

On Being Heterosexual in a Homophobic World

Published in Backfire: the effects of homophobia on heterosexuals, edited by Warren Blumenfeld, Beacon Press, 1993

If you were to meet me, before I had the chance to tell you anything about me, you would know that I am white and male. If I told you about my work – teaching about racism, sexism, and homophobia and the coordinator of the Campaign to End Homophobia – you might assume that I am gay. In fact, I am heterosexual. I am also homophobic; in my experience, being homophobic is the predictable result of growing up and living in a homophobic world. My life has been affected at every turn by these conditions.

In the following pages, I want to talk about being heterosexual in a homophobic world. I want to explain some of the ways I came to know about homophobia and, in the process, some of the ways I noticed that I was homophobic. I want to describe some of the ways homophobia has hurt me as a heterosexual and how I believe that ending homophobia is in my own interest as a heterosexual. I want to make some comments about heterosexual privilege. And, finally, I want to share some of my optimism about the potential for a less homophobic future.

Learning about Homophobia

In the summer of 1972, during a phone call in which she sounded far away but very sure of herself, K. told me that she was a lesbian. She and I had flirted with being lovers, and I knew that she cared deeply about a woman with whom she lived. Earlier that spring, I had wondered about her sexual orientation, but I believe that this was the first time I knew that I knew a lesbian. Despite my desire for her, and some feelings of jealousy about her relationship with a woman, I felt satisfied knowing that she was claiming a lost part of herself. I was OK, and so was she.

I have no specific memories of contact with openly lesbian or gay people prior to that summer, although I clearly knew that there were lesbians and gay men in the world. Having grown up with a healthy dose of traditional masculinity in a traditional family, and having been a successful football player in high school, I must have known the stereotypes, and I was certainly acquainted with homophobia. Yet I was somehow prepared to accept K. for who she was. I did not try to talk her out of it; I did not assume that I could change her.

Over the next four years, in graduate school, I met other lesbians and other women whom I assumed were lesbian. I recall being curious about them – perhaps we talked about what it meant to be a lesbian – and my general sense is that I liked these women and admired who they were and what they did in the world.

On the other hand, my consciousness of homophobia in my relationships with men began much earlier and was a very different experience. I recall a sixth-grade classmate who

was accused of being a "homo" because my friends and I thought he was weird and somewhat effeminate; we teased him, sometimes shoved him, and certainly excluded him from our social group. Then there was a man at the local soda shop who allegedly liked boys and about whom my parents warned me; I believe that we liked the attention he gave us, yet we would make "jokes" about his being a "homo." Then there was the routine way in which we sneaked looks at other boys in the locker room shower, trying to satisfy our curiosity about other guys' genitals, and the fear I felt when I sensed someone looking at me.

In contrast to the little I knew about lesbians, by college I had acquired substantial misinformation about male homosexuality. It was not until 1977, after graduate school, when I was teaching high school, that I first met an openly gay man. B. was a student of mine. Over time, he told me about his social life outside school, his experiences with classmates, and his relationship with his parents. I knew about the concerned yet accepting attitude of his parents, the rejection from classmates and the feelings of loneliness at school, and the excitement and fear he felt in dating men and looking for love. B. challenged my stereotypes about homosexuality.

I now know just how courageous B. was. He was the only male student who was out; his only real friend at school was a young woman who had been ostracized for having been sexually involved with several guys. I believe that they understood, at some level, how the oppressions they experienced were related.

In retrospect, I recall the relationship with B. as feeling comfortable. I enjoyed our conversations and had a good rapport with his parents, with whom I discussed his work at school as well as their feelings about his sexual orientation. I suspect I was nervous about saying or doing the right thing around him, yet I generally recall that I was a good adviser and that B. appreciated my support.

At about the same time, I began to meet adult gay men. Instead of feeling confident, I was afraid. Homophobia had set me up to fear gay men's sexuality; male conditioning had set me up to fear men in general. A friend introduced me to L. and implied that he was gay. The first time we met, I had enjoyed the conversation and told him so, but in a second meeting, I told him that I did not want to spend time with him, giving the excuse that I was too busy. Actually, I was scared that he was coming on to me, and rather than confirming my suspicions, I ran from him. I felt guilty that I had shown interest in him and then rejected him. I had a similar experience with a man in an exercise class at the YMCA, and he was angry that I ran away.

What I now understand is that underneath my terror was confusion; I wanted closer relationships with men, but I was not interested in sexual intimacy. Having known intimacy only in sexual relationships with women, which usually began with flirtation, my interest in men must have had sexual overtones, to which, not surprisingly, gay men responded in kind. I was not prepared for that. So I cut off contact as soon as it was made.

Through participation at Men and Masculinity conferences in 1981 and 1982, I began to explore my relationships with other men and the nature of my own manhood. I knew that there were gay men at these conferences, and I heard about sexual contacts between some of the men, but I was somehow untouched by this. I was preoccupied, and excited, by all the talk of feminism and a “new masculinity”. I was thrilled that I had found a community where I could be myself and not have to compete, at least in the old ways, with other men.

At the 1982 conference I met D., who was openly gay. We became friends. During a visit to Los Angeles I stayed at his house. He came on to me and I responded simply by telling him that I was not interested in a sexual relationship. He respected that. It was a brief but profound exchange: I learned that the cultural mythology suggesting an unbridled gay male sexuality might be inaccurate. In the years since that evening, I have rarely been afraid of a gay man's sexual interest in me; in fact, most of the gay men with whom I have had contact have never demonstrated any sexual interest in me.

At the same time, I have come to believe that gay men, like heterosexual men, are socialized as men before any consciousness of sexual orientation. Part of male socialization is learning to be sexually aggressive. Therefore, I believe that trusting any man with sexual limit setting is a risky business. Nonetheless, I have continued to trust not only D. but most of my guy male friends.

Not only do I generally feel safe around gay men, but I have often discovered in these friendships a sense of intimacy that is usually missing in my friendships with heterosexual men. In fact, I am more likely to be afraid in the presence of heterosexual men, or those men whom I presume to be heterosexual. I am more alarmed by the ways in which men threaten one another in everyday acts of male aggression that are not explicitly sexual.

The Effect of Homophobia

Over the past five years, my friendships with both lesbians and gay men have grown deeper, and at some point I noticed that most of my friends and acquaintances are lesbian or gay. There is a freedom I feel with these friends. Not only is the potential for intimacy greater with gay male friends, but I can also cross sex-role boundaries more easily with them than I can with heterosexual male friends. With lesbian friends, there is an opportunity for intimacy that is different from the intimacy I experience with heterosexual women: from the start I assume that we will be friends, not lovers, so I focus my attention on our friendship instead of becoming sidetracked by the possibility of a sexual relationship. Our different sexual orientations act to limit my sexual aggression, and, in the end, I feel less confused about the sexual nature of our relationship.

At the same time, in predominantly heterosexual social settings and with some heterosexual friends, I feel a certain pressure – sometimes self-imposed, but sometimes coming from others – to be a more traditional, or at least predictable, man. I have to

decide if I want to talk about my work on homophobia or about the fact that I play in a lesbian and gay jazz band; I have to decide if I have the energy to deal with the reaction. If I hide this information, I feel as if I have left part of myself at the door. The feeling is one of distrust; I do not know if it is safe for me to be myself in the presence of other heterosexuals. I also feel confused by the sexual energy I experience in heterosexual social settings: the sexual attractions between myself and other women and the sexual fears separating me from other men.

From my perspective, there is no question about the effect of homophobia on lesbian, gay, and bisexual people in this society. As a group, they have been, and continue to be, oppressed because of their sexuality. The oppression takes many forms: invisibility, harassment, assault, damnation, denial of police and judicial protection, discrimination, etc. While heterosexuals, as a group, are not oppressed by homophobia, I believe that we are profoundly hurt by it. The fear of being thought homosexual keeps us from being intimate with same-sex friends; this same fear can lock us into rigid definitions of masculinity and femininity. Homophobia can destroy our families when we discover, and cannot accept, a family member is lesbian, gay, or bisexual. In a society where the achievements of lesbians, gay men, and bisexual people are hidden, we get a distorted view of reality; we learn only about the lives of other heterosexuals. The denial of equal civil rights to sexual minorities inevitably leads to limitations on the rights of all: if one group can be targeted for discrimination, any group can be targeted. In the end, homophobia prevents us from being fully ourselves.

My Self-Interest in Ending Homophobia

In my work on racism, I have often noticed how I have more energy for my work when I can articulate what I am moving toward rather than what I am trying to avoid. As a result, I have begun to focus on the ways in which it is to my benefit to live in a multicultural world in addition to the ways in which I am hurt by racism. In the case of homophobia, the benefits of living in a less homophobic world include expanding my options as a man, expanding the types of relationships I have with women and men, a greater appreciation of my own sexuality, an increased sense of safety as I interact with other men, learning from the experiences of lesbian and gay people, continuing my friendships with lesbians and gay men, learning about other forms of oppression in a way that is facilitated by my understanding of homophobia, and the possibility for greater justice and love in the world.

Expanding My Options as a Man

I learned the male role well. To expand that role beyond the limits defined by traditional masculinity means overcoming my internal sense of what is appropriate as well as the culture's judgment of what is appropriate behavior for me. The primary way in which our culture enforces sex roles for men (and women), is through homophobia; same-sex attraction and sexuality are linked with "inappropriate" sex roles. The feminine man is labeled gay, faggot. The masculine woman is labeled lesbian, dyke. A reduction in cultural homophobia will, therefore, mean an expansion of sex-role opportunities for me.

I will be able to do the things traditionally assigned to women without being stigmatized as less of a man.

Expanding Types of Relationships

For many heterosexual men, their friendships with women often carry a sexual tension: will we have sex? At the same time, their friendships with men are competitive and emotionally distant: how can I keep from being vulnerable around him? In my friendships with lesbians and gay men, I have the opportunity to move beyond these limitations. With lesbians, it is a given that our relationship will not be sexual, so I find that there is the possibility of a solid friendship developing, free from the tension of sexual feelings. (I believe that this is what heterosexual women often mean when they say that gay men are more "sensitive"; it is not that gay men are less sexist, but that the fear of sexual assault is not present, thus allowing for better communication and greater intimacy.) With gay men, there is a possibility of emotional intimacy beyond what I often find with heterosexual men. From my experience, gay men are generally less afraid of being close to other men and thus more available for intimate friendship.

A Greater Appreciation of My Own Sexuality

In the time that I have spent trying to understand homophobia and come to terms with my own prejudices, I have learned to ask questions about my own sexuality and the assumptions that accompany traditional heterosexuality. I have discovered new patterns of loving; I feel freer in my sexual relationship with my partner, knowing that there really are no "right" ways to love.

An Increased Sense of Safety

After a young gay man was murdered in Bangor, Maine, several years ago, I was asked to come and work with public school teachers on issues of homophobia. As I walked through the town, I sensed that every man in Bangor must adjust his behavior; any man was vulnerable to attack if the attackers thought he were gay. About a year later, I was walking in Harvard Square in Cambridge (a place with a reputation for personal freedom) and was verbally assaulted by two men for having my arm around another man (he and I were talking about a difficult period in his life, and I was supporting him by putting my arm around him.)

Although I may not be as vulnerable to physical or verbal attack as many gay men are, an end to homophobia would mean an increase in my personal safety. I believe that homophobia is a stimulus for male violence: men who are insecure about their masculinity or who fear peer rejection for not being sufficiently masculine may use violence as a way to prove their manliness. I would love to feel safer from all forms of male violence, from street crime and fistfights in sports, to economic exploitation and war.

Learning from the Experience of Lesbians and Gay Men

I have learned a lot from my friends. For example, lesbians and gay men have shown me ways to challenge traditional assumptions about sexual relationships. Listening to gay men's stories of the bathhouses in the 1970s or knowing that sexual contact between

friends is common in the lesbian and gay community has helped me understand that consensual sexual activity is primarily an experience in giving pleasure to oneself and one's partner. Too often, heterosexuals are taught – and believe – that sexual activity can take place only in the context of marriage or a love relationship. AIDS, of course, has changed the landscape, bringing fear where there was liberation. I feel sad that our society missed an opportunity to expand its appreciation of sexuality as a way to build self-esteem and to come to know oneself.

I have also learned about commitment. Although my partner and I have discussed marriage, I have resisted participating in a state and church-sanctioned ceremony upholding heterosexual privilege. Recently however, I attended the wedding of two gay men and saw an option for us. During the ceremony, the friends and family who attended the wedding were granted the power to pronounce the two men “lifelong partners.” In this act, I saw the process of empowerment at work; I felt the excitement of naming something for ourselves rather than having it named for us. One of the partners pointed out that heterosexuals often fall into legal, church-sanctioned marriage without considering creative alternatives; for these men, being gay meant the opportunity to think through their commitment to one another carefully and then create a ceremony that would fulfill their needs, not just satisfy legal or religious requirements.

Continuing My Friendships

Many of my closest friends are lesbians and gay men. Homophobia threatens their existence and makes it difficult for them to be fully themselves. These friendships are important to me. I desire these friendships to continue and deepen.

Learning about other Forms of Oppression

Although each type of oppression is unique, there are also similarities between, say; racism and homophobia. Knowing about the dynamics of homophobia helps me understand how racism operates, and vice versa. As a white male, I can use all the help I can get.

Greater Justice and Love in the World

I want to live in a world of freedom and justice for all people. Whenever I witness acts of homophobic injustice and recognize the contradictions inherent in a society that professes equality for all, I feel pain. If I am told by a fundamentalist that homosexuality is evil, I feel a deep hurt that good people, who happen to be gay and who live their lives with at least the same levels of commitment and integrity as heterosexuals, are judged by others as being evil.

I also want there to be more love in the world; if it comes in the form of same-sex sexuality; that is fine with me. I feel the loss of that love whenever I realize that same-sex couples cannot safely show their affection in public places in the many ways that heterosexuals can: hugging, kissing, holding hands. I believe that this will be a better world when all people are free to express their love for one another.

Self-Interest and Heterosexual Privilege

Focusing on heterosexual self-interest is controversial. For those who are acutely aware of the oppression of lesbian, gay, and bisexual people – and the relative freedom of heterosexual people – such talk can lead to feelings of resentment that heterosexuals are interested only in getting more privileges than we already have. For others, talk of self-interest flies in the face of the liberal position that ending oppression is for the benefit of the oppressed, never the oppressor: to have it otherwise would be selfish. (Of course, underneath this position one often finds an assumption of superiority and a feeling of pity for the oppressed.)

When a colleague first suggested to me several years ago that I might want to look at my own self-interest in doing this work, I resisted her; it seemed like a contradiction to me. I experienced the question itself as an invitation to selfishness. How could I worry about increasing my lot when there was so much oppression to be fought? But like most people – and perhaps all people – my energy for a task is strongest and most ‘resilient when my self interest is at stake, when what I am doing directly benefits me.

Furthermore, if I am doing something for someone else's benefit and not my own, I run the very real risk of deciding what they need rather than listening to them articulate their needs. I also run the risk of doing their work for them, thus depriving them of the opportunity to learn new skills to defeat their oppression. Thus, I have come to believe that I will have the most energy to challenge oppression when I define the benefits that I will receive in a less oppressive society knowing full well that others will benefit from the work I do for myself.

While I am focusing on the long-term goal of a non-homophobic society, where the benefits I have described will accrue to all people regardless of sexual orientation, there are questions I have about managing my heterosexual privilege in the present. Will I confront those who would give me benefits for being heterosexual while denying the same benefits to lesbian, gay, and bisexual people? Will I confront the omnipresent cultural homophobia that renders anyone who is not heterosexual invisible, abnormal, immoral, or sick? Will I give up the privilege in those settings where I have the power to exercise it?

The privilege is certainly real: it includes the many ways in which I automatically reap the benefits of living in a society that believes that heterosexuality is normal, moral, and healthy. I am free to talk about my sexual partner – in fact, if I were to run for political office or seek certain jobs, having a wife would be a clear asset in terms of public image. If I marry, or at least have a woman as a partner, my decision will be celebrated in my family, and it will be assumed that I have become more responsible as a man. As an employee, I will not have to worry about discrimination because of my sexual orientation; as a citizen, I will have other heterosexuals representing me in political offices and see my heterosexuality reflected positively in the culture. I certainly benefit by being free from physical and verbal assault, and this freedom allows me to focus my energy on what I want to do with my life without having to worry about other people

stopping me. (I am also privileged by my status as a white male; it may be difficult to separate those privileges that accrue only to my heterosexuality.)

It may be easiest to confront others who would grant me privilege, provided that I am aware that I am being favored. One of the dynamics of being a member of an oppressor/dominant group is a relative unconsciousness about oppression, so I assume that I will not always know about the privilege being given to me. It may be easier to see the privilege in context, for example, in a case where a gay co-worker is being questioned about his ability to work objectively with young males. I might realize that my ability would never be questioned simply because of my sexual orientation. I would then have the option of challenging our supervisor about homophobic stereotypes.

It seems nearly impossible to challenge cultural homophobia, given its depth and breadth in our society, yet I believe that I can challenge it in specific cases: by calling attention to homophobic advertising practices, writing a letter to the editor concerning a homophobic news story, or challenging the homophobic behavior of a prominent public official. In addition, I can acknowledge and appreciate individuals and institutions when actions are taken to reduce homophobia. I believe that my work on homophobia, by its very nature, challenges cultural homophobia; it stands as a statement that homophobia is not in all our best interests.

As for those situations in which I can choose to exercise heterosexual privileges, some privileges seem insignificant and are easy to give up, while others are difficult and exact a price in the casting aside. Although I have the privilege of casually sharing information about my sexual orientation, I do not always feel a need to tell others about my heterosexuality. I can easily give up that privilege in some social and work settings.

The price goes up, however, if it is a privilege that I really want or one that I believe everyone ought to have. For example, whenever I am with my partner in a public place, I am acutely aware of how we can hold hands or kiss without any threat to our physical safety. The reality for same-sex couples is quite different. Consequently, I have chosen to touch her far less than I would like. At the same time, I believe that we need more expressions of love in this world, not fewer, so this decision is unsettling. In general, is giving up a privilege that I believe to be fundamentally good a strategy for countering oppression?

Perhaps in the Next Generation

In the last few years, I have become a father to two teenaged children. Technically, they are my unofficial stepchildren, as I have no legal relationship with my partner. But we are a family. Homophobia, as well as racism, sexism, ableism, classism, and a host of other oppressions, is a regular topic at the dinner table. My home is yet another place where I can challenge heterosexual privilege.

My daughter, who is fifteen years old, is learning far more than I ever did about people who are different from her. When she began to be conscious of the sexual orientation of some of my friends, she was curious but nervous and so kept her distance. She was reluctant to baby-sit for a lesbian couple, asked me in a cursory fashion if her piano teacher were gay; and was impatient with me when I suggested that her friends might not all be heterosexual. But she is now great friends with her piano teacher, comfortable with babysitting in a lesbian home, and very outspoken at school about the fact that she has lesbian and gay friends. She challenges peers who are openly homophobic.

Recently I invited her to attend a gay wedding with me; she changed her plans for the weekend and made a special trip to be with us even though she was vacationing with a relative. She told me, "I wouldn't miss this for anything." We both cried at the wedding.

My son has gone through his own changes. At fifteen, he and his friends used words like faggot as put-downs. At nineteen, he is saddened by the homophobic comments made about a dorm-mate presumed to be gay; as a residence hall president, he is meeting with the lesbian and gay support group to develop educational programs to reduce homophobia on the campus. He is still a little nervous being around lesbians and gay men, but he realizes that it is his homophobia getting in his way.

I am proud of them. I think they are both extraordinary young people. I am also proud of my decision to encourage their contact with lesbians and gay men. I have even asked each of them about their sexual orientation; I want them to be conscious of the question. In their own ways they have each laughed and mentioned their obsession with the other sex, as if to say "It's hopeless."

My daughter and son frequently tell me about the harassment of friends and peers who are presumed to be lesbian or gay. They are concerned, often angry about the mistreatment. At the same time, I notice how easily they are accepted, supported, and encouraged in their heterosexual relationships. Friends and extended family simply assume that they are heterosexual and therefore "normal." To some extent, they realize that they are the beneficiaries of heterosexual privilege.

I am excited and hopeful about their future and the effect they are having and will have on other people in their lives. At the end of their lifetimes, I expect that this world will still be a homophobic place; cultural change is a long and difficult process. But at a personal level I see profound change. In contrast to what I knew when I was young, they know that the world contains proud and healthy lesbian, gay, and bisexual people; they know that oppression is to blame, not the victims of oppression. Although I have never heard them articulate this, I believe that they realize that homophobia hurts them.

Although I have a vision of a world free of homophobia, I do not consider myself free of homophobia; in fact, I assume that I always will be homophobic. It is not necessarily pleasant to come to terms with this; I sometimes feel guilty, or shameful, or sad that my homophobia affects my life and those around me the way it does. But in coming to terms with my homophobia, I feel more whole. I am integrating parts of myself that our society

has tried to keep separate. Perhaps this is the strongest reason for me to continue doing this work.