater danger. One of the first and most astonishing lessons I learned about straight young men was that they tended to be reassured rather than threatened by my evident, though non-aggressive response to their masculinity. If I was queer: well, that was my misfortune and none of their own. Everybody knows queers have very good taste.

Conversely, being gay made me a much more attentive and somewhat more skillful observer of what went on around me. I was used to functioning at a high level of apprehension; I could and did notice actions and policies that my straight mates seemed to find too scary to acknowledge. I was just as scared as they; but, then I usually had been; I had had to get used to living like that. Gays learn body language early and well. Words are for camp. I didn't expect people to tell me the truth. I was pretty sure most of them didn't know the truth, if there were such a thing, and would die sooner than learn.

I had less reason to deceive myself about the meaning of what I saw — or at least, I had quite different reasons and would make less common errors, less likely to be confirmed by the erroneous observations of my fellows. Gay men, especially 50 years ago, had less stake in society than straight people; and certainly less stake in the common myths that held society together and condemned gays in the process. It was not merely easier for us to be critical of its pretensions, we had to be. And, finally, all gay men have survived years — some have survived decades — of efforts to seduce or coerce them into seeing what they don't see and feeling what they don't feel; and reporting these false observations as their own, ardently and enthusiastically. After all, straight men insist, it's a fact of nature that women are irresistible: you better believe it. Our attraction to them is what makes the world go round.

No training could conceivably serve a scientist better, if he is strong enough to endure it without capitulation. If Galileo, like Leonardo, had been gay, he might have found the courage to respond to his inquisitors with a weary "there you go, again." But then, perhaps, like some of them, he may have been.

HETEROSEXUAL QUESTIONNAIRE

1. What do you think caused your heterosexuality?
2. When and how did you first decide you were a heterosexual?
3. Is it possible your heterosexuality is just a phase you may grow out of?
4. Is it possible your heterosexuality stems from a neurotic fear of others of the same sex?
5. If you've never slept with a person of the same sex, is it possible that all you need is a good gay lover?
6. To whom have you disclosed your heterosexual tendencies? How did they react?
7. Why do you heterosexuals feel compelled to seduce others into your lifestyle?
8. Why do you insist on flaunting your heterosexuality? Can't you just be what you are and keep it quiet?
9. Would you want your children to be heterosexual, knowing the problems they'd face?
10. A disproportionate majority of child molesters are heterosexuals. Do you consider it safe to expose your children to heterosexual teachers?
11. With all the societal support marriage receives, the divorce rate is spiralling. Why are there so few stable relationships among heterosexuals?
12. Why do heterosexuals place so much emphasis on sex?
13. Considering the menace of overpopulation, how could the human race survive if everyone were a heterosexual?
14. Could you trust a heterosexual therapist to be objective? Don't you fear (s)he might be inclined to influence you in the direction of his/her own leanings?
15. How can you become a whole person if you limit yourself to compulsive, exclusive heterosexuality, and fail to develop your natural, healthy homosexual potential?
16. There seem to be very few happy heterosexuals. Techniques have been developed which might enable you to change if you really want to. Have you considered aversion therapy?