

Chapter Two: Adolescence

by Reid Vanderburgh, MA

During my pre-adolescent years, gender was not a huge issue for me, aside from those times when my mother attempted to expose me to femininity. But when adolescence hit... I remember clearly telling my mother when I was 12 that I was never going to get married. I was deeply serious, and knew what I was saying was Truth. I saw my female friends changing before my very eyes, and was dismayed by the sudden emphasis they were putting on boys and dating. I somehow knew I was not going there with them, though I had no idea where I *would* be going in terms of relationships. My feelings of isolation and being different intensified dramatically.

My mother just laughed and said, "You'll change your mind." How sad, to be 12 and have an image of myself as an adult looking exactly as I did at that moment. I resigned myself to living my life alone. I knew I would not be able to have a relationship. Had I known enough to tag on the words, "as a female," I would have been right on target in saying I would never marry or have a fulfilling relationship.

Children have a clarity of mind and wisdom that is clouded during adolescence. Hormones are not good for clear thinking! I was absolutely right, at 12. I have had relationships over the years, of course, but they were not intimate emotionally and not successful. They did not make me happy. I was going through the motions, doing things because they were things adults should do, following patterns of relationship development because that's how such things are supposed to happen. The *shoulds* and *oughts* of adulthood clouded my mind. I knew my mind better at 12 than at any time

afterward until I was 39.

One *wonderful* thing that happened during my early adolescence was the changing of dress codes in the San Francisco Public Schools when I was 12 years old. Once I entered 8th grade, at 13, I no longer had to wear dresses to school. I never looked back, and that one change made adolescence somewhat bearable for me. I have no memories of any of the clothes I wore to school prior to that time; I remember quite clearly the various combinations of jeans and shirts I wore after that dress code change.

When I was 12, I fell in love with a classmate of mine, a girl named Sandra. At the time, I did not realize this is what I was feeling. The Stonewall Riots had not yet happened, Gay Pride was in the future, and I had no knowledge whatsoever of homosexuals. This may have been San Francisco, but it was also 1967, pre-revolution times for the gay community, and I had no idea my city was a refuge and haven for small-town queers.

Sandra intrigued me, partly because she was the first person I'd met who was clearly a genius. Her nickname was "Spock," and she reveled in her logical mind. We spent a great deal of time together, our imaginations soaring far beyond the limited boundaries of Herbert Hoover Junior High School.

When we were 13, Sandra completely cut off our friendship. I do not now remember the precise circumstances, but clearly remember it had something to do with her feeling I did not trust her as much as a best friend should. I was stunned not only by her rejection, but that she *saw* me clearly enough to recognize my lack of trust in *anyone*. It floored me, and scared me, to think that anyone actually *saw* me that deeply. I had not felt I had much of an impact on anyone, a feeling I have fought throughout my life.

To learn she was angered by my lack of trust was incomprehensible to me; why would it matter to anyone what I felt in the depths of my soul? For that matter, why would it make a difference to Sandra whether or not I trusted her?

In any event, Sandra steadfastly refused to acknowledge my existence for the better part of a year. The first half of ninth grade was a miserable time for me. I stayed home from school for weeks on end, feigning not feeling well. My mother sent me to my pediatrician, a kindly older woman. A few years ago, my mother told me the doctor told her I was depressed.

My mother was a Depression-era child, raised on a Missouri farm, and had no time for psychology. Instead of investigating the depression, she latched onto another of the doctor's suggestions, that perhaps I had an undiagnosed allergy. Among the list of likely culprits was down or feathers, so the end result of my feigning illness was not recognition of my severe depression, but the loss of my favorite feather pillow! Even at the time, I recognized the irony of this and would have laughed had I not been so depressed over Sandra's rejection.

Only in recent years have I considered that Sandra's rejection made a fine excuse for my depression, as I really did care deeply for her. I never questioned whether there might not be something deeper going on within me. In any event, I built a wall around my emotions, feelings and true thoughts that was impenetrable, and for years, I blamed this on Sandra. In truth, I walled myself in so no one else would be able to *see* me as Sandra had done.

Sandra eventually repented of her rejection, writing in my junior high school yearbook that she had been stupid and could I forgive her? We went to different high

schools, and prior to graduation, her family moved to southern California. When I was 19, she called me. She was going to be in San Francisco and wanted to get together with me. We met, and I found my tongue padlocked. I literally could say *nothing* to her, even at the most superficial levels. I don't think I said two sentences in four hours. I was unable to make myself vulnerable to another human being, and this was the first time I realized it.

Later that year, I fell in love with a woman in earnest. I was attending City College of San Francisco, as was Mickey. This time, I *did* recognize the nature of my feelings, and it seemed to me that my entire life fell into place. Though I had a great deal of internalized homophobia, I nevertheless felt a great deal of relief, thinking, "*This* is what's been going on all these years! *This* is what I felt for Sandra! I must be a lesbian!" It seemed to explain everything, and I adopted the label 'lesbian' and never looked back.

I never asked questions such as, "Why is my tongue still padlocked?" I was completely unable to talk about my feelings with the woman I was in love with. Mickey could see how I felt, but could not get me to say it. She was not in love with me, though she was attracted to me. We almost had a sexual relationship, but not quite. This was the mid-1970s, the middle of the sexual revolution, and love and sex were close to being divorced from each other (particularly in Free Love San Francisco). To her credit, Mickey did not take advantage of my feelings by sleeping with me, though the times dictated this as a reasonable course of action. She was 25 to my 19, and I believe this age difference influenced her behavior.

There are few events one can point to and say with certainty, "My life would be significantly different if I'd made a different

choice in this situation." I know with certainty my life would have been different had I not fallen in love with Mickey. When she was evicted from her apartment so the landlord could give it to his newly-married son, Mickey needed a place to live. In my weakness for her, I offered to ask my mother if Mickey could move in with us in our huge three-story house. My mother, knowing how I felt about Mickey and thinking this would make me happy, agreed.

It was a miserable time. Mickey had other girlfriends and would bring them home. I sank deeper and deeper into despair, finally deciding I had to leave. In my extreme lack of self-esteem and having no knowledge of acceptable boundaries, it never occurred to me to ask Mickey to move out. I moved out of my mother's house, and left it to Mickey! She continued to live there for the next three years.

I applied to colleges out of town, in order to leave without having to tell my mother the true reason. The closest college I applied to was in Forest Grove, Oregon, about 30 miles west of Portland. I moved in August of 1976, just a few weeks before my 21st birthday. How different would my life have been had I chosen Hofstra University instead? Or Purdue? Both had accepted me. Had I not moved to Oregon, I would never have met Judy in 1987, and what a difference *that* made, the biggest of all.

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