

HETEROSEXUALITY: THE LOVE THAT DARE NOT SPEAK ITS NAME

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Daring to Speak: Languages Spoken and Unspoken

This presentation is about the surprise of a lifetime: A gay patient's discovery, integration and acceptance of his heterosexuality. The man was not looking for this transformation when he began his analysis over twelve years ago. Indeed had then his analyst ever so much as suggested such a transformation, he would have walked out the door. Heterosexual feelings started to emerge into his consciousness only after he left his male partner of twenty-seven years. It accompanied a redirection of his own sense of masculinity from undeniable to be sure to deepened and more authentically his own. I can say with absolute confidence that this radical expansion of sexual orientation and deepened gender identity reflects the patient's authentic sense of himself because I am the patient.

After living my entire adult life as a gay man with no significant conscious expectation that I could or should be heterosexual, I found myself at age 47 meeting, falling in love with, and marrying a woman. As both the patient and an analyst, I offer to you this story and something of my analytic understanding of it in the hopes that by doing so I can help move the discussion of the fluidity of sexual orientation and gender identity, especially in men, from an academic

perspective to one of clinical relevance, especially through the unaccustomed direction of homosexuality to heterosexuality.

I want to go further in today's presentation by treading in what may seem to some like treacherous waters by suggesting that aspects of our analytic theorizing about homosexuality that have been discredited or at least set aside by most of us may actually have clinical usefulness. Ideas traditionally associated with homosexuality such as castration dread, perversion, certain aspects of narcissism, incomplete resolution of the Oedipal stage, profound enmeshment issues with the gay person's mother, and so forth need to be reexamined not for universal application to all gay patients or as evidence of their inherent pathology with respect to their homosexuality, but simply as a means of working with those gay patients for whom they might prove relevant. In other words we may need at an appropriate time in a given analysis to consider that the gay patient may indeed be defending against an array of emotions associated with repressed heterosexuality that, of their own accord, needs vital expression in the world of real relationship. All of these ideas had something to do with me; and I have to assume that I am not the only man for whom they may prove important.

I suspect that many of us--myself included--have strong feelings when we associatively link the words like perversion and narcissism with homosexuality. After all, over decades of clinical work some analysts perpetrated a great deal of harm on their gay patients by trying to "cure" them based on what I believe it is

fair to call culturally-informed ideological assumptions about homosexuality. Let me say at the onset, then, that I abhor any notion that an analyst would begin an analysis with an ideological or theoretical assumption about homosexuality being per se pathological or something to be eliminated or worked through. And I do not disavow anything of my past, present and future homosexual feelings. I also want to be clear that like any other ethical analyst, I stay with the productions of my own gay patients and do not presume that they need to have in their lives what I now have in mine.

And finally, I hope you will understand that I take the anxiety-provoking risks associated with so much self-revelation because I feel that this necessary story would be difficult to accept by some if it were told by an analyst who was always fundamentally heterosexual. I assert for myself a certain credibility that would not, I feel, be available to that analyst.

Let me begin my story with a memory. I was about seven or eight and after my mother scolded me for something, I shut myself in my bedroom closet. At first I felt sad that my mother seemed so disappointed in me. I remember thinking that it would be good if I suffocated in there. After a while I realized that she hadn't missed me and I started to cry and get angry. "She doesn't care. I don't matter at all!", I remember thinking. As more time passed I felt despair. "I hope I do die!", I thought. "She'll miss me forever." After more time and still no mother, I left the

closet and went to the kitchen table where, smilingly, she offered me lunch. She didn't seem to have a clue about my experience. I never told her. I never could tell her how I felt about anything important. In this childhood experience, we might say that I internalized my closet, which became the space of our enmeshment and the space of my silence.

The closet is of course the well-known metaphor for the hidden, frightened, and often self-loathing homosexual. For many, to come out of the closet is to risk, among other things, the security of self-denial for the uncertainty of acceptance and real relationship. The closet is often is a place of a particular condition of love. That is, it is a place one *wants to stay*. It is the place of unconsciously constructed relationships that feel to be the deepest and most cherished of all, as in the case here of my mother and me. I seriously doubt anyone ever occupies the closet alone. I wonder if in there with the gay person is always his most important love who in one way or another feels to him just as committed as he does to the shadows. There is something sublime-feeling about this lonely partnership that can feel impossible to give up or to want to give up, even as relationships with self and others suffer. Of course since these personages are the distorted and internalize part objects of a single psyche, the shared dwelling is actually a house divided against itself. In my case the relationship of the closet remained of central importance even years after I thought I had come out of the closet by announcing to the world that I was gay. Indeed, in my case I only now,

with my heterosexuality mined and brought to light, do I feel genuinely free of the closet.

Many years ago, I left the closet to join the community of gay men. Of so I thought I did. I came out for the usual reasons: the press of the body exceeded the push back of shame. Integrity needed to trump an indenturing conformity. The need for authenticity bested my fear of rejection and abandonment. In time I came out to everyone, became an activist and scholar of gay literature and, years later in analytic training, a leader of sorts in my institute on matters of sexual orientation. Most importantly, I met a man and entered into a partnership with him that lasted for twenty seven years. In short, I understood myself to be gay and never seriously considered that I would or could be anything else.

There are many ways I could present my story. My wish to address as directly as I can the theme of this conference about daring to speak the unspeakable compel me to accent a single analytic concept with which I most struggled: perversion; for without a doubt in my mind perverse processes characterized my defensive structure and contributed to forming my homosexual self. It took me many years to work through my transference to older conceptualizations of homosexuality in positive support of my own analysis so that I could take in about these theories what was useful to me even as I rejected what wasn't.

Perversion is also of particular importance to me because a perverse dream compelled me to seek therapy many years ago and became emblematic of all the work I did with that therapist and all the work I subsequently accomplished with my analyst. I had the dream during my twenties while I was in graduate school.

I bring home to meet my mother a woman from graduate school I was in fact then attracted to. Karen was her name. The sense was that this was in preparation of marriage. At first my mother is warm and welcoming and offers Karen some tea. After a moment, however, my mother transforms into a hideous and terrifying monster. She picks up a bloodied joint of mutton and crushes Karen's skull with it. My mother exulted in her brutal act and cried out triumphantly. The perspective of the dream is such that she towers above me.

I called this dream figure "Mutton Mother," and she can be understood as the phallic mother of perversion. In the dream, she cleaves me to her by killing the woman who would take me from her. By crushing the "other woman" she crushed my chance at heterosexuality. Except, as analysis revealed and allowed, she didn't castrate me. It simply went into hiding until I could find a way to guarantee its safe return. The story of my analysis is the story of how I came to understand this attempt at castration, the subtle narcissism it implies, and the perverse relationship choices I made with their masochistic and sadistic undertones.

I have had two long therapies, the first with a woman and the second with a man. Again time restraints limit me so I will keep brief my work with Linda, but first a little background relevant to both treatments.

I am the first born of four children and the only male. My mother was a quiet and rather depressed woman who could be very loving and tender but when she allowed herself her anger it was extreme and very cutting. My father was a jovial sort, in some ways narcissistic, but more alive to the world and to others than my mother. My parents were given to cliches of the time about how boys should behave, perhaps my father less so than my mother. Deviations from these cliched norms were generally met with contempt. Unfortunately I never comfortably occupied the space of cliched masculinity even as I at times yearned to,

For me being the only boy did not convey any special status although I secretly believed it should. Indeed with the addition of each sister, I felt that there was something increasingly wrong with me. Lynn, the sister closest to me in age, was a great friend but also a target of significant envy. My father loved her for her boyishness and I always felt that I should be more like her. In short I felt like I was the daughter and she was the son. My mother often cringed with contempt at what she considered to be my feminine side. Cringing and other physical expressions of emotion were more common than spoken words.

When my mother became pregnant with the third child (I was about six) I evinced a range of regressive symptoms, the most important of which was that I refused to use the toilet and retained my feces. This led to much family turmoil. Finally, after soliciting a doctor's advice, my mother administered an enema (it happened to be on her bed). I remember jumping up and running away in horror and shame. I actually think she regretted having done this but remained, I felt, disgusted and upset with me for my behavior. This event no doubt informed the creation of the castrating mother that came to haunt me in my dreams so many years later. Freud has likened feces to the penis, so following him at least it made sense that I would want to keep it buried deep within.

At about this time, my parents took us for a day at the beach. While having dinner at a family restaurant, I saw a boy who must have been about fifteen or so wearing a see-through tank top. I was mesmerized by his beauty--I noticed in particular his strong pectoral muscles and his nipples. I wanted more than anything to be him. Throughout my adult life I often thought that I would rather be the man of my dreams than have him in my arms. In analysis I came to appreciate how I split off and eroticized this dimension of my own masculinity. Even as a young boy I felt that this was the kind of boy my mother and father would prefer. He struck me as confident, strong, and given his shirt, sexually daring: good with the girls. There never seemed to be enthusiasm for my preferences of reading, making music, talking about relationships, and other traditionally feminine interests.

My childhood and early teens were unhappy. I felt lonely, sad, ashamed and, I can now say, very angry. I had come to feel that I wasn't wanted by either of my parents, although they were generally quite involved in my life and for the most part loving. In this conflict, I established a psychic truth of estrangement that did not at all match the fuller truth of my parents actual love for me. The pull of the closet strengthened as I didn't let them help me develop a self-concept based on healthy-enough self-esteem. Even so, it was true, I believe, that while my parents loved me there were parts of me that they simply could neither understand nor love.

I engaged in the usual sexual experimentation that boys do; however, I had the sense that my interest in this was more emphatic than I felt the other boys' to be. I knew to keep my mouth shut. While I didn't think of myself as gay, I did think that I was a freak. I dated girls in high school and never for a moment identified myself as gay. Indeed it wasn't until I went to college that I first consciously understood that I was. When I finally had my first gay experience I was both thrilled and filled with shame. Midway through my senior year, I met my partner. Within three months we were living together. I knew from the very beginning that I was not in love with him yet I felt a strong pull into the relationship. I now believe that I chose him precisely because I knew I could never love him and that by entering into a relationship I knew could not satisfy me I established at the beginning a condition of self-imposed deprivation that supported subsequent self-

limiting masochism. My partner and I split up twice in the early years of our relationship and twice we reunited, the second time under very meaningful circumstances. During my late twenties, my mother became ill with leukemia. I had a year or so before left my partner and I had had no contact with him during the duration of her illness but on the very night she died, I called him, ostensibly because I thought he would want to know, but of course it was to reconnect with him. I recall thinking that it was as though the soul of my mother entered my partner for the sake of not letting me go.

Within a week or so of the Mutton Mother dream, I began therapy with Linda. In addition to the dream itself, my presenting problems were depression; discontent with my homosexuality; a pervasive sense of shame; difficulties in writing my dissertation; and my unhappy relationship with my partner. Linda offered me her steady and empathic presence and her keen ability to point out difficult truths about my role in all of this. From time to time, I would profess sexual interest in her, but even now as I look back, I am not sure I ever really meant it. Perhaps they were rehearsals or psychic adumbrations of what was to come. Instead, I felt that she offered me an alternative experience of woman to those harsh Mutton Mother-like projections of myself that I extended to my mother and three sisters. Through our work together, I could take in that a woman could take me seriously as a man and not wish to enslave or kill me. She might even celebrate a fully "out" life that included a satisfying sex life and a solid sense of healthy self-esteem. We began the long work of separating and individuating that

would lead to a good-enough culmination in my later analysis. If Linda and I discussed with sustained seriousness the prospect of my heterosexuality, I do not now remember it. I do remember that with her help I felt I better accepted my self--as evidenced in many ways but most significantly by completing my dissertation--the first at NYU on an explicitly gay-related topic. I felt this as a phallic accomplishment of great importance. Our work also led me to consider becoming an analyst. My termination more or less corresponded with my entering training. In short, Linda took me a long way on the journey towards finding my masculine self vis-à-vis feeling increasingly safe with a female who refused to keep my projections of unkind, selfish, and castrating women. I had several dreams towards the end of my therapy with Linda that involved a strong yet benign woman leading me on a journey. But the journey would not be complete until I had the chance to work with a man.

I remember my first impressions of my analyst. He was somewhat reticent, but when he did speak, it was forceful and direct. After Linda's relative warmth, he seemed remote and a little forbidding. Looking back on some journals from the early period of our work, I am reminded how often he made me angry. Although always empathic, he did not then strike me as gentle. I wonder now if I needed him not to be, not in a masochistic sense but from the perspective of modeling a separate existence' that is, he could stand up for himself. I often confused the absence of gentleness with unkindness or cruelty.

I spent a great deal of time during the early years of our work obsessively complaining about my partner. He didn't work. Made no money. Was like a Collyer brother in his obsessive collection of every manner of object including literally thousands of copies of old New York Times newspapers. No manner of discussion, argument, threat, etc. could change him--or us. Although intellectually I could take in my analyst's questions and interventions about this relationship, it didn't click that I was perpetuating this enmeshed state and that if it were going to change, I actually needed to act.

One day, after years of patiently listening and holding my whining complaints about my partner, my analyst said to me in what I took as real frustration: "Can we talk about something else?" Naturally, I was deeply offended. What right did he have to tell me what to talk about, and so on. But this intervention conveyed several things to me that were essential to my development. First, that there was more to me than being my partner's partner. I was, after all, a fairly accomplished person, who had much else going for him than this relationship about which to talk. I had all sorts of strengths to call upon. That I didn't call upon them suggested that somehow I was colluding in this unhealthy relationship. Second, that there is no reason for anyone—even an analyst—to agree to be someone else's used object for all eternity. This intervention also consolidated for me my awareness of the masochistic and sadistic dimensions of my relationship and how they served to keep us in eternally perverse union that itself kept me from appreciating within an intimate context a "whole" other person--male or female.

Our dynamics kept me from ever facing the masochist's perhaps deepest dread: to be abandoned. And since I associate my ex- with my mother, to be abandoned by her. Not long after this session, my analyst had occasion to point out that in not leaving my partner I didn't have to confront my own grandiose fantasy that I was of such significance to him that he could never do without me. My analyst's taking care of himself by saying no to my whining was a powerful message about separation. I didn't leave my analyst, although I was very angry. Indeed, even though he was taking care of himself I could begin to feel how I might begin to take care of myself in a similar way. Through all of this we kept talking. I could speak my anger and he could hold it without attacking me. Slowly I had to acknowledge my own masochism vis-a-vis my partner and my narcissistic defenses while simultaneously experience a relationship of deepening importance with my analyst.

My analyst remained challenging throughout our work together. While very well able to express empathy, kindness, respect, and his love for me, he didn't fail to combine these expressions with analytic insights designed to challenge my resistances to feeling my phallic energy. Further, he kept pointing out that I seemed to shower contempt on my partner in much the same way I felt it poured on me by my mother and others. Over time I came to see how I reduced my partner to a non-person. It was my choice not to really take in how troubled he was (although I did understand this on an intellectual level). My ex had become to me an object rather than his own subjectivity. Of course the same could be

said of his experience of me. Mutton Mother did not appreciate the entirety of my personality and her energies strove to keep my personal life organized around part object relationships. Regarding my ex-partner, my analyst kept pressing me to consider that life as I was living it seemed not to be changing and that I had a primary role in maintaining this stasis. For a long time I consciously wished that change would occur from outside myself. My analyst helped me to understand that the continued relationship was something I apparently needed in defense of experiencing an intimate relationship with a whole person. My constantly blaming my partner for our difficulties only served to keep me from ever looking inside myself to find whatever I might need to achieve intimacy.

As the years progressed, my analyst started to return more regularly my projections that would have him collude with my view about my partner. I dearly wanted him to agree that my partner was at fault for my unhappy life. I also wanted him to confirm my impotence and the impossibility of change. Of course, my analyst would not join me in any of these fantasies.

From time to time I thought I heard my analyst snoring from his position behind the couch. Once I jumped up to surprise him. He was awake. The idea that I was putting him to sleep made me very angry. Always he said in my assertion that I was boring him "if I had fallen asleep, couldn't it be because of something else?" That is, couldn't he have a life apart from mine that might result in being tired? Finally one day I believe he did fall asleep. This occurred well into my training

and I understood that it was a characteristic countertransference reaction to fall asleep while listening to the narcissistic productions from a patient. I was very hurt, but not so much with him after we talked about it as with myself. Was I really so narcissistically oriented?

On that day, something started to shift in me. I saw how terribly cut off from related feeling I was, and I didn't like it. I didn't want to lose him to my endless need to complain and stay stuck. I could more fully understand that he was separate from me and that despite this separation he could care about me. With this experience, I started to see how enmeshment is the antithesis of mature love. While I have no idea how he would remember this session, I remember it with tenderness for the both of us.

In short, in my view he worked with the transference in such a way that I could experience the love and support of a man who had my best interests in mind absent any condition of shame or contempt. Within human rather than superhuman bounds he could hear and take in what I had to say. Through the transference I could feel and use his strength vis-a-vis Mutton Mother. I felt safe with it. Just as safe and reliable was his holding of the frame with me as a intersubjective space in which I could begin to play with aspects of myself that had been frightened to come out including, finally, playing with my heterosexual feelings.

During one session, I was talking explicitly about my anxiety about getting up close and personal with a vagina, and he showed me an art book of line drawings of vaginas. As I looked at each page, with him sitting right there, I felt as though I was being introduced into the world of adult men. This was a rite of passage that I had never before allowed myself even as I felt shame over needing so late in my life his help about something many teenage boys could appreciate; I also had to take in how exciting the idea of making love with a woman struck me. Soon I asked a few women to dinner. All were disastrous experiences, but even I could allow that I needed to be gentle with myself about these awkward first attempts.

Perverse process can be about dislocated symbolic penises and throughout my analysis a recurring question that we posed was "Where is the penis?" (OK, we used other language). Even before I ever entertained the idea of dating women, let alone marrying one, this question always served to bring me back to such fundamental questions as "Where is your aggression?," "Where is your desire?" "Are you afraid?" "Why are you hiding?" "Where is your creativity?" Of course these questions often were applied to the prospect of partnering again with a man. But somehow the association of "Where is the penis?" with "Do you want his?" didn't feel right. Wanting "his penis" is like wanting to be the boy with the see-through tank top who seemed so strong and attractive to people. It is interesting to me that after all these years of analysis with a man and after many discussions about this, I never felt sexually attracted to my analyst. I believe that

a hidden part of myself needed him not to be a sexual distraction but instead a caring model of what I might someday myself become, but of course in my own way--someone in stark contrast to who Mutton Mother would have me be. With this insight, I came to understand that the creation of Mutton Mother was an act of revenge, a huge "fuck you" to the mother who left me in the closet. It was as though I said "Alright, if you don't love me for who I am, I will make myself into someone you will hate. I will take myself away from you." Of course this meant taking me away from myself too.

And who is it I have become? This question points to the core of this presentation and the theme of this conference. To me entire linguistic systems with their sociocultural associations and influences feel insufficient for gaining an answer, let alone mere words such as homosexual, heterosexual, or bisexual. So for me the question that many people have insisted asking me: "Am I gay, straight, or bisexual?" is more about them or my relationship with them and what I imagine their needs of me to be than anything I care to answer. All I can answer in direct terms is "Yes, and...." or "Yes, but..."

Most of the time these three words--gay, straight, and bi--point to something I can only feel incompletely and can not fully apprehend. In an attempt to render a response, if not an answer, I would like to use four metaphors that have come up either explicitly or implicitly in this presentation: closet, frame, expansion and integration. I offered my understanding of the closet as a place in which the

frightened or self-limiting gay person joins with a beloved (or a beloved part object) and swears a fidelity that includes the forswearing of other relationships. While I can not universalize this construction, I am confident that this fantasy of enmeshment applies to other gay men than just me. By comparison, the frame is psychic space within which two relatively more independent psyches meet for the sake of encountering each other in a gesture of mutual healing. Each, I believe, may seek in the other the separate identity with which to begin or continue to strengthen self-states and object boundaries that can be used to exchange narcissistic for object love. From the start my analyst held me accountable for my presence in the frame and would not allow me to overwhelm him with transference energies, even as he quietly held them for many years. "Can we talk about something else?" was a developmental experience in the frame where he reminded me he existed and that he was at my service if I could see and feel him as something other than a used object. In time, he became more and more revealing of himself as the man he is outside the frame. This wasn't a breach of the frame, it was an expansion of it that help make room for my growth too. Actual language about ourselves helped individualize us as speakers with a vested interest in hearing each other. Of course all separation includes de-idealizing of one sort or another, and what healthier way to confirm that process then, when ready, for the analyst to allow him or herself to be increasingly real to the patient. In this presentation, the expansion of the frame is a corollary to the expansion of my sexuality, that is to the "Yes, and..." and "Yes, but" that answers the question are you Gay, Straight or Bisexual? At present this

expansion means the addition of new object relations and dynamic energies that are not necessarily at peace with each other. Conflict still exists as the Mutton Mother encounters new internal and external objects and accompanying feelings of desire, potency, masculinity and so forth. Integration, the last metaphor, means for me a range of experiences that include détente, the agreement to disagree, the enduring commitment to healing as painful conflicts continue to arise, celebration, and for me very profoundly, if incompletely, forgiveness. After all Mutton Mother needed something too. And more importantly, Mutton Mother is not my real mother at all. The ability to love a woman in my life has also helped me to regain my love of my real mother who was so much else than this difficult aspect of myself. These four metaphors help trace the activities of an analysis even as they continue to inspire its meaning. Neither one nor all of them together can reveal all truth but together they offer context for continued meaning making. Today if my wife is upset with me about something, rather than running into the closet as I did when I had upset my mother, or sadistically and masochistically reducing myself and my partner to warring part objects, she and I have a conversation and maybe even a fight, but I know for sure that when it is over I am still loved and able to love.