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AN OPEN LETTER TO LESBIAN MOMS

By Jessica Murphy

This piece was written in an Intensive Writing class I took in my second year at University at Buffalo Law School. The quotations throughout come from personal interviews and research for a paper I had done as an undergraduate student at the State University of New York at Binghamton entitled "Who Do You Love?" Through this paper, I attempted to explore the experience of other children of lesbians. In order to ensure complete honesty from the research participants questions were answered anonymously.

As I had always thought, the conclusion of this research was that being raised by lesbians in and of itself was not the problem. Instead the problem faced by children of lesbians and gays is society's misperception and ostracism of their parents. A central theme throughout each interview was how painful the solitude of being a lesbian's child was and how angry these people were about being judged based upon the sexuality of their parents.

This prose piece calls for lesbian and gay parents to create networks for their children to interact with other children with lesbian or gay parents. To the best of my knowledge, there has not yet been such a group formed. Creation of this group would ensure that the scars prejudice left on these research subjects will be less noticeable on your children. My life was turned around once I knew of another person like me. Please think about this carefully.

I'm hoping that my experiences, and the experiences and perceptions I've gathered from others like me, will help you and your children in the future. I know how immensely important it is that you have children, but you need to know how society's magnifying glass can make your children feel disproportionate and out of place.

I'm suggesting something simple which could have helped someone like me several years ago . . . and did help me, once I found it. I discovered that there was someone else out there like me. Just knowing that I wasn't alone helped me put my feelings into perspective.

The irony of this friendship is that it took three years for us to

"come out" to each other; and when we did, it happened by accident. My friend would write me letters asking for advice on how to handle a "sticky situation" involving "sensitive" family issues. She consistently shot down my suggestions, explaining politely that she was sure I didn't quite understand, and that it was impossible for her to explain. One day I finally responded that nothing was tougher than explaining a gay parent, and that my advice was good. She wrote back that this was her exact problem and that I was the only friend she had told in nineteen years. The only reason why we ever found out about each other's moms is because I was such a hot-head.

You have or want to have children, but as a lesbian you don't immediately epitomize society's ideal parent. The truth is that for as long as there have been women there have been lesbian mothers. You bless and curse us with the love and care you willingly give. The first years won't be difficult for us, but the K-12 years can be a living hell. Your involvement in our lives can blunt the pain some, but what we need more than anything is to fit in somewhere other than home.

This is where you come in. Your land is no-man's land. We spend years dying to be normal, searching for something similar to what you have, a place where WE fit. We don't have a separate culture the way that you do. We can't "spot" someone the way you sometimes can. We live in limbo not sure of what we are until later. As one woman explained, "I always felt I lived a double life . . . I had two houses, two sets of adult friends, two sets of clothes, etc. . . . I had two families. But I never had one."

We represent your connecting bridge into the "normal" world, whether you like to admit it or not. Heterosexuals have children, too, and that is a connector that supersedes the differences of sexual preference. Your children are as likely to be heterosexual as homosexual, just like everyone else. But, society believes that your choice equals our choice. We embody your challenge to society to rethink what is normal. As one adult child of a lesbian put it, "I wonder more than ever if I have become a strong woman because of my mother's orientation, or in spite of it. More often than not, I find myself thanking her for raising me the way that she did."

We complete your circle of life and cannot separate ourselves from what you choose for yourself. Adopted or biological, we will break your hearts the way this breaks ours. We can never be superficially normal, all because of you. We don't blame you, either. Don't change . . . But, share the secret of strength. Another woman

expressed, "If I am able to, I say that intolerant people don't matter, and I don't want to be around them. But, people's opinions do matter, and did especially when I was younger. I wanted so much to be liked, and I was so hurt when people would say bad things to me about my mother."

Although society categorizes you by who you sleep with, this isn't about your sex partner's gender so don't feel like you're the problem. You're not the problem, and neither are we. The problem stems from the "Other World's" perception of your culture and inability to accept that you are more than just sexual, you are also maternal. Your choice to have a child means that each of us must painfully straddle both your world and the "Other World."

Sartre was right -- hell is other people.

What I'm suggesting is a network of people like your child for your child, a cultural group of sorts. A group where children like us can meet and mingle, and feel "normal." It's not that you can't talk to us; but you aren't necessarily the child of a lesbian. You are the lesbian.

No matter who says what to us, we feel the way we do because we do and will continue to love you. We agonize over why people hate someone we love so much. To deal with these feelings, parts of us withdraw into your "closet."

Normalcy is what we crave, and you cannot fully provide it, so facilitate it. Friends like us; connections to other children in similar situations. A group of you and us meeting every several weeks from infancy on up would not just help us, but would also help you build a network of women for you to lean on when we cause you problems.

The trauma of childhood is something we all deal with, and you do all you can to alleviate it. Creating a group of other people like us is a highly successful amelioration technique, but it is not the entire solution. Nothing can solve our hurt except time; time for us and time for society. The silence of "the closet" is what has us looking for one glimpse of acceptance from someone other than you, and that's precisely where others like us come in. One person said:

As a child, I felt as if I was always hiding, always lying. Incredibly simple things became difficult, such as having a birthday party, a slumber party, having friends come by, having somebody's parent pick me up for an event, introducing anyone to my mother and her partner, school functions I was in, and my mom and her partner

wanted to attend, teachers asking questions about my family, etc. I was teased and felt as if I was different and that people thought I had a weird home life.

The secrecy is what is so hard. Your closet is ours, too. We waste so much time trying to prove why we are normal, we forget you already know we are. One woman I spoke with explained that she felt the nastiness so acutely that her "soul forgot to breathe." Think of how this person's life could have been different had she known someone else like her. Just knowing someone else was like me changed everything. I knew there was someone who knew what I meant when I said I had a hard day at school, someone with snappy comebacks for rude questions, and someone to tell me that loving you was right and good because you are my mom.

When you run into hard times with us, what do you do? You probably speak to your friends, other parents, or lesbians, or other lesbian parents. You turn to someone else who shares a similar set of experiences. By leaning on each other we too can build strength the way you do. But we hide ourselves so well we have to depend on you to make nascent connections with other children like us.

We can do the rest, we just need your help to start. Help us when we are young, introduce us now, so that we don't feel so alone later. You can't change who you are and we can't change either, but feeling less alone makes us stronger. One person explained their feelings this way, "Sometimes your choices make me mad, but because you are true to yourself, you let me see that I can examine my own life and have the courage to be who I am."

When we're young, we need affirmation from other people that you aren't weird and scary the way so many think you are. We want to know that our love for you isn't wrong or bad. You can't chase away the hurts that inevitably come in the package of childhood, but by showing us where our strength lies you help us come out of our closet and breathe again.

Jessica Murphy is a third year law student at the University at Buffalo School of Law. She would like to thank all of her parents, Professor Lindgren and the Intensive Writing class from January 1996 for open minds and a whole lot of patience, all the people who helped her with her paper in Binghamton, and to her Minnesota Belle just for knowing what she knows now.