

# Coming Out of Two Closets

by Jane Field

*Les femmes handicapées qui sont également lesbiennes doivent surmonter deux formes d'oppression sociale. L'auteure explique qu'il est très important de s'identifier comme lesbienne handicapée afin de contrer les préjugés sociaux qui nuisent aux femmes handicapées et aux lesbiennes.*

I feel it is very important for dykes and gay men with disabilities to be "out" in terms of both their disability and their sexual orientation. The other day someone remarked to me that there are a number of people with disabilities, particularly paraplegic men, who attempt to "pass" in the non-disabled world, who want nothing to do with disability groups, especially consumer-run groups. I chuckled a bit at the picture that this conjured up in my head of people in wheelchairs covered with trenchcoats, furtively wheeling around, attempting to hide their disability.

Of course people who have invisible disabilities are more able to hide their disabilities, if they choose to do so. It's a bit ridiculous for a wheelchair user like myself to consider hiding the fact. But it leads me to wonder why I would want to. Why wouldn't I want people to know that I have a disability, that I accept it as part of who I am and that I am proud of who I am? Why wouldn't I want anyone to know that I confront physical and attitudinal barriers every day of my life and that I identify with strong individuals who are part of the disability rights movement? And why would I deny myself the opportunity to be part of consumer-driven groups like the DisAbled Women's Network?

I don't hide my disability and I don't "overcome" it either. It's just something I

live with. I am not handicapped. Society is handicapped when it shuts out people like me. I am not physically challenged. Tri-athletes and mountain climbers are physically challenged. And I'm certainly no more differently-abled than anyone is from anyone else. No. I just simply have a disability. I don't deny it, or hide it. I'm "out."

Being "out" as a person with a disability is a conscious choice, whether or not one's disability is visible. For the way others view us is closely connected with the way we view ourselves. Choosing to see disability as a part of who we are and recognizing our strengths and abilities, is all part of "coming out." Realizing that having a disability is not a negative thing, is an important first step in this process.

My disability is only one part of me. I am also a lesbian, and as a lesbian, I am also "out." It took me a while to come to terms with my sexuality, just as it did for me to accept my disability. I am proud of being a lesbian and I see my sexuality as a very important part of who I am. I wonder why I wouldn't want people to know that. Why wouldn't I want people to know I am actively involved in the struggle for lesbian and gay rights?

Recently, I met two women in North Bay who thought that they had never met a lesbian. They said, "Of course you have those kinds of people in Toronto, but we don't have any in North Bay." Not only were they astonished to learn that I was a lesbian, but they were also greatly surprised when I told them that I could introduce them to at least two lesbians who lived right in North Bay. Their eyes opened even wider when I continued: "Maybe you don't know these lesbians are right here in your own community, because they don't feel it's safe for them if people

know. And what is it about your little community that would make them feel that way?"

It makes me feel very sad that for many lesbians the closet is safer than the community. And people won't change their attitudes if they continue to think they are not affected. The "we don't have that problem here" mentality leads to isolation, misunderstanding, stereotypes, and prejudices.

We must be "out" both in terms of our sexuality and our disability, so that people will know that we do belong and that we occupy a rightful place in the community as a whole—not just in the disabled community, or in the lesbian community.

Sometimes, however, we are not "invited" to be part of our own gay community. This happens when events are not accessible, when there are no lesbian bars that are wheelchair accessible, when only part of a bookstore can be accessed, or when our fellow lesbians and gay men assume that we don't exist and can't even conceive of having a relationship with us. We are in a sense "handicapped" by the inaccessibility of the gay community and by the attitudes of others. Our full participation as "out," practising homosexuals may be limited by these barriers. We have to do our best to make sure the gay community knows we are here, that we belong and have much to contribute, if we can just get in.

Similarly, as lesbians and gay men in the disability movement, we need to feel validated and recognized. We need to feel comfortable discussing our issues and concerns as gay people in the context of our disabilities. This is not always easy either. Although the disability community may be readily physically accessed, there are just as many attitudinal barriers

and misconceptions about our sexuality in this community as there are in society at large.

As lesbians and gay men with disabilities, our struggle lies not just in being accepted in society, but also in being accepted for who we are in both the gay community and the disability community.

I am reminded of a store-owner who once remarked to me that his store didn't need a ramp because "people in wheelchairs don't come here." Right! And there is no homophobia in North Bay, because homosexuals or "people like that" apparently don't live there! Well, of course they do, but they may not be "out" because people's attitudes are as inaccessible as an unramped store. There is no obvious invitation to be "out."

Invitation or not, I think we have to be "out" in all of our communities. We have to be proud of who we are as dykes with disabilities, or gay men with disabilities, and invite others to get to know us.

*Jane Field is a former high school teacher currently volunteering in literacy, lesbian and disability rights activities in Toronto.*



Winsom, *Celebration II*, 1993. Acrylic on canvas, 145 cm x 85 cm.

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