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Work in Progress

Coming Out and Relational Empowerment: A Lesbian Feminist Theological Perspective

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Work in Progress

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About the Author

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Abstract

This paper, in four parts, explores “coming out” as a relationally empowering movement into both increased personal authenticity (a desire for mutual relation) and a posture of public and professional deviance (a willingness to risk rejection). The first part, a discussion of heterosexism as a structure of alienated power, examines the social context in which lesbians and gaymen are self-disclosing. In the second part, erotic power is presented, theologically, as a sacred relational resource which enables and secures the coming out process. The third part is a reflection on ambiguities and tensions in the coming out process. The final part examines how the coming out process (as an affirmation of erotic power, a movement in relational authenticity and resistance to alienated, nonmutual, power-relations) becomes a paradigm for healing and for the healing relationship between therapist and patient.

Setting context, acknowledging limits

The words of Audre Lorde, Black lesbian feminist poet and theorist, spoken in the context of her struggle with cancer:

Of what have I ever been afraid? To question or to speak as I believed could have meant pain, or death. But we all hurt in so many different ways, all the time, and pain will either change or end. Death, on the other hand, is the final silence. And that might be coming quickly, now, without regard for whether I had ever spoken what needed to be said, or had only betrayed myself... while I planned someday to speak, or waited for someone else’s words. And I began to recognize a source of power within myself that comes from the knowledge that, while it is most desirable not to be afraid, learning to put fear into a perspective gives me great strength.

I was going to die, if not sooner then later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you. (1977/1984, p. 41)

Lynn, a 36-year-old student, and I sat and shared memories of having crept furtively out of our seminary dorms fifteen years apart — I in 1971, Lynn in 1986 — to find our ways, alone, to meetings of the Daughters of Bilitis and, once there, of having slipped in as invisibly as possible, taken seats as close to the door as possible, and tried as hard as possible to convince ourselves that we couldn’t possibly be one of “them” — those lesbians.

Winding our way out of isolation can be a touching and empowering process. Lynn said,

¹Parts of this lecture are adapted from *Touching our strength: The erotic as power and the love of God* by Carter Heyward. Copyright 1989 by Carter Heyward. Used with permission of Harper and Row Publishers, Inc., San Francisco.

“Coming out has been for me learning to experience myself as a woman who receives energy from other women. Coming out has helped me establish my identity as a relational person.” She noted, “I couldn’t have done it alone,” though she was quick to add that she spent her whole first year in seminary avoiding the very people she wanted most to be around. She and Patricia, a lesbian priest currently working in New York, confessed that, for the first year or two they were in seminary, they would cross to the other side of the campus to avoid running into me as I walked from my home to my office.

Diane, a doctoral student and formerly a chaplain at Brandeis, who is here tonight on this panel, tells me that some fifteen years ago she freaked out when she came upon the essay on lesbianism in the first edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*. The article was called, “In Amerika, They Call Us Dykes,” and, at age 16, Diane wasn’t ready for this.

Coming out as lesbians — recognizing and naming ourselves as women whose primary erotic energy is generated in relation to women — is, in heterosexist society, a process laden with risk: emotional, physical, relational and professional. It can be also a revolutionary, empowering and, from a theological perspective, profoundly sacred process.

Appreciating connections between us in our work

I want to acknowledge here at the outset the courageous, pioneering work of the Stone Center — the clinicians, theorists and staff, without whom we wouldn’t be here tonight. I want to thank especially my good friend and colleague, Jan Surrey, who this year is teaching a course with me on “mutuality” at the Episcopal Divinity School. Together, we are learning more and more about connections between the emotional, physical, intellectual, spiritual and political dimensions of our lives. I am deeply mindful also of a woman who has been for so long an inspiration to me and to so many of us — Jean Baker Miller, a remarkable resource of a clear and gentle wisdom. I recognize the contributions of Nanette Gartrell and Lennie Kleinberg, lesbian therapists who have spoken in this Colloquium in years past; our lives and our work are linked. In this presentation I am especially appreciative of Lennie Kleinberg’s work on “lesbian identity disclosure” (1986). And I am grateful to my perceptive colleague and friend, Peg Huff, a pastoral psychologist who introduced me to Jan Surrey and to the Stone Center’s work and who herself is attempting to integrate basic presuppositions of feminist liberation theology and the Stone Center’s self-in-relation approach to psychology. My thanks to

each of you, and others, for inviting me to speak tonight and to all of you for coming out to this occasion.

Our limits

Before moving into the body of my talk, I want to say a word about the limits of what I and we can do here tonight. An important tenet of feminist liberation theory is that we recognize that our knowledge is limited by the particularities of who we are. White women, for example, cannot construct theory “for” or “about” women of color. More exactly, we can construct it, but, in a racist society, it lacks intellectual credibility and the power of moral suasion for and among most women of color and for those white women who catch the deceptive nuances of white racism in our own work. The best we can do is to speak for ourselves — of our own lives and work and commitments and learnings — and listen carefully to others.

To acknowledge that there are limits to what a white, southern, Christian lesbian can know about “relational empowerment” in no way diminishes the value of what I can contribute to this ongoing study. It serves simply to ground and secure my words. Such an acknowledgement does not render me “separate” from people of color, northerners, Jews or heterosexual women. Rather, it may help strengthen our awareness of our differences and our commonalities as we struggle together toward realizing our power as women...as humans...as earth creatures.

And so, I invite you to hear what I and we do not say, as well as what we do; to notice who is not here, as well as who is; to recognize what is being left out, as well as what is being included — and to remember as much of this as you can.

Structure of presentation

This presentation has four parts: First, I shall discuss heterosexism as a structure of alienated power, for coming out cannot be understood as an empowering relational movement unless we recognize the alienation out of which lesbians and gaymen, especially lesbians, are coming. Second, in order to establish further the context of coming out, I shall speak of the erotic power which enables us to come out, as a sacred resource available to all. Third, I shall reflect on some ambiguities and tensions in the coming out process, drawing from my own experience. Finally, I shall comment briefly on what I see to be some critical implications of the coming out process for healing in women’s lives and, in particular, for the relationship between women healers and women who

seek our help, and between us, when we need help, and those women to whom we turn. Until the closing section of this paper, my primary focus will be on lesbian lives and movement. But everything I am saying involves us all.

Heterosexism, power and lesbian women

Heterosexism is the basic structure of gay/lesbian oppression in this and other societies. Heterosexism is to homophobia what sexism is to misogyny and what racism is to racial bigotry and hatred. Heterosexism is the historical social organization of our life together in which is generated fear and uneasiness toward dykes and queers — toward ourselves if we are lesbian or gay. Dialectically, these feelings serve to hold the structure in place, thereby strengthening not only such traditional patriarchal religious institutions as Christianity, which have done much to set heterosexism in place, but also more deeply personal institutions such as the self-loathing of homosexual youths and the hatred of such youths by their peers.

A “structure” is a pattern of relational transaction which gives a society its shape. Consider the analogy of a house: If there is a structural problem, we don’t solve it by changing the wallpaper or rearranging the floor space. We cannot solve the structural problems of class elitism, racism, heterosexism or any other ideology simply by rearranging our lives, institutions and professions to accommodate those who historically have been left out. To solve structural problems, we have to dig into the foundations of our common life in order to discover the rot. Only then can we begin to reconstruct our life together in such a way as to provide adequate, trustworthy space for us all. Let’s dig, then, for a few minutes, into the foundations of heterosexism: We are digging toward the realization that our problem is one of alienated — abusive, nonmutual — power relations.

Alienated power

In a profit-consumed economic order, the value of persons is diminished. The accumulation of capital on the part of the wealthy and the hope for wealth on the part of the rest of us are designed to take precedence over the essentially nonmonetary value of human beings and other earth creatures as valuable simply because we are who we are. In this context, the capacity to love and respect our bodies, enjoy a strong sense of self-esteem, take real pleasure in our work, and respect and enjoy others, is a weakened capacity. In a literal sense, we have lost ourselves — ourselves as a people in solidarity with one another and other

creatures.

This loss of ourselves and one another is what Karl Marx meant by “alienation” (Fromm, 1961). It forms the basis for what Jean Baker Miller names as our “disconnections” — the “intensely confounded opposites of the ‘good things’ that flow from growth-enhancing, mutually empowering connections” (1988, p. 7). In an alienated situation, no one relates as humanely as she or he might desire. It is not that we do not want to be caring people, nor that we do not want to experience and share the “good things” that flow from mutually-empowering relationships. It is, rather, that largely unbeknownst to us in the course of our daily lives, we are captive to social forces that are in control of our lives, including our feelings and our values. In this situation of alienation from ourselves and one another, power has come to mean power over others as well as over our own base “natures.” Power has come to mean the domination, however benign, by a few over the lives and deaths of many. I am referring to the real, daily control of all human and other natural resources: the food we eat, the air we breathe, the energy we burn, the love we make, even the dreams we nurture, are controlled to a large extent by the structural configurations of power which have been shaped by the interests of affluent white males who usually fail to see the exploitative character of their own lives.

The alienation in our life together is so pervasive that we assume that it is “natural” and “normal.” Thus we assume that it is only natural to want to come out on top...to pull ourselves up by our own boot straps...to distinguish ourselves as better than, other than, separate from.... We learn to live over/against one another, out of touch with the sacred value of that which is, in fact, most fully human — common — among us. It’s important that we see the extent to which our acceptance of alienation as “just the way it is” characterizes our common life in the United States in the late twentieth century. This resignation generates a sense of powerlessness among us in which we are largely out of touch with our power as a people to create, to change and to hope. For, while alienated power is not shared, alienated powerlessness is — and it moves us toward our undoing as a people and a planet.

In the context of alienation, our eroticism — the deepest stirrings of our relationality, our need and desire to connect — is infused with dynamics of alienated power. As mirrors of the world, our bodyselves reflect the violence intrinsic to alienation. What we know, what we feel and what we believe to be possible are mediated by images and acts of

domination and control. We learn to associate survival, how we control our future, with symbols and acts of coercion and submission. Whether at home or elsewhere, children and adults learn that whether or not might makes right, it shows who's in charge: a whipping, a war movie, a rock video about gang rape, Rambo, the gung-ho carryings on by the President and all his men about the so-called "freedom fighters" in Nicaragua.... These are lessons unforgettable in the most embodied sense, by which we learn to experience our most personal world as fraught with tensions of being more, or less, in control of our lives.

The dynamics of alienated power shape our eroticism as surely as they do the Pentagon budget. Ours is a sadomasochistic society, literally, in that we are taught to lie back and enjoy the fruits of control and compliance. Alienated power, for most people, becomes synonymous with relational power.

Heterosexism: Structure of alienated power

Sexism is a structure of alienated power between men and women. It refers to the historical complex of practices and attitudes essential to men's control of women's bodies and, thereby, women's lives. Heterosexism is a logical and necessary extension of sexism. It is cemented in the assumptions that in order to secure sexism in the social order, men must be forced, if need be, to stay in control of women's bodies. Thus, penetrating to the core of sexism, heterosexism heralds the recognition that, in order to keep women down, men's sexual activity must be imposed upon women. Without male control of female bodies, patriarchal power relations would not prevail: things would fall apart — "romantic love" between men and women, the ideal of lifelong monogamous marriage and the nuclear family, "traditional values," established religious and moral principles, "security" and "freedom" of the nation...all that is predicated upon privileged men's staying in control of the world as we know it.

Insofar as we recognize that heterosexism is the fundamental means of enforcing sexism, we will realize that we cannot separate an analysis of gender relations from an analysis of sexual relations in our efforts to develop feminist psychologies, theologies or theories of moral reasoning.

Heterosexism in Stone Center's work

This is a point at which the Stone Center's work falls short of realizing the radicality of its own implications. The Center's theoretical work, by relational implication as well as by such opportunities

as this one tonight, invites connection with openly lesbian women. Yet, it would become even more radically relational — more relational at its roots — if the actual lived experiences of lesbian women were being interwoven into the core fabric of this splendid theory of mutuality, empathy and empowerment. I hesitate to voice such a critique from outside the clinical and theoretical arena in which these insightful women are working. But it is precisely the fact that the voices of openly lesbian women, like those of women of color and other marginalized people, must always be brought in, or spoken, from outside the center that must be challenged.

It is not merely that the Stone Center's work needs to become more inclusive of lesbian experience in order to be more credible with lesbians, nor simply to reflect what is clear already to those of us who know that these women are committed deeply to justice for, and the well-being of, lesbian women. The Stone Center's work needs to become more inclusive of lesbian experience so that the psychology itself can be shaped by lesbian, as well as heterosexual, experiences of relationality, empowerment, connection and disconnection. The Stone Center's work needs to become more inclusive so that it will be more honestly, and fully, related to the real-life experiences of more women.

The experiences of openly lesbian women would bring different nuances to developing understandings of mutually empathic and empowering relationships. For example, I suspect that lesbians might well, on the whole, call attention to embodied, erotic friendship and sexual relationship between women as a locus, often, of empowerment and mutuality — a locus, sometimes, of abuse — between and among women. I suspect that erotic pleasure (whether explicitly sexual or not) might be cited, frequently by lesbians, as a hallmark of mutually empowering relationships. I suspect also that openly lesbian presence in the shaping of relational psychology would push the work in overtly political directions of advocacy for lesbian women as representative of all women in the context of heterosexist patriarchy.

"Closet" as instrument of control

We cannot simply up and leave heterosexism behind until we leave this world via death. Coming out refers not to leaving behind us the structures of oppression, but rather exiting from "closets" of psychospiritual, physical and political bondage. A closet is a lonely, cramped place in which to hide...a place of disconnection and disembodiment in which,

because we are out of touch with one another, we are out of touch with ourselves.

The closet is also the only acceptable place for lesbians and gaymen to live in this culture of gender and sexual alienation. For only insofar as we are closeted will the prevailing power relations be held in place. That's why most of the liberal protestant churches, for example, have decreed that openly gaymen and lesbians who are sexually active cannot be ordained. The issue is not simply sex, but power — the fundamental organization of social, economic and political power in heterosexist patriarchy. In this con-text the closet serves as a masterful device of control.

To come out, then, is not merely a step in personal authenticity. It is a step also into a posture of social and political deviance and resistance. In both senses, as movement in authenticity and as act of political dissidence, coming out can become a remarkable process of relational empowerment. It can reflect a "direction of growth" (Surrey, 1985) in which the lesbian is seeking more, not less, authentic connection with friends and loved ones and, in so doing, is signalling an investment (however small or unaware) in helping to shape unalienated — mutual, honest — power relations in society.

Coming out is a process in which a lesbian's "differentiation" from the relational norms of heterosexist patriarchy becomes clarified, and in which the differentiation happens within the context of her efforts toward making authentic connection with others (Surrey, 1985). Thus, the coming out process is not, fundamentally, a way of separating from parents or others in the lesbian's past or present, but rather of inviting — implicitly or explicitly — others to "foster, adapt, and change" with her experience of herself in relation to them (Surrey, 1985; Kleinberg, 1986). The fact that the lesbian's self-disclosure often precipitates rejection by family, employer and others in her life should not be interpreted as the lesbian's way of disconnecting from others. To the contrary, as Lennie Kleinberg suggests, the act of disclosure is often "an act of love" (1986, p. 10). The high incidence of rejection of openly lesbian women signals the pervasive extent of heterosexism in our lives together.

Erotic as sacred power

Openly lesbian women are dangerous to heterosexist patriarchy because, whether or not it is our intention, our visibility signals an erotic energy that has gotten out of control — out of men's control. Historically, we have learned that this erotic power is

not good — for us, for others, for the world or for God. Operating on the basis of an interpretive principle of suspicion in relation to heterosexist patriarchal religious and social teachings, feminist liberation theologians in Christianity and Judaism have begun to suspect that our erotic power — this object of such massive fear among ruling class men, from generation to generation — is, in fact, our most creative, liberating power — that is to say, our sacred power, that which many of us call our God or Goddess. And she is indeed dangerous to a culture of alienation and abuse because she signals a better way. She sparks our vision, stirs our imagination and evokes our yearning for liberation. In the image of old wise women, dark and sensual, she calls us forth and invites us to share her life, which is our own, in right, mutual relation. From a theological perspective, coming out as lesbians — icons of erotic power — is not only a significant psychological process. It is also a spiritual journey, a movement of profoundly moral meaning and value, in which we struggle, more and more publicly, to embrace our sisters, our friends and ourselves as bearers of sacred power. Let me say a bit more about eros as sacred power.

Erotic power as sacred and mutual

Christian theology, which has shaped the prevailing relational norms of European and American cultures, traditionally has held that *eros* (sexual love) and *philia* ("brotherly" love, or friendship) are, at best, merely derivative from *agape* (God's love for us, and ours for God and our neighbor — "neighbor" being interpreted usually as those who are hardest to love: humankind in general, our enemies, those who aren't like us...). The moral distinctions among the three forms of love has been fastened in the classical Christian dualisms between spiritual and material reality and between self and other and, moreover, in the assumption that it is more difficult — therefore, better — to express God's (spiritual) love of enemies and strangers than to love our friends and sexual partners.

These distinctions represent a radical misapprehension of love. They fail to reflect, as godly and sacred, the embodied human experience of love among friends and sexual partners because they are steeped in the assumption that erotic power — or, in patriarchal, androcentric culture, women's power — is dangerous and bad and therefore always in need of spiritual justification.

To this, feminist liberation theologians say, "No." To the contrary, the erotic is our most fully embodied experience of the love of God. It is the source of our

capacity for transcendence, or the “crossing over” among ourselves, making connections between and among ourselves. The erotic is the divine Spirit’s yearning, through us, toward mutually empowering relation which becomes our most fully embodied experience of God as love.

And how do we know this? We know this by living life, by experiencing the power in mutuality. We know this by having learned to trust our own voices, not in isolation, but in relation to the voices of those whose lives we have learned to trust — prophets, poets, people in our past and present, known personally to us or only by reputation, those whose ways of being in the world, and in history, draw us more fully into mutual connection with one another.

Mutuality is not a matter simply of give and take. It is not, Margaret Huff (1987) notes, mere reciprocity. Nor is it equality. Mutuality is not a static place to be. It is movement into a way of being in a relation in which both or all parties are empowered *with* one another to be more fully themselves: mutually, we come to life.

In the context of mutually empowering relationship, we come to realize that our shared experience of our power in mutual relation is sacred: that by which we are called forth more fully into becoming who we are — whole persons, whose integrity is formed in our connection with one another. And our shared power, this sacred resource of creation and liberation, is powerfully erotic.

Audre Lorde speaks of erotic power as

an assertion of the life force of woman; of that creative energy empowered, the knowledge and use of which we are now reclaiming in our language, our history, our dancing, our loving, our work, our lives. (1978/1984, p. 55)

She associates the erotic with wisdom — “the nurturer or nursemaid of all our deepest knowledge,” (p. 56) and, again, with creativity — “There is, for me, no difference between writing a good poem and moving into sunlight against the body of a woman I love” (p. 58).

Recognizing the fear-laden conditions of our lives in a culture of alienation and isolation, Lorde warns that

We have been raised to fear the *yes* within ourselves, our deepest cravings.

... The fear of our desires keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined.... (pp. 57-8)

Even our inner voices, which we may call “conscience” or “God” or “ethical” or “intuition,” are trained to speak to us in the spirit of homage to a force invisible to us because it is our fear of our YES to our own life force. We fear this life force, our erotic power because, if celebrated rather than denied, it would “force us to evaluate [all aspects of our existence] in terms of their relative meaning within our lives” (p. 57). Nothing would remain the same. For, as Lorde affirms,

Once we begin to feel deeply all the aspects of our lives, we begin to demand from ourselves and from our life pursuits that they feel in accordance with that joy which we know ourselves to be capable of. (p. 57)

The capacity to begin moving through fear towards this joy is the beginning of healing. It is erotic power at work among us. It is the spiritual context in which lesbians are coming out, rearranging ourselves in relation to friends, families, love, work and the world itself.

Coming out: A lesbian feminist perspective

Though the lesbian cannot determine by herself the effects of her self-disclosure on others, her desire to come out is, at root, a desire to connect authentically with others. Coming out, we lesbians seek to participate in relationships in which, as Jean Baker Miller suggests, at least five “good things” happen (and I paraphrase):

We feel a greater sense of “zest”
We feel more able to act and we do act....
We have a more accurate picture of ourselves and others; we feel a greater sense of worth; and we feel more connected to others and a greater motivation for connection with others beyond those in [our immediate realm of family and friends]. (1986, p. 3)

This description of “growth-fostering relationship” characterizes beautifully the effects of how, in coming out, we experience ourselves in relation to those who meet us in this relational movement.

To look at several particular aspects of the coming out process may help clarify in what ways our integrity, as lesbians, is formed in a relational matrix of creative (often difficult, painful) tension between ourselves and others; between the explicitly sexual dimension of our lives and the rest of our lives; between how much of ourselves we reveal and how much we conceal; between acting for the immediate present and acting for the long haul; between clarity and confusion about what we are doing; and between letting go, erotically and otherwise, and maintaining a sense of control over our bodyselves and our lives.

Self and others

We cannot come out in such a way as to do justice to anyone, ourselves or others, if we cannot discern connections between our own sense of well-being and happiness and that of others. We cannot come out “perfectly.” We cannot make everyone feel good about what we are doing. We cannot make everyone agree with us that our sexuality is good or that our relationships are good or that our divorce is good or whatever. We can be aware, however, that everything we say, do, choose or refuse to choose, affects us and others. Our words do, and our silence does. We can use words and silence in a spirit of profound respect for ourselves and others, including those who remain captive to their own fears. In this tension between self and others, we can learn *with* others gradually how to embody both an active indignation with injustice and a sense of patience with those who may be, in this particular moment, more frightened than we are. We learn, with one another’s help, to experience anger and compassion not as opposites or contradictions but as essential dimensions of love.

The sexual dimension and the rest of who we are

When I came out, many people asked, “Why put limits on how you’re going to be perceived? Why box yourself in? Don’t you know that folks are going to think this is all you are — a lesbian — and that all lesbians do is fool around together under the sheets? What about your interests in Latin America? In the work of Elie Wiesel? In christology? Why do you want people to think that sexuality is all you can talk about?”

I knew, when I came out, that I was still

interested in Elie Wiesel and in El Salvador and in working against racism and in jogging and walking my dogs. Maybe because I was already reasonably “well established” as a dissonant voice within my professional circles, as priest and theologian, I have not experienced myself as being perceived by most people solely on the basis of my lesbian sexuality.

Still, I would be lying or foolish to suggest that a lesbian who comes out can continue business as usual. She cannot. We cannot. But then, why would we want to? Do we not come out in order to disrupt business as usual?

When I came out publicly (by way of two published essays) in 1979, I knew, to some extent, that my coming out was an act of resistance to unjust power relations, unjust gender relations in particular. I did not realize at the time, however, how fundamentally these power relations are interstructured into our lives on the basis of gender, sexual preference, race, religion, age, able-bodyism, culture, ethnicity, nationality, etc. It has been far easier for me to be “out” as a lesbian since I began to understand, in my own life as well as through the lives of others, that the ways in which sexual power is used and abused among us are connected to ways in which religious, economic, racial and other forms of power-over are exercised. I see now what I saw, but not as clearly, a decade ago: that the same motive which urged me out of the closet is that which drew my attention to what’s happening in Nicaragua. It’s the same motive that invites me to do feminist liberation christology and sparks my interest in Elie Wiesel’s work. The motive is to cast my lot with those who resist unjust — nonmutual — power relations wherever in our lives we experience them — in our most intimate relationships and in our professional lives, as well as in the more explicitly public and political arenas of our lives together.

In relation to her Jewish roots, Adrienne Rich writes, “I had never been taught about resistance, only about passing” (1982, p. 72). In 1979, I still wanted in some ways to pass. I suspect that, in some remnant ways, I still do. But I am clear today that I do *not* pass in relation to the norms of dominant political, theological or psychological cultures. Slowly, I am learning to live not in disappointment, but rather gladly, at the margins. Coming out pushes me further, a day at a time, into a realization that I *don’t* want to pass, not really. This has been the most liberating, creative and painful lesson of my life — learned in an educational matrix shaped by friends and lovers and enemies, by students and teachers and therapists and *compañeras* and all sorts and conditions of other earth

creatures. I have been learning to trust the authority of those voices, my own and those of others, which call us more fully into mutually empowering relationships.

Revelation and concealment

A difficult tension for me has been between revelation and concealment of myself. I was raised to “tell the truth.” This little moralism has served me well, by and large, such as in my decision to live openly as a lesbian. Today, however, I see how little I knew, when I came out, about taking care of myself emotionally, spiritually and physically. It is possible, I am learning, both to take care of ourselves and to take public stands. Possible and very hard.

There is profound theological wisdom in the tension between revelation and concealment. The Sacred reveals herself to us when we are ready to see her — which is to see more clearly ourselves in relation. As T.S. Eliot noted, humankind cannot bear much reality, at least not in large doses. Hence the presence of the Spirit of Life is often concealed from us: that is, we do not realize what is good for us until we are ready to help generate the conditions for it. Yet this sacred knowledge can be called forth. It is available to us whenever we are ready to use it. Revelation — of the divine, of the fully human is a matter of timing, of seasoning our capacities to risk seeing, and showing forth, our goodness when we are ready to embrace what we see and who we are. And in the hidden places of our lives, preparations can be made even now toward enabling us to respond to those moments in which the time will be right for us to open ourselves more fully to one another and to the larger world. Like bread, we are being prepared to rise.

We should remember, in coming out, that the light we are shedding critically on our society shines no less upon us, and we are likely to find ourselves feeling exposed and vulnerable. Like everyone in this society, we too are frightened of homosexuality: it’s called “internalized homophobia.” Moreover, if we have good sense, we are frightened of heterosexism — of being rejected, hated, wounded or killed. We also do not know, none of us, the full implications of living publicly as happy faggots or dykes in the world. In this situation, some purposeful concealment and carefully refracted light is often wise.

The immediate present and the long haul

The tension between revelation and concealment can be illuminated by recasting it as a pull between taking a stand here and now and sustaining the longer-term, ongoing process of coming out. Coming

out, we are attempting to live in both “places” at once — and we can, provided we are able to keep faith in our interrelatedness and in the power of our relation. To do so gives us confidence that, for example, even if I can’t say what I want to *now*, or be where I feel like I need to be now, then perhaps I can be *later*; or if I can’t do it, someone else can represent me, just as I am representing others now. This is radically relational faith. It enables us simultaneously to take a stand here and now and to wait with one another on the Spirit to move us together into a future that is beyond our control as individuals, yet which we are helping to shape.

Clarity and confusion

There is tension also between our clarity and our confusion about coming out, about our sexualities, about ourselves in general. This very real pull in us is unavoidable. By “confusion,” I mean that which is still unclear, cloudy, unable to be seen well at this time. It is a form of concealment. Among lesbians and gaymen, confusion is bred in our experience of alienated power relations. Heterosexist expectations, after all, have shaped us in their image. Coming out of them, we are bound to be mystified. For we literally are coming out of long-standing senses of who we are. In a very real sense, we are changing identities, as we come out of ideological assumptions that have made us believe that we were either mad or bad.

Every healthy lesbian and gayman, like every woman or person of color who is aware of the pernicious effects of sexism or racism, at one time or another has been profoundly confused about his or her sense of sanity or worth in our society. The process of coming out tends, at first, I believe, to exacerbate our confusion and, as we live into the process, to resolve it more and more. We need to honor our own and others’ confusion and let it be in order to move with one another, gradually, through it. For women to be able to sort these things out together, to “clear the air” with one another’s help, is a rich relational blessing.

Letting go and maintaining control

There is also tension throughout our lives between the desire to express sexually our yearning for mutuality and our efforts to stay in control of our bodies/ourselves. Coming out often involves being stretched between these urges — coming into a wild, erotic ecstasy, a full celebration of our bodyselves and those of others and, at the same time, a need to hold on to ourselves, to keep the lid on lest we feel as if we are disintegrating in the midst of a culture already hostile to our well-being.

We must be gentle with ourselves and one

another. We ought not push too far ahead of ourselves nor act too fast. But when we do, we need to be patient, tender, with one another and with ourselves, as we try again and again to find relational rhythms that are good for us and others. Coming out is, in heterosexist patriarchy, a lifetime project. It requires that we give ourselves lots of time and space to feel and appreciate the radical significance of our lives as openly lesbian women.

Sexual orgasm can be literally a high point, a climax in our capacity to know, ecstatically for a moment, the coming together of self and other; sexuality and other dimensions of our lives; desire for control and an equally strong desire to let go; sense of self and other as both revealing and concealing; the simultaneity of clarity and confusion about who we are; and tension between the immediacy of vitality and pleasure and a pervasive awareness, even in moments of erotic excitement, that the basis of our connection is the ongoing relational movement — the friendship — that brings us into this pleasure and releases us into the rest of our lives, including the rest of the particular relationship.

There is remarkable sacred power in these tensions. To stretch and pull, with one another, is to come out more and more into a fullness of ourselves in relation, in which the Sacred is born among us.

Implications for healing relationship

In closing, I shall comment briefly on how the coming out process might inform the relationship between women healers and those who seek our help. My focus, finally, is not on lesbians per se, but on women healing *with* women. As affirmation of our erotic power, as movement in relational authenticity and as resistance to alienated, nonmutual power relations, the coming out process is a paradigm, I believe, for healing.

Erotic power as our healing power

Therapists, priests, pastors and other healers should not underestimate the extent to which, like Freud, we remain fearfully preoccupied with the dangers inherent to embodied intimacy: the “libidinal” dangers of erotic power. Moreover, we should not fail to remember the origins of this fear of eros: we are heirs of long-standing religious and civil traditions in which eros and women, and especially erotic women, are perceived as a threat to the prevailing social order.

Rather than realizing our erotic power *as* power for healing, we are torn apart from ourselves in right relation, alienated from our most creative power. We have become frightened of one another — and of ourselves — when we are most deeply in touch. This

fear of eros, of intimacy, of one another, and of ourselves with one another, becomes an enormous impediment to the healing process and badly distorts the healing relationship.

One of the primary effects of the fear of our erotic power is to keep the healer “in the closet” as it were — hiding her own authentic presence, her real life and values, from those who seek her help. It is deeply troubling to me that most therapists, who presumably are aware of the destructive effects of nonmutual, withholding relationships in their patients’ lives, and in their own lives outside the clinical setting, do not see the damaging character, however benign, of nonmutual relationships within therapy — damaging to both therapist and patient.

Becoming real together: Movement in mutuality

From an ethical perspective, we must be suspicious of any transaction in which one person’s becoming increasingly authentic and self-revealing is predicated upon another’s self-concealment. Outside the clinical situation, most of us are able to recognize such a dynamic as the emotional root of sadomasochism, but inside we have learned to accept it as a condition for healing. Audre Lorde characterizes such a relationship as emotionally abusive. She suggests that, whether professional or personal, such a relationship borders on the pornographic and the obscene (1978). Surely there is a connection between the fear of erotic power, the withholding of honest presence, the veiling of real feelings and the obsessive, eruptive sexual violation of patients by therapists.

Our fear of intimacy and of being in touch with one another generates a perverse misapprehension that the more “self-possessed” and less relationally vulnerable we are, the more helpful we can be to others. The truth is: *nothing* is as profoundly healing as real, mutual presence.

Our lives have deep, decadent roots in obscene power relations which, in countless ways, obscure our capacities even to believe in the possibility of mutuality. All of our lives are implicated. All of us are involved. Feminist professionals, especially perhaps those of us in religion or psychology, need to help one another come out of the structures of nonmutual power relations which, literally, have secured our professions, shaped our psyches and still do. Despite our commitments to justice and compassion in our work, we have a hard time loving one another very well. And, my sisters and brothers, this is not our fault as individuals. We must be gentle with ourselves and one another, realizing that we have enormous power

to heal with one another or to hurt ourselves and one another very badly.

We all experience relationships in which for a time mutuality is not fully realizable. Therapy is a good example. The mutuality in such a relationship may be limited temporarily, as perhaps it must be, by purpose and function. If, however, the limitation is static and unchanging — that is, if the dynamics of a one-way dependency are fixed permanently, which they are assumed to be in all patriarchal relational configurations, including the psychotherapeutic tradition — the relationship will be emotionally and spiritually distorted regardless of how well-meaning and skillful the persons in it may be. Individual goodwill, personal integrity and professional competence cannot solve systemically abusive power structures. *Any relationship which does not contain seeds of movement toward the possibility of becoming a fully mutual relationship is intrinsically abusive.* In such relationships, healing can happen, and often does, in spite of, or even by way of, the abusive dynamics. But the harm done by the lack of mutually authentic participation, at the very least, diminishes the power of healing.

As healers, and as women seeking healing, we have an opportunity to bring one another out of the “closets” in which is hidden the fullness of our creative, liberating relational power. And we know this sacred power, our erotic power, as we actually experience and/or long to experience it. Yet, as Audre Lorde writes, “We have been taught to fear the YES within ourselves, our deepest cravings” (1984). Our challenge, as women in the healing process, is to encourage one another to embrace this YES together.

Discussion Summary

After each colloquium presentation, a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. At this session Judith Jordan, Irene Stiver and Janet Surrey of McLean Hospital; Julie Mencher of the Stone Center and Diane Moore of the Episcopal Divinity School joined Carter Heyward in leading the discussion.

Question: Were you suggesting that heterosexual women are, by definition, submissive and compliant?

Heyward: No. Heterosexism is not the same as heterosexuality. As an ideology, heterosexism teaches that heterosexual women, which is all women if we are “good women,” are sexually submissive. That’s our common dilemma as women in heterosexist patriarchy: If we’re perceived as “good,” we’re submissive to men.

Question: Will you elaborate on how the Stone

Center’s theoretical work might be different if it were more informed by lesbian experience?

Heyward: Let me try to say a little more here without becoming too speculative. If lesbian experience is women’s experience of erotic power in relation to other women, lesbians might have quite a lot to say about empathy, empowerment, mutuality, connection and disconnection in women’s relationships with women. Furthermore, as sexual experience, lesbianism might well teach all women something about our bodies, our embodied feelings. The Stone Center’s work is far-reaching in its implications. I suspect that more central lesbian presence and participation in this work would help these implications emerge more fully.

Mencher: Lesbian experience gives us a different window through which to look at women’s relational lives. For example, Irene Stiver, in her working paper on the meaning of dependency, suggests that, contrary to traditional theory, women may experience dependency as healthy. Lesbian participation in the development of this theory might help clarify what such “healthy dependency” looks like.

Jordan: In thinking about homophobia, I realize that we in this culture are really *relationally* phobic. I mean, I listen to therapists talk about lesbians using words like “fusion,” “confusion,” “lack of boundaries,” “merging,” and I hear how outrageously frightened many of us are, not simply of what lesbians represent, but of our own relational possibilities.

I also just want to say that a lot of therapists need to come out of the closet in relation to the mutuality in the therapy relation.

Surrey: What I hear you talking about, Carter, is a whole new understanding of power. You call it “sacred” and “erotic.” This is intrinsic in the Stone Center’s work, but lesbian experience and participation brings it more clearly into focus.

Moore: In expanding the base of the Stone Center’s work, women of color ought also to be more of a part of this. Otherwise, we’re not really talking accurately about *women’s* lives — but rather *white* women’s lives.

Comment: You mentioned “able-bodyism”...I happen to be a lesbian, a therapist and disabled. In this society, relationships between able-bodied and disabled women involve a tremendous imbalance of power. I hope the Stone Center will do some work on this because it’s a critical issue and a rich and fertile field for exploration.

Heyward: Yes, indeed.

Question: In my training as a therapist, I

learned that not to disclose is an incredible self-discipline. I was taught that to do otherwise is selfish. It is to “flaunt myself.” It’s a form of ego-gratification. I still mostly believe this. I believe that, if I submit to this self-discipline, the patient can make of me whatever she wishes, and that this is positive. But I missed an opportunity for healing in one clinical experience by refusing to disclose what a patient needed to know about me in order to feel good about herself in relation to me. Will some of you comment on this?

Jordan: When I spoke of coming out of the closet as a therapist, I was addressing this. I believe a lot of therapists experience shame about what we’re doing and who we are, and that we hide behind a veil of “neutrality.” We talk about allowing our clients to project on us and use us for whatever they need us to be. But, in fact, we’re running scared. In teaching students how to be therapists, we often say things like: “Don’t burden the other person.” “Don’t disclose.” “Don’t gratify.” But what are we really setting ourselves up as? Are we not real people sitting there making real relationships? It’s difficult to be authentic in the therapy setting, but we do need badly to move toward this.

Mencher: I’d just like to say that the admonition, “Don’t flaunt yourself,” which I also learned in my training, is what my father said about my lesbianism. I agree with Carter entirely: movement toward mutuality is essential in therapy, and the movement needs to start with authenticity. This is extremely important.

Surrey: Mutuality, as we are using it, is about potential for growth and change. It’s about relational movement. It has to do with our capacities for mutual empathy, a process in which what happens between us is no longer simply yours or mine, but rather ours. Mutuality in therapy, as elsewhere, is relational openness. It is a call into the new. It’s about much more than self-disclosure.

Stiver: I’d like to elaborate on that. The optimal therapy relationship is constantly changing and shifting and, indeed, the culture contributes to our difficulties with relational authenticity. The therapist is at almost as much a disadvantage as the patient. We need to realize how important it is, how frightening and how hard, to stay open in therapy, open and struggling to keep the relationship growing. More often than not, both people are scared about the growth and about the intimacy in the relationship. But growth in relationship is what therapy is all about, regardless of the sexuality of either therapist or patient.

Question: I’m concerned that we do not

idealize lesbian relationships. We have rampant chemical dependency in our lives and abuse in our relationships, and I think we need to be very honest about this. Will you comment?

Heyward: I agree. We ought not to romanticize lesbianism as if it were a way out of relational problems and abuse because it is not. Lesbians are women in heterosexist patriarchy. The violence and alienation in our society affects us all and distorts our capacities to love and work.

Mencher: For example, like other women, most lesbians grow up in gendered family structures in which mothers and daughters learn to be competitive with each other and with other women.

Question: How can the Stone Center avoid looking at lesbianism through the lens of idealization?

Mencher: We need to avoid idealizing women, including lesbians. But we need to look at real live lesbians, not at who we want to be, but who we are.

Heyward: And it needs to be lesbians who do the looking. Lesbians need to study, honestly and critically, our lives-in-relation, in order to learn who we really are.

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