

Exploring Gay Intimacy Issues of Gay Men

Notes from Gary Hirshberg's Presentation
On March 8, 2008

Introduction: Gary received his Masters degree in 1984 from the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University. In 1992 he opened his own practice in St. Louis specializing in work with gay men, people affected by HIV/AIDS, and adult male survivors of sexual abuse. Gary has been an adjunct faculty member at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University where he taught courses on HIV/AIDS and Human Diversity. He is currently a third year candidate in psychoanalytic training at the St. Louis Psychoanalytic Institute.

The following are notes taken during the presentation made by Gary Hirshberg in his address to the members of Prime Timer's at their monthly meeting.

External issues vs. internalized issues (a critical distinction)

1. **External issues** (issues which we generally have no control over)
 - a. Our inability to get married as a gay couple in Missouri or Illinois
 - b. Our inability to provide a survivor's benefit to our partner from our pension plan or social security when we die
2. **Internalized issues** (issues which we do have some control over)
 - a. Messages we receive from our family, peers and societal authorities that we unconsciously absorb
 - b. Hirshberg's example: His three year old nephew told Gary to take off his bracelets because boys don't wear bracelets, only girls do.

Our problems with intimacy stem from the following:

1. **Our parents and their negative messages** about same sex attraction:
 - a. Our parents have no idea that we are gay when we are children even though we often sense that we are different when we are as young as 4 or 5 years old.
 - b. Consciously or unconsciously, parents communicate negative messages about same sex attraction and we unconsciously internalize these messages.
 - c. We learn from our parents that we are the "enemy" or "outsiders" and we soon feel that don't fit into our own family.
 - d. Gays and lesbians are the only minority where we learn to hate ourselves before we learn that we are a member of that minority.

- e. Gays and lesbians are the only minority where family members do not normally help their children accept and cope with their minority status.
- f. Blacks and women typically teach their children what it means to be a minority and how to cope with the accompanying societal oppression.
- g. These negative message from our own families helps explain the following:
 - i. Alcohol problems are 3 times higher in the LGBT community than the population at large.
 - ii. Suicide rates are 5 times higher.
 - iii. Sexual addiction is a serious problem.
- h. Freud's mistake in examining same sex attraction is that there is not an inherent problem with respect to homosexuality. The problem is our sexual socialization. From a very early age, we are taught that same sex attraction is "evil", "sick" and "illegal" and we unconsciously internalize these messages.

2. **The sexually stimulated environment in which we are raised**

- a. Consider the following situations:
 - i. Physical education classes where boys take showers together in one large room
 - ii. Camp where boys swim nude and run around naked in the woods
 - iii. Bathrooms with open urinals
- b. If gay boys become sexually aroused in these situations they risk getting beat up.
 - i. Consider the unfair scenario of putting straight boys in a shower with naked girls and enforcing the norm that anyone getting an erection will be stigmatized and physically punished.
 - ii. For gay or straight boys, this is not a healthy process of sexual conditioning.
- c. For gay men, the consequence of this unhealthy conditioning is problematic behavior for the rest of one's life.
 - i. Larry Craig, Senator from Idaho, who is married, takes homophobic positions on legislation yet seeks sexual gratification in men's restrooms.
 - ii. James McGreevy, Governor of New Jersey, who is married, has a secret affair with an Israeli man and hires his lover to head his state's office of homeland security.
 - iii. Larry Haggard, evangelical minister and President of the National Evangelical Churches, travels to Denver periodically to hire a male prostitute and use sex enhancing drugs.

- iv. These are only a few nationally recognized figures. Sexual addiction, misuse of alcohol and drugs and other inappropriate coping strategies are all too common among gay men.

3. The fact that we are MEN

- a. Men, gay or straight, generally have more trouble with intimacy than women because men want sex while women want love. (admittedly an oversimplification but generally true)
- b. This phenomenon is usually reflected in the differences between gay men versus lesbians in the “coming out” process.
 - i. Men typically “come out” as gay when they start having sex with other men.
 - ii. Women typically “come out” as a lesbian when they fall in love with another woman.
- c. Men and women are socialized differently.
 - i. Women are socialized to believe that their relationships are a primary source of their identity.
 - ii. This socialization starts on the playground.
 - 1. Girls play in socialized settings.
 - 2. Boys play competitive games where their relationships with other boys will rotate from team member to competitor.
- d. Gary Hirshberg used stop lights as an analogy to explain this difference between men and women.
 - i. With respect to sex, women have a red, yellow and green light.
 - ii. For men, the green light is almost always on. Red or yellow are infrequent options.

4. The impact of gender role expectations

- a. Definition of internalized gender role conformity.
 - i. We unconsciously internalize the message that boys must behave as boys and girls must behave as girls.
- b. The problems for “sissy boys” versus gay boys who can “pass” as straight with respect to gender role conformity:
 - i. “Sissy boys” have very difficult childhoods because they do not conform to gender role expectations. They are usually harassed, beaten up and generally ostracized by other boys. However, once they become an adult and “come out” as a gay man, coping with their minority status as a gay man is usually easier.
 - ii. Gay boys who “pass” and are good at sports and have straight boys as friends have relatively happy childhoods but often experience difficulty when they are

- older and “come out.” It is frequently difficult for them to lose their privileged status and acceptance as a straight male.
- c. Our internalization of strict gender role conformity affects our ability to be intimate with other men.
 - i. Look at our profiles in the “personals” – “masculine man seeks same”, “no fems nor fats”, or “straight-acting seeks same.”
 - 1. Is this internalized heterosexism?
 - 2. Are we judging each other by conventional gender role expectations?
 - 3. Are we shutting ourselves off from each other?
 - 4. Can we be intimate with others if we can’t accept within ourselves what makes us different from heterosexuals?
 - ii. Look at studies of oppression. When minorities start gaining access to the privileges of the dominant culture, they start enforcing the norms of the dominant culture.
 - 1. White men in power tend to promote other white men.
 - 2. When women gain access to power, they tend to also promote white men.
 - 3. When blacks gain access to power, they tend to also promote white men.
 - iii. In attempting to conform to gender role expectations, what do we do to ourselves?
 - 1. Do we marginalize some members of the gay community to gain greater acceptance?
 - 2. Do we mimic heterosexual practices to gain acceptance?
 - a. Seek marriage
 - b. Have kids
 - 3. Do we abandon being true to ourselves and what we really need to gain acceptance?

Overcoming our unhealthy sexual conditioning

1. Healing occurs when we are in an environment that fosters deep emotional connections.
 - a. We need to be members of groups composed of other gays who understand our experience.
 - b. Healing requires that we have the opportunity to share our innermost thoughts and experiences and have them reflected back to us.

2. **This often requires creating our own families that will provide the nurturing and support that we didn't get from our biological families.**
 - a. Healing requires that we are supported and understood within the context of long term relationships; however, they may manifest themselves.
 - b. In this context, we can discover that intimacy and sex are distinct yet interrelated.

3. **Healing is knowing what you need in a relationship.**
 - a. It is necessary to know what sex does for you. Does it build bridges or does it trip you up in a relationship?
 - b. It is necessary to learn how to communicate. This involves learning to express what you need and also learning to listen so that you might understand what you partner needs.

Notes prepared by Dennis Hostetler, secretary of Prime Timers, March 11, 2008