

## Chapter 5: Something's Not Right!

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

At this time in my life, I had the unnerving experience of being desired by other women. Two women in the theatre company were attracted to me, one quite seriously. My self-esteem and body image were such that I never even saw it when it was right under my nose. I had not yet learned to recognize the signs. As time went by, this was a skill I developed and then used to keep such attractions from reaching any serious point.

One of my neighbors, Caitlin, and I became close friends. We did a number of domestic things together, shopping and so forth, and I gradually grew very fond of her. I realized at one point that I was attracted to her. At this time in my life, I had very conventional views about attraction and love. If one was attracted to someone, the natural course of events meant progression toward a relationship. I also had attraction and love inextricably linked in my mind. I was doing my best to maintain impeccable lesbian credentials, so I never did anything that was unconventional according to the current norms of the lesbian community.

I began leaving Caitlin anonymous notes saying she was cute, and things of that sort. She told me later she suspected I'd left the notes, but I acted so surprised and curious when she showed them to me, she was thrown off the track. Oh, I had learned how to act, alright! I did confess to a mutual friend, Christina, that I was intensely attracted to Caitlin, knowing Christina had a penchant for playing match-maker. One evening, Christina almost literally pushed the two of us together, and we began an affair.

Shortly into the affair, I realized it was a

mistake. Once again, I was completely turned off sexually once I'd become sexual with the object of my attraction. I broke off sexual relations with Caitlin, but could not talk to her about it. We slept together every night, but I rebuffed her sexual advances, saying I was not in the mood. This was true enough, but she deserved an explanation. The problem was – I was so confused by my own actions and feelings, I could not have explained them to her.

I was far too self-conscious to enjoy sex. I was attracted to women when they had their clothes on. As soon as their clothes were off, I was no longer attracted. This is all I was aware of at that time. I understand *now* that I didn't want to make love with them not because of their bodies, but because of my own. My self-consciousness had nothing to do with them, but with me. I didn't want to share my body with them. At the time, I just berated myself with thoughts such as, "What kind of lesbian is attracted to women when their clothes are on and not when they are off?" Of course, these were rhetorical kinds of questions. I didn't really want to *seriously* consider the question as I didn't want to hear the answer.

Caitlin broke off our relationship completely about a year after it began. I heard through a mutual friend some years later that she regretted having left me because it was the best relationship she'd ever had. Well... if one leaves sex out of it completely, this may have been true! But at the time, I remember hearing this statement in complete disbelief. I did not see that I had anything at all to offer anyone.

Sex had become an obsession with me, because I knew with certainty that the root of my problems in relationships lay in my warped view of sex. However, I did not yet realize there was a difference between sex

and gender. My *real* obsession was with gender, and it played out through my sexuality. I hated going into women's bathrooms. I would wait until I thought a bathroom was empty, then scuttle in as quickly as I could, practically running into a stall. If someone else came in while I was in there, I'd wait until she was gone. If worst came to worst, I'd wait in my stall until the person in question was washing her hands, then I'd open the door and *run* out of the bathroom.

I never once thought about my identity as a woman, which is where the real problem lay. Rather, I obsessed about my identity as a lesbian, which naturally brought sexuality into question, rather than gender. I kept a daily journal at that time in my life. Those journals are full of angst about attractions, feelings of self-worthlessness, wondering why I was so unlovable. The bottom line always was, "What's wrong with me?" But as long as I continued to wail that question from a sexuality context rather than a gender context, the answer remained elusive.

I left the theatre company in 1983 or 1984, when our lead actor's drinking became too stressful for a number of us techie types. At about the same time I began my involvement with the theater company, I had also started working on a women's newspaper in Portland. I had an ulterior motive – Therese, a woman I was very attracted to, was helping produce this newspaper and I wanted to get closer to her.

Therese was attracted to me, also. The chemistry between us was dynamic and volatile. We never did have a sexual relationship, but did exchange passionate lengthy kisses a number of times. As we became closer, she said to me one evening that she had something to tell me. I could tell

she was nervous, that this was a big deal, so when she finally blurted out, "I'm bisexual," I'd been prepared to hear she'd fallen in love with someone else.

To put her announcement in context – this was the early 1980s in the lesbian community, where being bisexual was generally suspect and misunderstood as being a "fence-sitting" kind of position. Most of my friends viewed bisexual women as either confused about whether they preferred men or women, or as women who liked to have sex with women, but were too cowardly to give up the safety of heterosexual relationships. In neither case were bisexual women regarded with trust or much respect. Bisexuality was not viewed as a sexual orientation in its own right. Hence Therese's nervousness in making this confession to me. She was very relieved when I just said, "So?"

This was not the first time a lover had made such a confession to me, but it was the first time that the thought crossed my mind to wonder what it meant that nearly all my lovers were either bisexual or had ended up in relationships with men. (Even Elena, who had loudly proclaimed her disdain for men during our relationship) Over the ensuing years, this was to become an ongoing pattern. To my knowledge, only one of the dozen or so lovers I've had over the years had never been with a man and still has not to this day (as far as I know!).

When I said, "So?" to Therese, my reaction was not based on any well-considered lesbian politic of supporting bisexual women. My reaction was based on my attraction to Therese, and I was not going to let any revelation drive her away from me. In fact, I *was* uncomfortable with her statement, because I had no idea what it really meant to be bisexual, but also because

this was bringing men into the conversation, however obliquely, and I didn't want to go *there* at all! That was a little too close to a personal truth I was avoiding like the plague, however unconsciously. I just knew her confession left me anxious and a bit scared.

The truth was, my politics were a hodgepodge of whatever was currently most popular in the lesbian community. I was cynical about lesbian politics in general, and tended to make fun of some of the press releases that came my way while I worked on the women's newspaper. When a story was prolonged and press release updates would come every month, I would say, "That story still!" with no empathy for the people involved.

One story in particular used to get me every month as updates came in. It went on for over a year and I got increasingly callous about it. I cringe now when I remember my sarcastic comments about the story of Sharon Kowalski and her lover Karen Thompson. If ever a story cried for empathy, theirs did. They were very closeted lovers in small-town Minnesota, and led a conservative life. Sharon was in a car accident that left her permanently paralyzed and in need of a great deal of physical therapy. Karen ended up coming out to Sharon's parents, in an effort to get Sharon home with her. Karen was a physical therapist and could have helped Sharon regain much of her functioning.

Upon hearing about their relationship, Sharon's parents refused to believe Karen, saying their daughter was not a lesbian and that she had been seduced by Karen. They went to court to get a restraining order to prevent Karen from ever seeing Sharon. They then put Sharon in a nursing home, where she received very little physical

therapy at the crucial stage in her recovery where future mobility was still possible if she'd been put to work.

I was callous and sarcastic when updates on their situation would come in each month, very effective defenses against feeling emotion. On the one hand, I was eaten up with envy that Sharon had a lover who cared for her so much. On the other hand, I knew deep down that I could never be in that kind of relationship myself. I realize now I was quite right about that, in a very literal sense. Theirs was a lesbian relationship, and by definition both partners have to be women (whether they are born female or not is irrelevant) if the relationship is to be considered lesbian. At the time, however, I interpreted this knowledge to mean I was too unlovable, that no one would ever come out in small-town America in order to win the right to take care of *me*.

By the mid-1980s, Therese had long since moved on and was no longer working on the women's newspaper. She had gotten involved with a man. She had given up on the lesbian community, finding too little support for a bisexual woman. I had fallen in love with another woman working on the paper, Helen. My love for her about drove me crazy, nearly to suicide.

There were several times during the 1980s when I came close to suicide. The pattern was always the same. I would fall in love with a woman, always a woman who was not in love with me. I would find my tongue padlocked, I could not voice my feelings and in fact felt my very life depended on her not finding out how I felt. She would always know, however, by my actions. I would find my work deteriorating, my self-esteem (never very high) disappearing, and my journals filling with angst about being unlovable.

Eventually, the woman in question would get tired of her role in my trauma-drama. But things would get sticky, as we were usually very good friends. I would deliberately form friendships with women I was intensely attracted to. I assumed from the time I met a woman I was very attracted to that I should form a friendship with her because I was so unlovable, no other kind of relationship would be possible. I never allowed for the possibility that she might be attracted to me yet not fall in love with me, which happened with Helen and Therese both. For me, it was all or nothing. This is why I never saw it coming when friends I wasn't especially attracted to would find *me* attractive.

In mid-1985, my work with the women's newspaper abruptly came to an end due to a conflict with the woman who owned the typesetting equipment we used. She was a very abrasive and opinionated woman. I saw her as a loose cannon, whose benefaction was not doing the newspaper any good in the long run. I proposed we instead take advantage of my new computer and the then-new capacity of printing out documents on a laser printer at a local copy shop. When the typesetter owner learned of my proposal, she abruptly denied me further access to her equipment. Scared of her overwhelming personality and uncertain about the efficacy of this new laser printer technology, the newspaper collective chose not to rock the boat, and allowed me to leave.

With my relationship with the newspaper and the theater company severed, I felt at loose ends. I was working on a half-time basis for a law firm in Portland, transcribing deposition tapes. I was in my late twenties at this point. I still had the thought, "I wonder what I'm going to be

when I grow up?" I had no direction in my work life, had never had a job that paid benefits. I didn't have career plans, just drifted from job to job as opportunities arose. My half-time \$8.00 an hour job paid all my bills easily, so I thought no more of it.

My mother inherited a great deal of money in the mid-1980s and felt guilty about being the sole heir. Partly out of innate generosity and partly to assuage her guilt, she was sharing the wealth, and she bought me a small house. Now, without having to obsess about money and having no organizations demanding any of my time, I was becoming too comfortable. If I were not constantly busy, I would have too much time to think. And to feel. And possibly to realize a few core truths about myself. Can't have that! I decided it was time for another bicycle tour, and began planning another ride to the Michigan Womyn's Music Festival.

One of my closest friends had recently moved to Boston, and I missed her a great deal. In looking at a U.S. map, I realized how close Michigan was to Boston (relative to its proximity to Oregon!), so the thought occurred to me to ride to Boston on this trip, to visit Julie.

Then I considered logistics... the festival is in August. If I rode on to Boston from Michigan, would summer weather hold until I got there? Then I thought, "Perhaps I should ride to Boston first, then to Michigan from there." It was a short step from this idea to thinking, "Jeez, I should just ride both ways!"

I wrote letters to various Contact Dykes in *Lesbian Connection*, an international publication consisting entirely of lesbians writing letters in response to various topics from previous issues, or raising new issues or questions. The Contact Dyke list consisted of women who were willing to be contacted by

other lesbians for information about their town or part of the world. I published my intent in *Lesbian Connection*, looking for contacts along the way. I had amassed quite a few replies, offers of places to stay which largely determined my route, by the fall of 1986. I was planning to do the trip during the summer of 1987.

In October of 1986, a fledgling organization, the Lesbian Community Project, held the first lesbian conference Portland had ever known. Over 400 women attended workshops on a variety of topics. I went, though I had no intention of joining any political group. Politics bored me. However, something happened at that conference that changed my life once again.

A few women had been trying for a month or so to form a women's chorus in Portland, but had had little success. Their advertising had been a little too minimalist. One member offered to announce the formation of this group at the Lesbian Community Project conference. With two friends, I heard the announcement, and all three of us decided to go to the next rehearsal to check it out. We did, and I stayed. For the next eleven years, the Portland Lesbian Choir was my spiritual center and the only place I ever felt truly at home in the lesbian community.

I had always loved to sing, but my innate terror of exposure to others prevented me from being able to sing when not alone. Funnily, there had been times when I had sung along with records or the radio knowing I would be overheard, as I knew I had a good voice and that this was likely to impress the person who heard me. I only had problems when others were *watching* me sing. In joining this newly-forming chorus, I knew I was coming home to a key aspect of myself.

I don't want this to become a history of the Portland Lesbian Choir, though I know more about that organization and its origins than all but a handful of people. The bond I feel with that handful is profound. My first rehearsal brought Erin and Liza into my life, and we quickly became the three musketeers. I felt an immediate "siblingship" with Erin that exists to this day. Liza has always been more enigmatic to me, though I love her dearly and have always enjoyed her company.

Between the three of us, we steered a course of professionalism and performance for the new chorus. I was one of the first production coordinators, and also held positions as publicity coordinator and fundraising coordinator. There was never a time when I was not in a leadership position within that organization, following the trend I'd always done in the lesbian community since my theater company days. I understand now that I was "buying" my place as a lesbian in good standing. If I did enough work for an organization, I could stay. I would have felt very uncomfortable simply joining a lesbian group for the sake of sociability, or because I believed in its mission and wanted to be associated with it.

One could make the argument that I am a workaholic of sorts, or that my perfectionist nature is such that I can't stand watching someone else do a job I know I could do better. The former is certainly not true. The latter has an element of truth to it, but does not tell the whole story. If I joined a chorus now, I might offer my graphics skills for publicity purposes, but would probably not take on the leadership role of making sure publicity was done as needed. I no longer have that feeling of needing to "buy" my membership in any group I care to join, beyond any required membership dues.

What I was buying in the case of the Choir was the right to sing in a LESBIAN chorus. In the back of my mind was the thought, "If I do enough work, no one can contest my right to be here." Of course, the thought never entered anyone's head to contest any such thing – until years later, when the thought finally entered MY head.

Throughout my twenties, I visited my biological family in the Bay Area as often as I could. I was not yet to the point where I was able to talk about deep feelings with other people. For this reason, it did not bother me that feelings are not talked about or dealt with in my family. In my thirties, as I came to have some self-esteem and an understanding of the level of intimacy possible in a family, I developed a family of choice in Portland whose company I preferred. Every member of my family of choice was a member of the Choir – this group had replaced my biological family. The Choir as a whole was like my extended family, and a small circle of five or six was my family of choice. Only with that small circle of friends have I ever felt truly at home, as if I never needed to do a thing to "buy" my place or justify myself. This is the only group that has ever given me unconditional support. And it was to this group that I turned later, when my life turned upside down and I needed support as I'd never needed it before or since.

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