

**UMD GLBT Advisory Commission**  
**First Annual National Coming Out Day Reception**  
**October 9, 2006**  
**Mags David**

**II. Time and Place**

**I. Introduction**

It's great to see so many friends here, and such a fabulous representation of queer Duluthians.

A word about language before I begin:

When I first came out, I was "gay." But, I have come to really love the word "queer" because queer is a big word. Queer includes gay men, gay women, lesbians, bisexuals, transsexuals, butch women, femme men, butch-but and femme-femme couples... Anyone who makes their lives outside of our cultural template. Queer is a big word.

But, I do usually think of myself as a lesbian. Or, actually, a dyke. Now, I know that "dyke" is not a polite word. But then, the women in my life tend not to be polite women.

**II. The Story**

Thirty years ago, in the fall of 1976, I was 16 years old and beginning my senior year in high school. I was also madly in love with a girl. The good news: she was in love with me.

One day that fall I was at a friend's house. We were chatting and she said something about going out to the garage. Only, being silly, she said the "gay"-rage and giggled.

I thought, "I'm gay." It was like turning on a light bulb. Honestly, despite being called a lezzie in sixth grade for holding hands with a girl, and other subtle clues like that in my life, it had never occurred to me before. I knew instantly that it was true.

First, I told my girlfriend. "Mel, we're gay!" She was like, "...yeah." Apparently, she already knew. Shortly after that my mom told me. "We're concerned about this relationship" and I couldn't see my girlfriend anymore. Of course I did, but that's a different story.

This is the really the way it happened for me, so I actually do have an anniversary of "the time I came out" which is why I thought of it when Kim

proposed this event. For most of us of coming out is not such a precise experience.

## II. Time and Place

I asked Tineke to share this event with me because I knew that we came out in the same year – into the same world. Our circumstances were very different, and our conceptions of ourselves and of what we were experiencing were also very different. But I'll always feel a bond to her because I know we were engaged in this process at the same time.

This is the world we came out into, thirty years ago, a place where:

IV. The nation's first openly gay state lawmaker Allan Spear, came out in the Minnesota Senate in 1974.

Anita Bryant, a former singer and beauty queen, was waging a very visible campaign in 1977 to repeal a human rights ordinance that included sexual orientation in Miami, Florida. "As a mother, I know that homosexuals cannot biologically reproduce children; therefore, they must recruit our children." Bryant's campaign was successful.

A similar human rights ordinance was both passed, then repealed in St. Paul in 1978.

Lesbian feminists were engaged in the work of re-defining what it means to be a woman, what it means to love women, and what a woman's "place" in the world was. This was at a time when women were expected to wear skirts to job interviews, *without exception*.

That nice, neutral, safe word "partner" was not yet in use as a way to describe our relationships. We said, "lover." – Try *that*.

The idea that it might be legal for a man to marry a man or a woman to marry a woman anywhere in the world during my lifetime seemed highly improbable.

V. The state of California had a referendum on the ballot in 1978, the "Briggs referendum" that would prohibit gay men and lesbians from teaching in the public schools. This referendum didn't pass, but I had intended to become a teacher, and this particular reality was life-changing for me.

## III. What is Coming Out?

"Coming out" is now a part of everyday language and people are "outed" for a variety of things. But it's about "coming out of the closet" - not hiding. And there are really two meanings to coming out.

The first is coming out to oneself:

Recognizing that being true to our own feelings means going against social norms, potentially at great cost to our relationships to family, friends, and the world at large.

The second is coming out to others:

Revealing the truth about our feelings, our actions, and our willingness to be outsiders.

#### **IV. Coming Out is Not a One-Shot Deal**

For some of us it *is* obvious by looking at us that we are queer. But usually the only people who are willing to talk about it when they notice are those whose goal it is to hurt us.

For all of us coming out is something we have to do over and over and over:

To our parents

To our friends

To our neighbors

To our co-workers

Our doctors

Our employees

The clerk at the grocery store

Every time we make a new connection eventually it must come up

So, it is something one needs to practice, and yes, it does get easier with practice. That's the good news; it gets easier with practice.

For a long time I'd get a shot of adrenaline every time I knew the moment was coming up. But now, thirty years later, it's almost - not quite, but almost - routine. I have practiced the many ways and various words of doing this particular reveal and there's no more adrenaline.

#### **V. But Why Do We Have to Talk About It? or, "Can't You Keep Your Private Life Private?"**

We can't keep our private life private because our culture constantly talks about romantic and sexual relationships. Do you know any heterosexuals who:

Wear a wedding ring?

Have pictures of their children in their office?  
Talk about "my husband" or "my boyfriend"?  
Point out their attraction to a movie star? ("He's hot!")

In this context our choice is:

To lie or omit:

What did I do this weekend? I went camping. By myself? mmm.

Are you married? No. Have a boyfriend? No. So you're single? Yes.

To lie.

To keep our private lives private means:

Never to talk about our crushes, or what movie stars we think are hot  
(...Helen Mirren)

Never to reveal the places we hang out or who our friends are.

Eventually to erase some portions of ourselves, and for fear of being  
found out, to make sure that we:

Dress right, talk right, act right, and

Be Very Careful.

But most of us here know all this. If we didn't we probably wouldn't be in this  
room. Still, it's good to remember this truth.

## VI. So, What is Being Out?

Coming out is one thing, but *being* out is the thing. If coming out is revealing  
that we are queer, being out is living queer.

Being out is:

Not censoring our personal style:

Of dress

Of speech

Of attitude and belief

Not censoring:

Our friends and associations

Not censoring:

Other queer people who may be bigger, badder, louder, more  
flamboyant, more *queer* than we are.

Being out is:

Not caring who knows.

Accepting that we will face some consequences:

Subtle, or not so subtle, ostracism

Discrimination

Strained family relationships

Physical danger

We all make choices about when, where, and to whom we will come out. But it can be a thin line between making choices and being in the closet.

Being out is *not*:

Living your life as an open secret. If you think "everyone knows" but "everyone" is a select group of your close associates, and you have never said it out loud to anyone else - maybe your co-workers don't know, and you're afraid of the information being "public" - you are not out.

Being out is:

Making it possible for other queer people around you to know that you are there. There is safety in numbers. If your number is only available to some, some others will not be safe. There is strength in numbers. If you are not strong enough to bear the consequences of being out your self, some one else will not be strong.

## VII. The Story, Part Two

A year after I came out my girlfriend had left me for someone else. My relationship with my parents was incredibly strained. And then I went to college. My parents drove me up to Eau Claire, put my things in my room and drove away.

I think it makes a difference at what point in your life you come out because for a while it disrupts you completely. So, whatever else other people in your age group are doing: going to school, establishing careers, getting married, making money... you will have less attention to give to that. In my case I dropped out of college my freshman year.

I see that this particular stress is still alive for some of our students here at UMD. Everything we can do to support them will make a difference, and they *do* need our support. I was saved by two lesbians in Eau Claire who took me into their home at this crisis point in my life.

And I never looked back. I knew that being true to myself was more important than anything else. That I could not live in the closet without paying a price I was unwilling to pay.

I have noticed about my fellow queers that we tend to speak the hard truths in many situations, often to the discomfort of those around us. But, if we have nothing else we have this: Coming out. Speaking the hard truth.