

gay & straight in the movement

When I first heard about Women's Liberation, I wouldn't have anything to do with it. Aloud I said I was liberated and didn't need that stuff, but inside I was afraid people would think I was a lesbian if I associated with all those women. I had no way of knowing what other women were thinking because no one was even talking about lesbianism. This silence drove me wild with frustration. I had had strong feelings for women all my life, and although I had never slept with a woman I had been sure for some time that I was gay. But Women's Liberation was publicly determined to prove that they weren't a bunch of dykes, and privately unable to deal with such a threatening topic. As a woman who loved women, I remained isolated even in the movement.

Secrecy has always been a fact of life for lesbians. Some find a lover or enter "the gay world." While sharing their lives and feelings with each other, they are always dealing with the very real consequences of exposure of their life style. Others, like myself, are what I call "head gay." Because we have not related to women sexually we lock a big part of our lives away from ourselves as well as from everybody else. I never came out*because I never dared tell anyone my feelings, and the people from whom I hid my feelings most completely were the girls and women to whom I was attracted.

I remember having crushes on girls when I was in junior high school. Even then, before I knew the word "homosexual", the taboo on feelings for one's own sex was so strong that I never let anyone know that I cared for them. My feelings for girls were much too powerful for me to know how to deal with them. Boys were only friends to me, and after puberty boys aren't supposed to be friends anymore. The result of this was many years of isolation and loneliness. At school and work I was outgoing and active, but I had few close friends. I always held back from relationships, running from people before I could be hurt by them. Lots of people, straight and gay, have some defenses, but society's taboo on homosexuality added to my own fears of rejection made it almost impossible for me to relate honestly to anyone. However, I was always conscious of how much I wanted to communicate this one secret part of myself to others.

At the age of 23 I fell in love. For the first time I imagined myself holding a woman, making love with her, spending a lifetime with her.

As I look back, I'm sure she returned the feeling, but we were both in Peace Corps training and afraid to jeopardize our chances of being selected. She never said anything and I never said anything. The saddest realization is that if I had only known how to break through those walls of isolation and fear I would have said, "I love you, and the Peace Corps can do to hell."

But I never did say "I love you". And it was a long time before I could even say out loud, "I love women." In women's groups we talked about orgasms with a hundred people present, but discussions of lesbianism never went beyond the mention of the word. Finally I got into a small consciousness raising group where the women were unusually supportive. It wasn't easy but I finally said, "I think I'm a homosexual." Their reactions were mindblowing! A married woman: "That doesn't seem like such an impossibility for me." Another married woman: "I've had feelings for women all my life, and I even had a kind of affair in high school." A single woman: "I am a lesbian." (She had come out all of one week before.)

That night started a high which I've been on for over a year now. Soon after that meeting two Radical Lesbians came over from New York to speak at a course on Women and Our Bodies. They stayed overnight with me and for the first time in 29 years I poured out those feelings boiling inside of me to women who understood, who knew what I had been through. One woman shared my bed. After two hours of tossing and turning I finally said to hell with all the walls and asked her to make love to me. I wasn't in love with her. In fact, I never saw her again, but I will always treasure that night as one of those magical interactions that can occur between women when they are mutually open and honest.

My life has completely changed since my hidden self has become a part of the whole me. For the past year I have been happier and more together than I ever would have believed possible. Hoping that other women wouldn't have to go through the isolation and loneliness I had experienced, a friend and I called a meeting of gay women in New Haven. The eight women who came included lesbians who were not active in the women's movement, women who had come out within Women's Liberation, and women who were thinking about their relationship to other .. /2

women. This was the beginning of the New Haven Gay Women's Group.

One of the things I did for several months after I came out was to try to tell women they should be thinking about lesbianism. Interestingly, among women new to the women's movement there was a willingness to discuss women's feelings for each other, but women who had been in the movement for a long time still weren't talking about the issue. Finally, in relaxed one to one situations, a couple of these women did say things like, "I felt threatened..", "I was afraid..." Suddenly it became clear to me, it wasn't that they wouldn't talk, it was that they couldn't talk.

Despite all the difficulties in opening up to each other about such a painful topic, there has been a slow, steady growth in understanding between gay and straight women in New Haven. Whenever we get depressed about dealing with the problems in this relationship, we think about so many other cities where there have been ugly splits between gay and straight women in the movement. There has never been a separate gay women's movement in New Haven. This togetherness is due in part to the fact that we are a small city, which means most of us know each other personally. We have the New Haven Women's Liberation Rock Band, and New Haven Women have always partied and danced together. Almost all women are or have been in consciousness raising groups and therefore have developed a tradition of listening to each other and genuinely trying to be supportive and sisterly. There were a few women who from the beginning reacted positively to the revelation that their friends were lesbians. Although most movement women in New Haven have yet to deal with lesbianism as an issue, they almost inevitably supportive of lesbians as individuals.

The high point in New Haven's gay/straight scene came at a retreat in June 1971 when 80 of us spent a weekend discussing our movement. We worked hard all day and partied exuberantly at night. On Sunday morning it was the turn of the Gay Women's Group to report on its activities. After a brief report there was dead silence. I had expected that, because although we were becoming open in small groups, the response of the movement as a whole was still silence. Finally a woman said, "Why do we always make Chris the spokeswoman? Why don't we talk for ourselves?" --Silence--Straight woman: "I'm really glad there are so many gay women here. It made it much easier for the rest of us to express physical affection with each other." And then we were off and talking. For

two hours all of us, "old heavies", new women, gay, straight, talked about our feelings. "It's so hard to be a woman in this society that I'm afraid to take on lesbianism." I've been so fucked over by men that I'm afraid to get into that kind of relationship with women whom I now trust."

The reasons for women's difficulty in talking about lesbianism seem obvious now. However, my own personal hurt from the reluctance of the women's movement to deal with lesbianism held me back from recognizing that although the levels of awareness were different, many women experienced the same kinds of fears as I had. I have learned now that most women's indifference, hostility or tension come down to fear of their own lesbianism.

I don't believe that all women are gay. I'm not even sure I think that all women are potentially lesbians, because none of us has talked to enough women to really find out. It is certainly clear, however, that many more women would be lesbians if this option were really open. This is my own philosophy and other lesbians would probably disagree with parts of it, but I never have heard any lesbian give substance to the women's movement myth that all women should become gay. We have all been pushed around enough and we don't need any more trips laid on us by anybody.

What we do have to force is discussion and analysis of lesbianism's meaning for ourselves and our movement. This has been a painful thing to talk about, but that very discomfort should be a signal that this issue is one which must be discussed. First, straight women have to learn to talk to gay women about lesbianism. They have to show us that they understand where we are coming from, open up the subject of lesbianism themselves rather than always expecting gay women to do so. Your silence hurts and agers us. It hurts because we project into it society's reason for silence--condemnation. It angers us because we are your sisters. We are part of the women's movement, yet in your efforts to support particularly oppressed minorities of women, you have overlooked the one you live and work with.

All of us, straight and gay, have to consider the personal implications of lesbianism. We have to be able to talk about sexual feelings for each other, about some women's desire to have a "gay experience", and about gay women falling in love with straight women. We have to get over the hard part and hang-ups so that straight and gay women can be friends, each able to talk about her own sexuality without

feeling put down by the other. Ultimately we have to reach the point where each of us accepts as a possibility for ourselves a sexual relationship with a woman we love.

In the women's movement as a whole, the impact of lesbianism has been explosive. The resulting force is pushing us in two directions. Everywhere there is tension between gay and straight women. In some cities there has been an open split between the groups. We are obviously in danger right now becoming two movements. Worst yet, because lesbians' total involvement with women gives them more time and energy to devote to the movement, the women's movement might become all gay. This would be a disaster for everybody and we cannot allow it to happen.

The only way to prevent such a schism is to deal directly with lesbianism and all its implications for ourselves and our movement. This has been happening to some degree already. The changes are not nearly fast enough, but when we consider that in just two years the women's movement has gone from active rejection to lesbians to formal support of lesbianism as a life style, our progress has been phenomenal. It hasn't been easy for women to deal with friends who become lesbians or the possibility that they themselves might become a lesbian. But women are struggling. In rejecting the prohibition of lesbianism, we are rejecting one of society's most strongly imposed taboos. If we can do this, we can do anything.