

# SPECTRUM

## Gays and families

One of the most pernicious and pervasive of the many myths concerning gay men and lesbians is that somehow they are anti-family. The gene for "anti-familiness" being located just left of that for "queerness" and pretty close to that for "anti-apple pie-ness" no doubt. Actually parents comprise something of an obsession for gay men and lesbians - as Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward put it "we find that whenever you put a group of gay men and women (sic) together and talking, sooner rather than later the subject of parents comes up." Of all the traumatic experiences during the process of self-acceptance, "coming out" to parents usually ranks high on the list. For parents too, hearing their child telling them that they are gay or lesbian is often a nightmare come true - no matter how accepting they later become.

Though it is impossible to generalize, parental reactions to this news often involve some sense of guilt, a sense of failure reinforced by all the partial information and down-right lies that form the most readily available data on the subject. As George Weinberg said, "having a homosexual son or daughter in no way implies having failed as a parent. There are between twenty and thirty million such parents in this country (USA), many of whom have been unnecessarily demoralized by the propaganda that they are failures."

Two issues are germane here; firstly, lack of objective information, and secondly, the existence of a veritable "guilt industry" whose object is social control. If parents have any difficulty with their offspring it is during that chaotic and supercharged time when teenagers and young adults are becoming or striving to become independent individuals. Part of that process is the parent coming to terms with their's child's sexuality - a mother not worried about her son, a father not fretful for his daughter really could not be called fully human. If the only information they had on their child's sexuality came from sensational tabloids or porn-videos, that worry or fretfulness would more likely be abject terror! Unfortunately, that is just about the quality of the information generally and readily available to parents of gay men and lesbians - with one exception. If a gay or lesbian child comes out to their parents it is rarely a spare-of-the-moment decision: its only a step taken after long, careful and often agonized soul-searching. A parent in such a position has a unique resource available - their son or daughter. By all means read

around, talk to other experts, but only the gay son or lesbian daughter can speak for themselves. A little love and understanding go a long way - and time is invaluable. There is no easy, magical answer - but most gay men and lesbians tell their parents in a spirit of love and trust. If the news emerged in the course of a row, then the relationship was already dysfunctional for other reasons, and such "other reasons" are likely to be sublimated into the issue of sexuality.

As for the "guilt industry", well it take many forms. If parents feel the need to seek professional help (in the broadest sense), then they should be aware that they are in a state of crisis. That crisis may be registering anywhere on the scale from "we need advise on this one" to a pained or anguished cry for help. Anyone in a state of crisis moving toward resolution is very suggestive. The chosen counselor is in a very powerful position, and recognition of this, and how to avoid its abuse is at the heart of professional ethics; be it for a psychiatrist or a clergyman. Ethics demand that a counsellor empower a person in a crisis to find their own solution: ethical counsellors *do not* and *will not* provide a solution. Parents of gays and lesbians who seek counselling should give counsellors who advertise simple answers and simple solution a very wide berth. Those religious orga-

nizations that identify parental culpability are little more than guilt manipulation outfits, and are in fact, a major part of the problem!

Some communities have active branches of organizations like "Parents of Gays" and "Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays" - homophile organizations that support gays and lesbians and their parents. Fredericton is not one of these communities, though initiatives in this direction are afoot. In the meantime there are other resources. There are books on the subject, and by far and away the best available are "Now That You Know" by Betty Fairchild and Nancy Hayward (Harvest/HBJ) and "Loving Someone Gay, by Don Clark (Millbrae/Celestial Arts). For those gay men and lesbians considering telling their parents there are some points worth bearing in mind:

1. How do you feel about being gay? If you are going to share a "problem" then don't be surprised if your parents also get it as a "problem". You are going to be off to a very good start. Be positive about yourself.
2. Choose your time with care. Ideally you want a time of calm. Avoid undue melodrama, avoid Christmas Day, Thanksgiving, Mum and Dad's Silver Anniversary . . .
3. Do not blurt it out during an argument! If communications are

## Our modern spirituality

The term spirituality has a considerable history. Today it has again become fashionable to speak of one's spirituality. But what is really meant by spirituality?

Spirituality has often been linked to an interior or contemplative life, with much time spent in reflective thought. Such was frequently associated with a reclusive, ascetic way of life, and one thinks immediately of medieval Christian mystics cloistered in monasteries. Today for some spirituality may still connote similar escapist or "other-worldly" notions.

Such focus assumes spiritual life to be opposed or irrelevant to so-called "ordinary life". This not unfamiliar notion, both inside and outside the church, renders spirituality somewhat politically, economically, even culturally benign; a choice for withdrawal, at least in part, from the everyday world of human affairs. This "flight" into the interior and private realm of the soul is assumed then to be optional or additional to real life. Those not thrilled about leading such a

(double) existence will emphatically insist that they are not spiritual. "I'm not a religious person" has in fact become quite common, if not naive, parlance today.

Since Catholic Vatican II (1963) understanding of the term spirituality has radically changed. We now more readily acknowledge that indeed everyone has a spiritual dimension. In fact, everyone, is spiritual, not just the Christian, Jew or Hindu. And, the spiritual or religious dimension is an integral aspect of the whole human person.

In one's spiritual core, one's deepest centre, a person experiences, as the theologian Paul Tillich put it, "ultimate reality". There one is open to, or confronted by, the immanent and transcendent God. Spirituality, then is our reaction to that experience.

That reaction, not merely to be confined to some interior realm, becomes our inner, motivating self bursting out in concrete expression. The things we say and do speak volumes about our spiritual orientation, what Robert Bellah

## Positively Pink by Adrian Park

already poor, work at improving them first, otherwise your sexuality will become a lightning rod for everything else that is going wrong in the relationship.

4. Be prepared for the possibility that the news will cause pain, upset or anger. These will pass, but its vital that they are vented. Remember how long it took you to come to terms with yourself - permit your parents the same time to work through their fears.

For the parents who hear the news, please remember:

1. It's taken incredible reserves of courage, trust and love for your child to reach this point. Guess where they learnt these virtues? These are characteristics of which you can be justifiably proud. It may not seem like it at the time, but it is an act of love, a choice between honesty or lies and evasions.

2. The only thing that has changed about your son or daughter is your perspective.

3. You are not alone. There are thousands, if not millions or parents of gays and lesbians who have been where you are or have been,

and are now as proud of their gay and lesbian children as of their heterosexual siblings.

4. If you feel an acute need for advice and help, your child is your most valuable resource. If you seek professional help, be very careful and be critical. Seek second, third, fourth opinions. You are not to "blame", anyone who seeks to play on your sense of guilt or failure, or tries to have you make restitution according to a set prescription is using you and abusing your trust.

For both parents and their gay and lesbian offspring the best advice is to keep lines of communications open. Do not force issues, listen to each other, especially each other's fears. Give yourself time. Bewary of "experts" offering magical and easy solutions. There are a thousand and one issues that can drive families apart, this need not be one of them. There are literally millions of us, gay men and lesbians, with parents we cherish and who cherish us as loved family members, who can bear witness to that fact.

## Metanoia by John Valk

referred to as "habits of the heart".

Mind and body give expression to the motivation within, the commitment of our hearts. Spirituality, therefore, becomes lived experience. Our spirituality directs our lives, animating and characterizing us. It tells us who we are, what we want, and what is important. It has to do with meaning and purpose, the so-called "life and death" question. These are religious questions. No one can escape them, though we try sometimes to ignore them.

The spiritual "make-up" of North American society today is as varied as it is interesting. But the various spiritual orientations, or "trends" as some have undoubtedly become, do have elements in common. We do, after all, share the same world, with the same problems and the same desire to

overcome them: poverty, disease, loneliness, death. How we deal with these issues of life has as much to do with our religious-cultural tradition or heritage as it does with our own individual spiritual uniqueness.

But all too often, of course, we produce our own little "gods", to which we devote much of our time, energy and money. Those who consider religion out-moded would hardly acknowledge creating a god in their own image. Fewer still would admit falling victim to the seduction of the "gods" of personal success and material wealth.

The late pop artist Andy Warhol, however, tells a different story. Warhol became astonishingly famous by portraying Americans as consumers. He mocked their inability to conceive of anything more  
*Continued on page 12*