

Coming Out Kosher Style - By Vivienne Cass

It's twenty eight years since I first declared publicly that I am a lesbian. Hard to believe that I can still remember it so clearly. But then it wasn't your 'everyday' coming out. I started like everyone else - telling the family. Mum first, then my sister, then a brother, then another brother, a grandmother, aunt and so on. Dad was last, as you'd expect since fathers always are the last to know. So far so good. But now comes the interesting part. Without actually meaning to, I told the Perth Jewish community! Yes, I mean THE Perth Jewish community. All four thousand of them. All at once. Later people asked me how I could have been so courageous. At the time, I couldn't distinguish courageous from foolish. After all, telling ONE Jewish mother you're not going to give her grandchildren is bad enough (the lesbian baby boom hadn't hit back then), but to tell a whole community of Jewish mothers would appear to be sheer lunacy.

I didn't think it was lunacy at the time. There I was, a 24 year old budding homosexual activist having spent two years hiding my relationship with a woman, hating the dishonesty, needing to 'be myself' - a common story. Coming out seemed to be necessary for my ongoing sanity.

Came the time to declare myself, I mulled over it for two months, drew a deep breath and headed over to my mother's to break the good news. Would you believe, just as I opened my mouth to speak, the doorbell rang. Visitors. Drat! Two weeks later, with courage re-found, I tried again. "Well Mum," choke, choke, "You know the friend I live with. Well, actually....." She didn't take it too well. I mean she cried non-stop for two weeks. At least that's what I saw. I think she actually cried for the next two years.

Taking another deep breath, I then headed off to tell my sister, hoping she'd be able to support my mother in her misery. Sister reacted by crying herself. Frustrated, I asked her why. "I don't know," she wailed, "it just seems something to cry about." Exhausted, I went to see my brother. At last, a decent reaction. "Cool, he said." This was better. Next stop, younger brother, sixteen at the time. "Really cool," was his response before asking to borrow my squash racket (a clear sign, I thought, of acceptance). OK, I'd survived this far. Time to rest up before telling my father, a man not known for any progressive opinions.

Two months down the track and he also knew. Disgusted, of course. He advised me to analyse myself out of it, a perfectly reasonable suggestion, he thought, since I was into my second degree in psychology. I remember laughing cynically at the time because my father's thoughts about psychologists in general tended to be along the lines of 'why-don't-they-get-a-real-job'. Amazing that he'd suddenly figured out we had some skills after all. Nevertheless, he didn't throw me out of the house as my mother had feared.

The problem was, everyone now wanted me to ignore the whole thing. I'd told them, hadn't I? Upset everyone's equilibrium, hadn't I? So why go on about it? But I was damned if I was going to throw away all the angst and agony I'd put into coming out.

So I kept talking. "Did I tell you WE are going away with some friends this weekend?" "By the way, I'm giving a talk to the medical students next week - about HOMOSEXUALITY, of course," And so on. "Why do you have to keep on talking about IT?" asked my mother. "Because I'm happy/it's important/it's who I am," was the response. This was clearly not a plus to her way of thinking and the tears would start flowing again.

The only moment of levity came from my grandmother who innocently said, "I can understand two women being close, but not two men...." Of course, I knew her version of "being close" was unlikely to match mine, but at that time I wasn't splitting hairs.

Ah, but what about the Jewish community? How does one tell four thousand people all at once? Actually it was an accident, but later I realised it was a lot easier than telling the family one by one.

I had decided to start a group for Jewish homosexuals and their partners. (Don't forget this was the 1970s and the term gay was still not fashionable - nor was distinguishing lesbians from their homosexual brothers). The problem was locating potential members. How to go about it? Call someone and say, "Hi, I've heard on the grapevine that you are a lesbian..." or hang about the homosexual bars looking for people with a distinctively Jewish 'look' ("hey, you look Jewish, do you want to join a group....?"). No, I knew there had to be a better way.

"I know," I thought, "why not place an advertisement in the local Jewish newsletter?" I imagined that the readers of this newsletter (MOST of the Jewish community) would think that, as a deeply compassionate psychologist, it was only natural that I set up a group to "help those people". Naive was obviously my middle name.

So, I worded something suitable. WANTED: JEWISH HOMOSEXUALS, BISEXUALS AND TRANSVESTITES, FOR A SUPPORT GROUP BEING SET UP. CONTACT VIVIENNE CASS, PSYCHOLOGIST, FOR FURTHER INFORMATION. The transvestite part was included because I knew there was a Jewish transvestite and hoped to get him along too. The bisexual part was aimed at a couple of married guys who apparently enjoyed men as well.

Surprise, surprise! The editor rejected my advertisement. "Not suitable, no further explanation to be given, don't call us again". Now what? Being Jewish, there was only one answer - try again.

A little smarter (but not much), I waited until a social worker friend of mine took over temporarily as editor. "I'll get it in for you," he said, and he did. In fact, it was his last action as acting-editor before they retired him permanently. I sat back waiting for the phone calls from potential group members. (I did say I was naive). The phone remained silent. "Well, that's it," I thought, "it's all been a waste of time".

Did I say waste of time? Well, in terms of meeting other Jewish homosexuals - certainly. No-one called, although much later a Jewish dad rang to ask if I could help

his gay son meet a nice Jewish boy!!! In terms of alerting the Jewish community to the EXISTENCE of Jewish lesbians, gay men, bisexuals and transvestites - hey, I couldn't have done better if I'd planned a special campaign. And as for letting everyone know I, VIVIENNE CASS, was a LESBIAN....a resounding success. An unbelievable success. Of course, they put two and two together. Forget the fact that I'd had boyfriends and even been a Jewish debutante. None of that mattered any more. I was 'one of those' at a time when hardly anyone knew 'one of those' and the gossips had a field day.

Naturally, my family was not thrilled by these events - especially when individuals commented to them about my 'courage', or worse, were brave enough to congratulate me personally. This happened, I remember, at my brother's wedding which, as fate would have it, took place only weeks after my "kosher coming out" as someone called it. Imagine walking into a wedding reception full of people who had just heard you were, in 1970s parlance, homosexual. Of course, I received some odd looks, saw whispered comments and so forth. There was also confusion on their faces. I wore makeup and an evening dress and generally spoilt their stereotypical view of lesbians. As I later explained, "Hey, I am as much a product of a Jewish middle class upbringing as you are, so why would I look particularly different"?

But, I cannot deny there were also pluses to my community coming out. From the day the advertisement was printed nobody asked me when I was going to get married or whether I hoped to have children. This was wonderfully freeing since I no longer felt obliged to "find a nice Jewish boy" as my grandmother had been suggesting for some time.

When all the fuss had died down, some people told me, years afterwards, that I was a great role model for their own coming out (although none was crazy enough to use the Jewish media for this purpose). Others admitted feeling terrified that I would 'out' them and so avoided me socially. The truth is that I had no thoughts at the time of the possible consequences of my actions on others. Heavens, I couldn't even figure out that it would have an impact on ME, let alone anyone else.

Nevertheless, I have no regrets and would recommend it to anyone who can't handle the often tortuous "telling-them-one-at-a-time" method of coming out. So, let me know if you're planning a community coming out and I'll be the first to send off a letter of support to the Australian Jewish News.

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