

The Political is Personal

We've come a long way from the days when men could be, and on a number of occasions were, executed for having sex with men. The Supreme Court invalidated the last of the sodomy laws in 2003. Gay and lesbian couples can legally marry in Connecticut, Iowa, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, New York, Vermont and Washington, D.C., and President Obama is pushing to overturn the Defense of Marriage Act. Don't Ask, Don't Tell is finally gone. Recent Gallop poll data indicate: 1) the majority of Americans support gay marriage; and 2) the majority of Americans find gay and lesbian relations "morally acceptable." And even though gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgendered and questioning students still face bullying, many schools have gay alliance type groups and many school districts have enacted "anti-bullying" policies that cover sexual orientation and gender identity.

These changes didn't just happen. We are standing on the shoulders of many GLBT people who came before us who fought very hard and risked a great deal to secure these rights. People like:

- Henry Gerber who founded The Society for Human Rights in 1924 at the risk of imprisonment
- Lisa Ben (an anagram of lesbian) who published *Vice Versa* in 1947
- Harry Hay who founded the Mattachine Society in 1951
- Del Martin and Phyllis Lyon, who formed the Daughters of Bilitis in 1955.
- And the legions of people who have marched, rioted, protested, filed law suits, called their representatives, stood up to gay bashers, bullies and nasty comments, reported crimes to the police, and come out over the years.

With all of this positive change, it's easy to feel like there's nothing left to do really but kick back and relax or head down to Union Station for a drink or out to Axis to get your groove on. And there's nothing wrong with a little R&R (as long as you don't drink and drive). Just don't let all these positive changes lull you into complacency.

For decades, activists with a radical bent spouted the expression, "The Personal is Political," based on Carol Hanisch's 1969 essay of the same name. The expression may be "sooo yesterday" but the theory behind the

expression is still relevant: many of the personal problems we face are the result of systematic oppression.

Even though we can now have consensual sex without breaking the law, serve openly in the military and, in some places, get a marriage license, as a group, we still face big problems. First, gay, lesbian, bisexual and lesbian youth have had to contend with harassment, violence and parental rejection because of their sexual orientation. Surveys suggest that GLBT youth struggle with severe problems with cognitive, social, and/or emotional isolation and indicate that depression strikes gay and lesbian youth four to five times more severely than their non-gay peers. Further, gay and lesbian youth are also more likely to attempt suicide. Those of us who made it out of adolescence alive are more likely to struggle with alcohol and substance abuse than our non-queer peers. Some studies estimate that 45 percent of us struggle with alcohol abuse and that we are 3 times more likely to abuse substances than non-queer folks.

The “personal is political” suggests that so many of us struggle with anxiety, depression and substance abuse (and a whole myriad of other addictive behaviors we use to keep from feeling the pain of being rejected, humiliated, and condemned) because of the pervasive and systematic oppression we faced and continue to face. This is important because, “Understanding that our oppressive situations were not our own fault — were not, in the parlance of the time, ‘all in our head’ — gave us a lot more courage as well as a more solid, real foundation on which to fight for liberation” (Hanisch, 1969).

We may have made significant gains, but we still face oppression on many fronts. That being said, political action is not enough. These relatively newly won rights do not repair the damage we faced when society was less embracing. They will not erase the tapes in our heads that tell us we are “less than” or curb the urge to self-medicate. They will not give us a sense of trust in the world that some people take for granted. They will not stop us from “waiting for the other shoe to drop.”

The “personal is political” but the political is also personal! In order to truly benefit from all the positive changes the LGBT community has seen in the last decade, to feel like we are welcome and wanted members of society, we have to heal the wounds from the past that keep us stuck. We have to sit

with the pain we have been avoiding with food, alcohol, sex, shopping, etc. We have to bear witness to the emotions that lie beneath or chronic anxiety and depression. And we have to rewrite the stories we tell ourselves about who we are that continue to keep us from living up to our full potential. I think we owe this to all of those people who fought so hard and risked so much so that we could be free.

*To ask Regina a question, propose a column topic, read about her approach to counseling, or check out her books and other writing, go to: www.ReginaSewell.com . You can read her blogs at www.ReginaSewell.Wordpress.com, <http://visionscounseling.wordpress.com>, and <http://possumcrossing.wordpress.com>. Her most recent publication, "Sliding Away" can be found in **Knowing Pains: Women on Love, Sex and Work in Our 40s**, edited by Molly Rosen.*