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FINDING A "WORD FOR MYSELF":
THEMES IN LESBIAN
COMING-OUT STORIES

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The beginning of my journey was coming out to myself. All of my life experiences seemed to come together at once, and I knew I'd discovered the core of myself. I finally saw all that I'd been feeling in a new, sexual light, and found the word for myself: lesbian.

—Barber and Holmes, *Testimonies*

Since society holds heterosexuality as the norm and most women grow up assuming that they fit this norm, the process of realizing and naming one's lesbianism is a defining experience. "Coming out" goes on throughout life, as each lesbian makes decisions to share information about her sexual orientation with others, from family members and friends to co-workers and neighbors, even the stranger in the next seat on an airplane.

For many lesbians, the memory of coming out has been crafted

into a story that is told and retold and is often the starting point of a friendship or relationship between lesbians. It is not unusual for these stories to become oral histories, passed down from person to person as lesbians learn the details of each other's experience of coming out. As Karla Jay has noted in her article "Coming Out as Process," there are many important reasons to know when a lesbian came out: The age she was is as meaningful as the cultural context at that time.

In an effort to understand coming out, experts have developed a number of stage theories. In her 1979 article "Homosexual Identity Formation: A Theoretical Model," Vivienne Cass develops a six-stage model based on her work as a psychotherapist: Identity Confusion, Identity Comparison, Identity Tolerance, Identity Acceptance, Identity Pride, and Identity Synthesis. The first four stages can be typified by the questions or statements a person in that stage might express: "Who am I?"; "I may be homosexual"; "I probably am a homosexual"; and "I am a homosexual." Stage 5 is characterized by a devaluation of heterosexual values and people as well as by anger and activism. In stage 6, this "us and them" philosophy is rejected, and the final resolution is to see homosexuality as only one aspect of oneself.

This theory, with its assumption of a neat and orderly progression through the same stages for everyone, seems inadequate to account for the experience of coming out today. The stage theories also produce an expectation that women who have moved to a newer place in the process of coming out as lesbians are superior to those who are still at a prior stage or who have "fallen" back into one. Many lesbian activists would take exception to the idea that they have not yet attained the highest level of identity development, especially those lesbians who have never seen themselves as activist and who are considered even less developed by the stage theory. Furthermore, are those women who see their lesbianism as the central, defining characteristic of their lives (including some of the authors of this chapter) doomed never to fully develop their lesbian

identity because they continually fail to see lesbianism as only one aspect of themselves?

In 1993, Paula Rust found that sexual identity is fluid throughout one's life and that it commonly changes, in some cases many times, in adulthood. In her sample, lesbians were an average age of 15.4 when they experienced their first homosexual attractions and 17 when they first questioned their heterosexual identity. The average age of first identifying themselves as lesbian was 21.7. Bisexual women reached these milestones in the same sequence but a couple of years later on average. Of those women who identified as lesbian, 41 percent identified themselves as bisexual at some time, whereas 76 percent of the bisexual women had once identified as lesbian.

Sexual identity development is, however, only one aspect of coming out. The disclosure of this identity to others is also of great importance to a lesbian, especially when it involves telling her family of origin. As members of a study group focusing on research about lesbians, we have found that the coming-out models do not capture the richness of lesbian life. Most do not address both *coming* out and *being* out as the separate processes Joseph Harry has described. Furthermore, the traditional models ignore feminism and political identity in general. Instead of developing our own model and thereby imposing a structure on experience, we decided to examine experiences directly and see what sort of structure emerged. We did this by looking for common themes in the published coming-out stories of lesbians. We read a number of anthologies published between 1982 and 1994 containing autobiographical pieces (see Further Reading at the end of this chapter) and identified more than twenty-five different themes, which we grouped into five larger categories. The remainder of the chapter will be devoted to the stories, organized according to these categories: diversity in the lesbian community; the different components of coming out; the reaction of a woman's family of origin; the reception by the lesbian and non-lesbian communities to one's coming out; and the varied emotions experienced by women as they came out.

DIVERSITY IN THE LESBIAN COMMUNITY

There are as many different experiences with coming out as there are lesbians who come out. While scholars and artists generally attempt to discover the common threads within the lesbian experience, we prefer to describe the diversity of the lesbian community. Diversity can be articulated in many ways—across lines of race, social class, age, religion, body size, and ability. The lesbians whose stories we read often discussed the double and triple minority status they experienced as lesbians and as women of color, or as poor lesbians in communities where most women were middle class:

In this country, lesbianism is a poverty—as is being brown, as is being a woman, as is being just plain poor. The danger lies in ranking the oppressions. The danger lies in failing to acknowledge the specificity of the oppression. The danger lies in attempting to deal with oppression purely from a theoretical base. . . . When the going gets rough, will we abandon our so-called comrades in a flurry of racist/heterosexist/what-have-you panic? To whose camp, then, should the lesbian of color retreat? [Cherríe Moraga, in *The Original Coming Out Stories*]

Many women wrote, sometimes mournfully, of being pressured into making a hierarchy of oppressions. The language and metaphors were sometimes warlike: choosing sides, betraying one's culture. The battles were sometimes metaphorical but often real. Joining a lesbian group on a college campus could automatically disqualify you from participating in a racial or an ethnic student group. As one Indian woman put it:

I was almost seduced into believing that I could not be an Indian and a lesbian without betraying either the culture of my birth and family, or the culture I had chosen as a lesbian and a feminist. Just as men had silenced me in the solidarity commit-

tees and meetings of the left, so too I found white lesbians talking for me and about me as though I was not present. [Kaushalya Bannerji, in *A Lotus of Another Color*]

For many women of color, coming out jeopardizes not only their sense of self as a member of a racial or an ethnic group but also their place within their family of origin and its cultural identification. The false view that lesbianism is a "white thing" adds a layer of complexity to the nonwhite lesbian's development and her attempts to remain part of her family of origin and ethnic culture. But some women do manage to integrate their lesbian and racial/ethnic identities:

Being a black woman and a lesbian unexpectedly blended, like that famous scene in Ingmar Bergman's film *Persona*. The different faces came together as one, and my desire became part of my heritage, my skin, my perspective, my politics, and my future. [Jewelle Gomez, in *Testimonies*]

There are women who reject their lesbianism, but it is harder to reject one's racial identity, usually a visible characteristic. Some women whose stories we read said that when they walk down the street, people see, for example, their black or Asian identity. When an African-American lesbian is followed by a security guard as she walks through a store, she is no doubt correct in thinking that it isn't her lesbianism that makes the guard suspect her as a shoplifter. Some women resolve this struggle by choosing to identify more strongly with one group than another: "The person who emerged first was the Puerto Rican, followed by the woman, and then by the Lesbian" (Sister Esperanza Fuerte, in *Lesbian Nuns*).

Religion is also an important factor in the coming-out process: "Religious women who happen to be Lesbians live behind two closet doors" (Charlotte A. Doclar, in *Lesbian Nuns*). Organized religions are often gender-segregated, and some lesbians seek out these women-only spaces by, for example, becoming a nun or studying the

Torah. Early in the process of coming out, many lesbians feel a strong pull to be in a community of women, without always understanding the sexual component of this pull.

THE MANY FACETS OF COMING OUT

The coming-out stories we read demonstrate that lesbian identity development occurs in many more than the five or six stages discussed in stage theories. These women commonly describe sensual childhood experiences with other girls or women before their feelings of sexual desire became explicit. The sense of being different came up over and over again in the writings, an idea that is a theme unto itself: "I carried a strong sense that I was different throughout adolescence. I knew I could be happy just being with my girlfriends, and boys seemed unnecessary, even bothersome" (Sarah Holmes, in *Testimonies*).

Some women reported always having had this feeling of being different, even before any sense that they were not heterosexual. Thus, they attributed it to other things, such as ethnic or religious identity. For a number of women the feeling of being different was directly associated with feeling like a boy or preferring boys' clothing, toys, playmates, and games. These feelings were value-neutral for some women; others described them as containing an element of excitement. Either way, feelings of being different commonly developed into a sense of alienation, especially when others also perceived the woman as different and treated her badly.

Eventually, romantic (although not necessarily erotic) feelings for other girls or women developed. One woman describes these romances at a time (1873) when they were socially accepted:

When a Vassar girl takes a shine to another, she straightaway enters upon a regular course of bouquet sendings, interspersed with tinted notes, mysterious packages of "Ridley's Mixed Candies," locks of hair perhaps, and many other tender tokens,

until at last the object of her attention is captured, the two become inseparable, and the aggressor is considered by her circle of acquaintances as "smashed." [Anne MacKay, in *Wolf Girls at Vassar*]

For most women, romantic involvement or thoughts lead to sexual exploration. In the stories, the timing of the exploration fell loosely into three categories. First were those women who described sexual exploration with other girls or women outside of any lesbian context—that is, they did not see themselves (or their partners) as lesbian; some did not even know there was such a thing. Some said that they felt more than they thought their partners did: It was more for them than just "practicing for boys." For a second group of women, sexual exploration coincided with their first labeling of themselves as lesbian. And a third group conceived of themselves as lesbians before having any sexual involvement with other women.

No matter when a woman first sees herself as a lesbian, it is an important event. For some, it is a wondrous occasion, as a lifetime of confusion seems to fall into order:

It was then that I realized I loved her. It was so simple. I was not going crazy, I was in love! I remember thinking "of course! How silly of me!" My behavior for the past two months suddenly made perfect sense. I was not frightened by the idea that this meant I must be a lesbian. . . . The idea of loving Sharon made me feel sane and at peace with myself; being a lesbian is infinitely preferable to being dead. [Deidre McCalla, in *The Original Coming Out Stories*]

For others, confronting their lesbianism is an ambivalent experience. Some women look up the word *lesbian* in the dictionary and are horrified or puzzled by what they read. Or perhaps they have an image of lesbians that does not conform to the way they themselves look or behave.

FINDING A "WORD FOR MYSELF"

Some of the women in the books we read had difficulty integrating their sense of who they were with their (stereotypical) beliefs about lesbians—thinking, for example, that they couldn't be lesbians because they didn't wear men's clothes, didn't have a "masculine" job, weren't ugly, and didn't hate men. Those who rejected the lesbian label were usually in a temporary phase, but one that could bring on destructive behavior, like excessive drug or alcohol use. Some women, including those in Catholic orders, became celibate; others became sexually involved with men, even getting married and having children.

Among the pieces we read were stories in the Christian fundamentalist magazine *Focus on Family* by women who felt they had been permanently "cured" of their lesbianism:

I accepted Christ immediately. I was so thrilled, so excited that I had actually experienced the touch of Jesus Christ. Fortunately, I was between lesbian relationships, so God's timing was perfect.

I looked deep in my heart, and I *knew* I had been living a sinful lifestyle. I wanted out, so I repented and asked God to help me. . . . God *can* change a homosexual's heart. I know because not only have I seen it, I've experienced it.

Whether or not they later reject it, most women who identify as lesbians do so early in life, even if they did not see it that way at the time. One of the exceptions is Phoebe Schock: "I'm one of the gay grandmothers. I spent most of my life trying to do what was expected of me" (*Wolf Girls at Vassar*).

REACTIONS TO COMING OUT: FAMILY

Deciding whether or not to come out to one's family of origin is a major choice for lesbians. Some never do, out of respect for a fam-

ily's religious or cultural traditions, or out of fear of rejection. The National Lesbian Health Care Survey (NLHCS), examining the experiences of almost two thousand lesbians in 1984, found that 19 percent were not out to anyone in their family of origin, while 27 percent were out to all family members. The other 54 percent were out only to some family members (see also Laura S. Brown's "Are We Family?" in this volume). Those who do come out to family must deal with the consequences, which range across a wide spectrum. Negative responses are unfortunately very common:

Among some of us young dykes, this was a very important and often-discussed subject: "Does your mother know?" "Oh, God, no! Does yours?" "I think she might suspect." We could talk about it for hours, speculating ways to do it, to Tell, fantasizing situations involving Finding Out and What Would Happen Thereafter. "I could never tell mine. She'd die. It'd kill her." "Mine'd crack up for sure." [Merril, in *The Original Coming Out Stories*]

Some of the harshest responses can come from religiously devout parents, who can clearly articulate their religion's position on homosexuality and often can't integrate their religious convictions with their daughters' lesbianism.

Some women described horrible, painful, even violent reactions from family members, who severed ties with them or harshly criticized them. Other families tolerated the situation, with the expectation that it would simply never be discussed. This often meant that the woman's lover/partner was not welcome in the family's home or, if she was allowed in, was treated as though she were a roommate or platonic friend. Some women described similar reactions when their own children learned of their mother's lesbianism.

Sometimes, the story of a family's response started out sadly and ended up joyously:

WHAT I SHOULD HAVE SAID

Deborah Perkins

“I’m gay. I’m sorry. Please don’t hate me.”

“I think you’re very sick,” Mom replied. Then she turned and walked away.

I sat there on her mountain of rejection, calling out, “I’m still your daughter and I love you,” and hearing only the echo of my own voice. My heart broke like a pane of glass.

If only I could do it over again, I wouldn’t search day after day, trying to find just the right words to ward off her anger and quell her disgust.

“You don’t know,” I would tell her, “how it feels to discover you’re not who you think you are. You don’t know what it’s like to learn at the age of thirty-two that you’ve fallen in love with a woman, and nothing in your fundamentalist, heterosexual background has prepared you for that. You don’t know how it feels to realize after all those years that you’re lesbian.”

“You don’t know what it’s like to sit

in a classroom or an office with people who are supposed to be your friends and listen to their sneering comments about ‘dykes’ and ‘faggots.’ You don’t know what it’s like not daring to speak the truth about yourself. You don’t know what it’s like to have to learn how to lie and how to hide.

“You don’t know the fear of being backed into a corner by a man bigger and stronger than you, who is trying to convince you that he can turn you back into a ‘real’ woman.

“You don’t know what it’s like to be judged for who you love instead of for who you are. You can’t imagine the never-ending ache of wanting to tell your parents the one thing you know will hurt them most of all. And you can’t begin to know the depth of that pain when you see the disappointment in their eyes.”

If I could go back and do it again, I wouldn’t try to find the words that are the easiest to say and the easiest to hear. This time, I would just tell the truth.

Mom, Dad, and I talked for a long time, and we cried a little, too. But they eventually reaffirmed what I'd always known: that they love me very deeply and will always be my staunchest supporters. After much pleading and cajoling, three years later, they marched in my first gay pride parade with me, carrying a sign that said, "WE LOVE OUR LESBIAN DAUGHTER."
[Liz O'Lexa, in *Testimonies*]

Families responded both positively and negatively to lesbianism; but some simply denied or ignored the information.

REACTIONS TO COMING OUT: COMMUNITY

It is not the same to come out to heterosexuals as it is to come out to other lesbians. This distinction highlights the importance of the lesbian community in women's coming-out experiences. Before the 1969 Stonewall rebellion, having a safe community of other lesbians was often a life-or-death necessity. The National Lesbian Health Care Survey revealed that 88 percent of women surveyed had come out to all their lesbian and gay male friends, while only 28 percent were out to all their heterosexual friends.

Cultural considerations are also an important reason for situating oneself in the lesbian community: "When I first came out twelve years ago, there were very few South Asian lesbians and gays around. We knew we were around and would travel hundreds of miles to meet" (Pratibha Parmar, in *A Lotus of Another Color*).

Although the lesbian community is a strong force in the life of many lesbians, it is not always perceived as a nurturing bosom into which a newly out woman is welcomed. Some women have difficulty joining the lesbian community because their age, ethnic group, religion, or economic class differs from that of most women in a given community. Others have internalized the homophobic message of the larger society, which can make them close off the lesbian community. When a woman first experiences love for another

woman, it is not uncommon for her to grieve the loss of her heterosexual privilege. Often, the burden of this sacrifice is so great that she decides not to make the transition to a lesbian existence.

THE STORYTELLERS' EMOTIONS

A final thematic category that took shape as we read these coming-out stories comprises the emotional responses of the authors to their own coming-out experiences. Some common emotions, especially early on, were guilt, shame, and fear: "I was drawn to her but was also very scared. After much anguish, we decided to 'give in' and experiment with being lovers. What followed was a year and a half of a loving, guilt-ridden, closeted relationship" (Adina Abramowitz, in *Twice Blessed*).

Once these women reached the point where their sexual identity was familiar and comfortable to them, they were likely to express more positive emotions—pride, encouragement, hope: "I'd like to say to any other Afro-American woman of color who is out there and struggling with her sexuality and feels there are no role models, there are other black women out there who will appreciate you for everything you are, so go for it!" (Valarie Walker, in *Wolf Girls at Vassar*).

"Becoming" a lesbian is not experienced in a temporal, hierarchical fashion. Most lesbians' accounts of their own coming out and being out describe the process as ongoing.

COMING OUT AS A LIFELONG PROCESS

Sexual identity itself has proved to be a fluctuating status, as Paula Rust has shown through her research with lesbian and bisexual women. Many women assume they are heterosexual, only to come out as lesbian, and perhaps later to see themselves as bisexual. The very labels that we apply to sexual behavior as well as sexual identity are subjectively defined. Researchers, therapists, and anyone inter-

ested in the lives of lesbians must begin to examine what lesbianism means to individual women. We can no longer assume that the label *lesbian* means the same thing to everyone. We *know* at this point that it does not.

The stories we read covered an extremely broad range of experiences, many of which were unrelated to the traditional conceptions of coming out. We would like to reiterate that coming out is a dynamic, lifelong process, as illustrated by these quotes: "One day I discovered I was about to be 67. The knowledge that time was running out hit me. What was unfinished in my one chance at life?" (Lenore Thompson, in *Wolf Girls at Vassar*); "At the age of forty, I stopped being a lesbian dropout and re-entered" (Matile Poor, in *The Lesbian Path*); "My coming out story is my life story, which is harder to end than it was to begin. Since coming out is a lifelong process, there's always the possibility of a new beginning" (Liz O'Lexa, in *Testimonies*).

The themes we came across do not cease to be important once a woman has initially come out. This fuller conception of coming out will enhance the knowledge and understanding of lesbian experience in all its beauty, richness, struggle, and complexity. We hope that this new model of coming out as a complex lifelong process will become the backdrop to research on lesbian life and to lesbian lives themselves.

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