

SIGNIFICANT, SO SIGNIFICANT

By MARY E. HUNT

INTRODUCTION

ONE SPRING SUNDAY AFTERNOON, Palm Sunday in fact, my partner and I entertained a group of couples at tea. It was a lovely occasion as some of us had not seen one another through the long winter months and others were new to the neighbourhood. We always like to introduce friends to friends, and what nicer way than over a good cup of tea and sustenance.

The table was set with flair. I had baked some tempting sweets; my partner, Diann Neu, was in charge of the open-faced sandwiches. Various teas were at the ready. Let the party begin.¹

First to arrive were two dear friends, Carol and Dana, both former nuns. Carol is an educator who counsels community college students; Dana is a nurse with HIV/AIDS patients. They have been together for ten years, a time punctuated by the care of elderly parents.

Next came Frances and Mona. Frances is a world-class mathematician, a brilliant pianist, and an active board member of a prestigious college. Mona is a librarian. They, too, have lived together for a decade, helping one another through career changes and facing the difficulties of being an interracial couple, African American and Euro-American.

Neighbours showed up next, our friends across the street. Jane is a radio producer, a politically savvy soul who writes well. Her partner Elaine is a social worker at an AIDS clinic, a dedicated cyclist, and always the life of the party. Drawing on their Jewish roots and their seven years of life together, they decided to express their covenant publicly. They hope for children soon and are committed to raising them in a stable, loving home.

Just as the first pot of tea needed refreshing, Joyce and Linda rang the bell. They are newly coupled and finding their way in the home-buying market. Joyce is a computer whiz who makes sense of cyber intricacies; Linda works in a bookstore to support her social activist habit.

Karen and Karla walked up the front path, fresh from a spring day's labour in their yard, planting and weeding, cleaning the pond and training their new dog. Karen is a school counsellor and Karla a social worker. They were both nuns earlier in their lives, have been together,

lived apart, and are now back together. Conversation was buzzing by now as friends caught up on winter activities and sketched plans for the summer to come. It was a fairly typical group of forty-ish women, sipping tea and enjoying one another's company.

Patricia and Sally arrived on the late side, but in plenty of time to meet everyone. Patricia teaches pregnant teens and Sally is a guidance counsellor. Sally's children are grown but she sees them frequently; Patricia left her religious community after twenty years for what appears to be a loving and life-giving relationship. They are new to the area so delighted in meeting such congenial women.

A word about the hostesses whom I almost forgot as they kept the water hot and replenished the plates. Diann is a liturgist and therapist, trained in Catholic theology and spiritual direction. I am a Catholic feminist theologian specializing in religious ethics, an activist and writer. I teach part-time at Georgetown, a Jesuit university. When asked how long we have been together we inevitably answer 'Not long enough', though we have already been blessed with nearly two decades of friendship. We love to entertain, and since we live in Washington DC area there is no shortage of guests.

Tea gave way to sherry. Frances played a few tunes on the piano while others sang along. Political debate continued in the dining room and discussion raged about an article in the morning paper. A pleasant time was had by all. We promised more such get-togethers during the summer months, busy lives notwithstanding.

Of course not all lesbian women are in coupled relationships, but this group was fairly typical of women of a certain age, economic level, religious background and social commitment. In fact some single friends were invited but unable to attend. The issue here is the sheer ordinariness of the gathering.

This recent social occasion at my house shows that what is so commonplace – a cup of tea with friends – to those of us who live it, is the source of so much consternation to others. It is their consternation, not our experience, which defines the unjust and destructive ways in which homosexuality, and particularly lesbianism, is treated in the public forum, especially in Christian circles, and specifically, in my experience, in the Catholic community. It is that framework on which I will focus since it is the one I know best and for which I feel the most direct responsibility to change. I will outline herewith the nature of the problem, how it relates to personal and corporate holiness, and what might be done to incorporate with respect this significant, so significant, reality into communities of people who seek love and justice.

I am in a deliberate way putting the shoe on the other foot, i.e., defining the problem as homohatred, questioning the holiness of those who discriminate, and suggesting how such persons can repent and redirect their energies so as to be inclusive. I see no need to argue for nor to defend women's love for one another, nor offer an apologia for same-sex love and genital sexual expression. Such would suggest that it is required when the default option, heterosexuality, needs no equivalent boost. It is precisely to change what Thomas Aquinas referred to as a 'habit of thinking', until the term 'significant other', if used at all, applies equally to hetero-marriage partners and to same-sex lovers, that makes this the most effective approach.

ANALYSIS

The problem defined

My friends are not angels, but neither are they 'dykes', 'lezzies', 'queers', or worse names that we have all been called in a homo-hating society. As Adrienne Rich observed: 'Two women sleeping together have more than their sleep to defend'. Rather, we are women whose primary affective life is directed to other women, something that a kyriarchal culture cannot accept.² The problem is simply not of our making, though we are the ones who suffer its consequences.

This rejection is fuelled in large part by a range of factors, not the least of which is Catholic religious prohibition on (a) sex outside of heterosexual marriage offering the possibility of procreation; (b) homosexual sex in any form, and (c) women's self-definition beyond the constraints of complementarity. Add these to a western world-view in which women, remarkable as it may seem, are still inevitably secondary to and derivative of men, and there is a recipe, not for tea and sandwiches, but for the homohatred and misogyny that most lesbian women, especially poor, young women of colour, know only too well.³

In forty-one states of the USA a lesbian woman can be fired from a job simply on the basis of her sexual identity. In Catholic circles, most of us realize we will not be hired if we are honest. Custody of children after a divorce is made extremely difficult for lesbian women. In one recent case a judge gave custody to the father, despite the fact he was a confessed killer who had served a prison sentence, rather than to the mother who was a lesbian. Extreme but true.

Daily life need not be so dramatic, but it can be annoying. Imagine shopping for a car together when the salesperson cannot understand that 'We both will' is a feasible answer to the question, 'But who will drive it?' Shopping for a bed goes without saying. Or, try checking into

a hotel and ask for a double bed, something no heterosexual couple would think twice about. Granted, these are the small inconveniences of those who can afford a car and who vacation regularly, but they are constant reminders that a 'significant other', no matter how significant she may be, is simply second best on a good day.

Many lesbian women have 'passed' through the years, being taken as sisters or 'just friends' who live together to share the expenses. While this has allowed many to survive, the erasure of lesbian love is particularly pernicious because it is based on the notion that men are necessary to sex, something that millions of lesbians would be happy to report is simply not the case. Moreover, it trivializes women's love for one another and the fact that strong, healthy, loving relationships between and among women are as feasible (if not more so, given male-female power inequity) as heterosexual ones.

Juxtaposed with this dynamic is the outcry against gay men whose sexual love is all too vivid for many observers. Gay men often labour under the opposite burden – the immediate suspicion of sexual intimacy whenever men become close friends. This is a function of a predominantly male world-view in which intimacy means genital sex, whether with a woman, or, heaven forfend, with a man. It often results in male skittishness about getting too close to another man, and it reinforces the stereotype that all gay men are predatory. Indeed, the bottom line is that lesbian women and gay men are understood very differently in the culture. Though we do share the oppression of homohatred, lesbian women and heterosexual women have far more in common with regard to how all of us are treated as women than do lesbian women and gay men with regard to how we are treated as those who love people of the same sex. Not even in oppression do we have equal opportunity.⁴

I do not aspire to gay male oppression, but I do aspire to clarify the right and reality of women's love. As long as it can be denied and passed over, we will remain 'insignificant others' in the broader culture. We will be consigned to the roles of caretakers for elderly parents when indeed we may have and/or want children of our own. We will live as celibates in religious orders, thought to have forsaken the 'joys' of heterosexual marriage when indeed it is women we prefer and engage with in community. We will receive invitations to bring 'and Guest' when recently married straight friends are invited and named as couples. We will be denied (in the US) hospital visitation, inheritance rights, spousal health benefits and many other goods that accrue to those who are linked by law through marriage. While mores are changing, they are not changing quickly enough.

The problem is twofold: first, there is the collective lack of imagination which has yet to encompass the reality of relational variety. It is becoming increasingly obvious that simple justice requires certain basic changes in the way society is constructed in order to provide equally for the range of ways people decide to live. No longer can hetero-hegemony hold sway when same-sex couples are having and adopting children who are in need of the same stabilizing practices which have so long justified special treatment for heterosexuals. Further, so many people find that their relational lives change, what with longer lifespans and the death of or divorce from a partner. Hence, most of us find ourselves outside the norm of hetero-marriage for some portion of our adult lives. In fact, what we are facing is the renewed importance of our significant others, the friends and co-workers, the relatives and pets, neighbours and on-line friends, who provide us with community and meaning. Taken collectively, they, rather than primarily the fabled 'spouse', are of significance.

Second, the religious teachings which ground family life and relational norms are in serious need of overhaul to take account of this new socio-economic reality. For example, statements which take as axiomatic heterosexual marriage and see everything else as somehow 'other', including well-intentioned liberal efforts to 'fit' coupled lesbian/gay people into the norm, are suspect. Contemporary Christians simply cannot have it both ways. Either they have to embrace and celebrate the range of safe, mutual, committed relationships that are emerging, or live with the increasing irrelevance of Christian sexual ethics to the lives of many of their members. This may not be immediately obvious in some places, but most people in my circles have plenty of options for being religious so that they no longer need to tolerate anything less than respect for their choices and a warm welcome to themselves.

Implications for personal and corporate holiness

When I think about my friends who came to tea, I cannot help but be struck by the goodness of their lives. Most of them are in service work, many with people who are marginal, whether because of poverty, HIV/AIDS or race. All of them are committed to women's well-being. They are generous beyond expectation, and involved in the larger community whether through music, church, sports, volunteer work, or some other social engagement. I cannot overemphasize the ordinariness of this reality, the degree to which we all go about the lives we have constructed with delight, despite the consternation of those who see our sexuality as criminal, sinful or suspect.

I would call them all women of faith, though the content and expression of our faith differs from Anglican through Jewish, from the Ethical Society to Catholic. In a pluralistic age this is to be expected and cultivated. What stuns is the degree of forgiveness expressed in long-term relationships with parents who have been rejecting, with friends who have had to learn to accept difference. Likewise, the patience required to explain and expect, to clarify and console, when what you see is what you get. Surely these are marks of holiness!

What is less clear is how those who would bracket or eschew such love define their own holiness. Is it a badge of honour to hold so rigid a position on natural law that sexual diversity is unthinkable? Is it a mark of a true believer so to distance oneself from the goodness of same-sex love that it turns into a loathing made legal? Do churches which outlaw the ordination of honest lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgendered persons (as in the recent case of the passage of Amendment B by US Presbyterians) really believe that they are saving themselves and their children from perdition? If so, we are clearly reading the texts and history of the Christian tradition in wildly different ways.

Bernadette Brootan, in her definitive study on female homoeroticism in the early Church, argues that the ancients did indeed know more about this than has been commonly believed. She stresses that they were bent on 'maintaining a gender-stratified social order' which accounts for prohibitions on women's same-sex love.⁵ Power, not sex, is the ultimate problem, with ancient women rarely accused of sexual improprieties (as in paedophilia or not having children) but rather of violations of the active/passive, do/be-done-to formulae for men and women that held sway. It sounds all too familiar when I realize that the major 'sin' of my dear friends (myself included, of course) is our transgression of hetero-social structures of male dominance, something we profoundly have in common with so many women: sex workers, women who refuse to be abused, women who report the perpetrators of their incest and rape.

Strategies for moving toward love and justice

What will it take for the significance of others to be taken seriously, indeed to be integrated into the lives of healthy faith communities? I am not optimistic in the short run, especially since so many people, beginning with male priests in Catholicism, are unwilling to be honest about their lives and attractions. It is duplicity, not sex, just as it was power and not sex in the early Church, which is at stake here. Until those issues are faced, personal courage will have to suffice. In the long

run I am more optimistic that changes can take hold in deep ways and people will adjust. Such is the story of Christian ethics; as we have overturned slavery and usury, so can we overcome homophobia.

Let us begin with terminology. Mary Daly once said about a dear male friend of hers that he was 'significant' and indeed he is 'other'. She was expressing my reservation about the term, namely, that it comes from a liberal effort to include on pre-existing terms rather than a foundational shift in consciousness. That shift is one of power, inviting those of us who are marginalized to name our own reality and to expect that the naming will be respected. This begins with heterosexual women who prefer to use their given rather than married names, to define themselves as themselves rather than 'wife of', 'widow of', 'divorced from', and so on, all of which reinscribe the kyriarchal power of hetero-marriage.

It moves to lesbian women who may name themselves and their friends as they please. In the case of the much ballyhooed television 'coming out' of 'Ellen' this season, it was all in a name. When her friends asked if she wished to be called 'lesbian or gay', she countered with, 'Why not Ellen?' Not very political in my book, but it is up to her. Likewise, I have a partner, a friend, a lover, never a 'significant other', as if somehow other friends were 'insignificant' or somehow 'the same'. The point is I want to name my own reality, and that seems a fundamental gain of theological liberation movements.

There is an awkwardness that comes with change, and so we are in that dicey time between virulent rejection and full acceptance. But the principle that those who are most deeply affected are the ones who set the tone, the kind of 'preferential option for the struggling poor' is a reliable guide. Then we can think together about how best to describe the many friends who make up our communities.⁶

Most churches, especially Catholic ones, are light years from same-sex commitment services, though they will bless animals and houses, ships and airplanes. I do not picture my friends waiting around for a free Saturday in the local parish. But I do see them choosing to join faith communities where they are taken seriously on their own terms, where their love is accepted and their lives are seen in larger than sexual terms. It can be done through education, good will, occasional huge mistakes, and a general willingness on the part of us to grow with the insights that accrue to our generation as they interface with the gospel values of love and justice.

At the first meeting of the Conference for Catholic Lesbians in 1983, the keynote speaker was Mercy Sister Theresa Kane. She was fresh

from the controversy that ensued when she, as the president of the Leadership Conference of Women Religious, had greeted Pope John Paul II on his first visit to the US in 1979. Her greeting echoed around the world because she mentioned, however gently, women's ministry, much to the chagrin of the Pope and his entourage. She did not need more trouble by attending such a potentially controversial gathering as the CCL event, but she did so because she was invited.

In her address, she rehearsed how as a member of a women's religious community this was not a prime issue for her, indeed how her own sexual preference, whatever it may be, had been obscured from her. But she told of meeting a number of lesbian and gay Christians at a symposium. Despite all that she had been taught, she reported that she saw love there, and that was enough for her to demand justice.

I will never forget the faces of the women as she spoke, the tears streaming down their faces as she affirmed them not simply as women, but as Catholic lesbian women, many of whom had been estranged from their faith communities for years. Ironically, she represented those communities at that moment, and her words were healing, welcoming and satisfying. That is not all that is necessary, but it was and remains a running start toward the day when all will be considered significant, so significant on their own terms. Meanwhile, my friends and I will keep the tea water on for those who wish to share the sacrament of friendship.

NOTES

¹ I have changed names (other than my own and my partner's) simply to protect the privacy of my friends. This signals no lack of willingness to be 'out' on the part of most of them. Rather, it is a show of respect for the choices others make in an often cruel world, and an unwillingness to judge those choices.

² 'Kyriarchy' is the interlocking structure of various forms of oppression which result in the 'lordship' of some people over others: men over women; whites over people of colour; heterosexuals over homosexuals. It was coined by biblical scholar Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *But she said* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1992), pp 122–126.

³ Suzanne Pharr's *Homophobia: a weapon of sexism* (Inverness CA: Chardon Press, 1988) is an excellent introduction to the issues.

⁴ Cf my 'Opposites do not always attract: how and why lesbian women and gay men diverge religiously' in *Spirituality and community: diversity in lesbian and gay experiences*, edited by J. Michael Clark and Michael L. Stemmeler (La Colinas TX: Monument Press, 1994), pp 147–163.

⁵ Bernadette Brootan, *Love between women: early Christian responses to female homoeroticism* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), p 361.

⁶ I propose that friendship and not coupledness be considered the normative adult relationship. See my *Fierce tenderness: a feminist theology of friendship* (New York: Crossroad, 1991).