

GAY WOMEN & MEN: How We Relate

They say we hate women, fear them, are disgusted by their bodies, want to live in a world without them, want to be like them, worship them, wish we were women ourselves. They "blame" our mothers (and tend not to mention our fathers) for our awful fate. There are women who are disgusted by us, threatened by us, intrigued by us, contemptuous of us, and supportive of us.

I have seen many generalizations about the relationship of male homosexuals to women. Much of this is sweeping dogma that has little connection to my own reality. It is impossible, I think, to generalize about this topic for the simple reason that there are so many different women. But, on the other hand, the feminist movement and the gay liberation movement have attempted to forge a *group identity* for women and for homosexuals. So accordingly it is worth exploring the way that these two categories of people interact, the way that they are inter-related.

I do not feel that I have ever hated women or have ever been disgusted by women's bodies. But I have met male homosexuals who have such feelings. Where does this come from? I think it comes from a male supremacist society, one which adores masculinity. A homosexual man failing to achieve the treasured and sought-after traits of masculinity, then, could easily become a person who hates the *visible* source of "femininity" — namely, women. The rabidly male supremacist homosexual must be, on some level, a self-hating person. As this self-hatred subsides — the essence of gay liberation — gay men can be more loving toward women.

There are some well established uniquely close relationships between gay men and women. For example, there is a significant number of male homosexuals who gravitate toward certain gay professions which have a unique relationship to women — hairdressing, fashion design, cosmetics, interior decoration. Because some men in these fields fit the so-called stereotype homosexual, there is a tendency or a desire within the gay liberation movement to dismiss or ignore such individuals — something which has always struck me as a bit anti-gay. Some feminists have suggested that men in such professions are complicitous in the exploitation of women, in that they help keep women in their most unliberated roles — sex object and housekeeper. These feminists may well be right; the fact that a woman seeks out a hairdresser voluntarily begs the question. Possibly, some gay men choose these jobs because they have cultivated an appreciation for what they imagine to be feminine standards of beauty. Ours has been a society of "real men" and "real women." A faggot who accepts this dichotomy, and who doesn't make it as a "real man," has only one other choice — being a "real woman."

This mentality, perhaps, motivates some transvestites (drag queens) and transsexuals (someone whose sex is altered surgically). Transsexuals like to think of themselves as women trapped in a man's body. Transvestism and transsexualism, however, are "extreme" choices, in the sense that few people have the inclination or the courage. So, for some gay men, a better choice in this incredible role-playing game is to help "real women" fulfill the female role most perfectly and most beautifully. Perhaps both faggot and woman in such situations share a sense of joy, fulfillment and beauty — while perhaps on another level they share a sense of pain, inadequacy and ugliness. Possibly, of course, the gay men in such professions choose them for simpler reasons. For one thing, these are among the few professions where a homosexual has job security — he will not be fired if his sexual preference is known. In addition, gay men in such fields probably feel more comfortable being surrounded by wo-



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men, simply because they perceive women as nicer, gentler and less threatening than most straight men. There is a unique level of intimacy, confidence and friendship, I am told, between male hairdresser and client.

I should take note of the fact that some women prefer the friendship of gay men because they discover that we can relate to them as people and not as sex objects. These same women are often disappointed, and sometimes angry, when we forsake their friendship in order to be with or search after a sex object (in this case, a man).

Some women prefer the friendship of gay men above all other kinds of relationships, and in camp language such women are called fruit flies or fag hags. Some fag hags — the term seems ugly to me, both anti-woman and anti-gay — develop strong friendships with one or more gay men. I can't say what motivates such women, or why they enjoy an evening in a gay men's bar. But I know some lesbians believe that fag hags are closet lesbians, that is, women who know they do not wish to be sexually dominated by a straight man but who are afraid to enter into the female side of the gay world. One comment I've heard about fag hags is that they are attracted to gay men for the challenge of it all — in the hopes of "curing" us or "making" us. Some gay men truly enjoy the company of such women, some are contemptuous of them, and some find such friendships convenient for straight-fronting (that is, putting on a heterosexual show) for family, employer, or social acquaintances.

Another special relationship between gay men and women is the incredible attraction of the gay male community for certain female entertainment stars. The late Judy Garland, of course, tops the list, and there is also Barbra Streisand, Liza Minelli, Bette Midler, Marlene Dietrich, Bette Davis, Katherine Hepburn, Joan Crawford and others. I have often felt alienated from the gay male community because I do not generally wor-

ship these heroines. Why do gay men love these women so? Some say it is because of the imagery of strong independence that some of these women project. Judy Garland was popular, I was told once by a friend, because gay men could identify with her tragic struggle to survive. Some say it is merely the image of style and stardom that these women project. Whatever the reason, it certainly is a cultural phenomenon of considerable importance, and it gives the lie to the statement that gay men have no place in their world for women.

Is a male homosexual the ultimate male supremacist? Or are gay men likely to be among the males most supportive of the goals of women's liberation? Both ideas have been expressed by feminists. One thing is certain: male homosexuals are preoccupied with the fact that on some level we are womanly, or we are considered womanly by this society.

I have heard men call their asshole a pussy, and I have heard men express revulsion at the idea of smelling or tasting or even looking at a vagina. I have met macho bi-sexuals who would just as soon fuck a woman as a man (any hole will do). Some of these bi-sexuals really prefer anal sex with women — which I believe they experience as the ultimate in domination and humiliation. In camp lingo, gay men use such terms as "Miss Thing" and the pronoun "she" as a put-down. Some drag queens mock women or impersonate women on the stage in order to make a living. (Some lesbians have stated that they feel that drag shows are exploitative of women.) But it is the butch image that is the sexual preference of most gay men, and many male homosexuals cultivate a masculine identity with care and pride (as in "I may suck cock, but I'm a *man*."). For most gay men it is still a compliment to be told, "Oh you don't act like a homosexual — I never would have guessed!" Most gay men are turned off to drag queens and to effeminate men because the male homosexual's sex object, in the end, is a man. Some gay men are uncomfortable with

lesbians — or dislike them — are turned off to feminism because such women disrupt the well-established imagery of woman-kind. Even within the gay liberation movement, men have remained insensitive to the ways in which we embody a male supremacist society, and this has been a major factor in the establishment of an independent lesbian movement.

I say all of this to acknowledge the fact that male supremacist values, the internalization of stereotyped role-playing, infect the male homosexual community. A significant portion of gay men, at least superficially, have aligned themselves with men, have affirmed their manhood, and in so doing they ignore (at best) or combat (at worst) the goals of the feminist movement.

Gay liberation *without* feminism — and sadly this is the state of a significant part of the gay movement — cannot really deal with the source of homosexual oppression. For that source is the system of sex roles propagated by a male supremacist society. Gay men managing to obtain the privileges of straight men ("civil rights") may ultimately achieve the economic and political status given to heterosexuals. But, as long as the heterosexual nuclear family remains intact and respected, as long as the masculine image remains admirable, male homosexuals will continue to be marginal people. We will be misfits while others form their families; we will be cocksuckers and faggots (womanly non-men) while only those men who fuck women will earn the cherished level "man."

Gay liberation *with* feminism is the only logical solution to the problems we face as male homosexuals in this society. My argument here, despite all that I have said about male supremacy among gay men, is that there are many indicators of an already well-developed unity in practice between gay pride and strong, independent womanhood. In other words, we are already well along the way, as gay men, toward a beautiful and strong alliance with women.

Well I remember the yellow brick schoolhouse in Woodridge, N.Y., where I learned to read and write. On one side of the building, the boys played a modified baseball game called "three feet." You had to throw a ball against the wall; there were teams and if you didn't do well, your teammates would resent you. On the other side of the building the girls jumped rope ("Down in Mississippi, where the boats go push!" — see, I still remember). Was I a "male homosexual" at age 6? Certainly not, but I was a fairy all right. I threw a ball "like a girl." And I found my place quickly enough with the girls and the jumprope.

It was simple enough, I think — the boys rejected me, or I rejected them and their competitive games, and I felt at home and welcome among the girls. Well, maybe I didn't quite feel "at home," because on some level I knew it was "wrong" for me to jump rope with the girls. I knew I belonged on the other side of the school, but the girls offered me affection and acceptance. I know from conversations with many dozens of gay men that this experience is almost universal among us: early childhood friendships and feeling of ease with girls.

My problems with relating to girls began with the emergence of my sexual identity at puberty. To a great extent, my easy friendship with girls continued all through junior high school, high school and college. Many of these friendships were based on my attraction for the girls who, like me, "got good marks" in school. Later, some of it was political — my female friends were comrades in such groups as the Student Committee for a Sane Nuclear Policy. But I also was becoming an overtly sexual being for perhaps the first time (being unaware of much childhood sexual feeling). Much of my erotic energy went toward males, and I had sex occasionally from age 13 on with boys (and once with an older man). But I tried very hard to be straight, and in so trying I found myself getting into relationships with some young women that can only be called contrived. In one case, when I was 16 or 17, I purposely

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sought the company of a 13-year old girl who, in the parlance of the times, had a "bad reputation," and we used to dry fuck together. I dated and necked rather compulsively, though I didn't enjoy this semi-sex very much, and I anxiously awaited the day when I would lose my hated and frightening virginity.

Throughout this period, I was not a self-aware homosexual. I knew I had a "problem," but I did not identify myself as homosexual entirely. Even after a long homosexual affair with a college roommate, I hoped to strengthen my straight identify. I expected to find my gay feelings fade into the past, just as the books said they would. As a straight-identified man, I of course did not encounter homosexuals in openly gay situations, though it turns out that still another roommate of mine was a closeted homosexual. While I was living with him, I began a rather serious affair with a very nice young woman. I told her I loved her, and I suppose I did, and we even talked of marriage. But in all honesty I think what I really loved was the feeling of *belonging* that I had when I was with her in the company of my straight friends who had already formed into couples.

Shortly thereafter, I became fully integrated into a homosexual life style, and I ceased making love with women altogether. Actually, I did try from time to time, but I couldn't keep a hard-on. However, I found that as I became a more sexual and sensual person, women began to find me attractive — much more so than before. Since I no longer desired the sexual company of women but was afraid to tell them the reasons why, I found myself building barriers between myself and women. It became more difficult to have casual friendships with women. Especially as the cult of virginity waned in the mid-1960's, I found the casual company of women more and more difficult.

I did not like these barriers that I had built, and I did not really like the entire notion of a secret life. I was able, even before the gay liberation movement, to tell a few friends that I was gay — and most of these were women. And later, after gay liberation strengthened my sense of gay pride and identity, it was to women that I first opened up. It was easier telling women than telling straight men. This is another universal experience of male homosexuals. In our families, too, it is easier to tell our sisters than our brothers, easier to tell our mothers than our fathers. True, mothers wring their hands ("What did I do wrong?") and girlfriends may feel a sense of loss and rejection, but there seems to be a level of understanding and acceptance of which men are not capable. And no wonder; did you ever hear of a woman beating up someone because he is a faggot?

I have noticed that my friendships with women I knew from our work together in the New Left in the late 1960's has in several cases been strengthened in this post-gay liberation period. We are able to talk more openly, it seems, not about current events or Marxian analysis, but about our immediate human experiences. With straight men I know from similar days gone by, the contact is often more strained — if it has continued at all.

I am close to three women in my family — my mother, my sister, and an aunt (my mother's sister). Our relationships after my coming out have vastly improved. This is no doubt a result of three factors: first, my ability at last to be open and honest; second, my familiarity with feminism and my ability to use this knowledge to communicate better with the women close to me; and third, my new-found ability to be less intellectual and to be in touch with my feelings and other people's feelings, an ability I associate with nurturing feminine aspects of my personality.

As many people know, there is a theory very popular among professional and amateur psychologists that male homosexuals are created by dominant, over-protective mothers. Before my contact with feminism and gay liberation, I was to a great extent victimized by this theory, and as a result I did not feel good about my mother. I think, at the outset, we

need to face up to the fact that most mothers can be described as "dominant and over-protective" if by that we mean that they are responsible for keeping up a home and assuming primary responsibility for giving a child affection (or any emotional response) and support. The entire line of thinking, I feel, becomes a sham.

I refuse to accept the notions of traditional psychology that certain behavior by parents will assure the sexual identity of a child. For example, I know of many cases of families with so-called dominant mothers and weak fathers where the children are quite heterosexual. I know of homosexuals who come from homes where the fathers are tyrannical and the mothers silent and prayerful, while such households also produce heterosexuals. On the other hand, I will not say — as some gay liberationists do — that what parents do is unrelated to a child's sexual identity. It may be a factor. And if we feel good about ourselves, how can we "blame" our parents for anything?

For me, the crucial fact is that my parents did not force too many sex role stereotypes on me. For example, my father never pushed sports on me, for which I am keenly grateful, though sometimes I wish I had a stronger, more athletic body. I think people perceived my mother as dominant, but I know that she does not run things. While gentle and not a tyrant, my father is much more likely to get his way in a given situation. Given the conditions of most twentieth century American marriages, however, my mother is quite an independent woman. I first heard the term "male chauvinism" from the lips of my mother. It was in the 1950's and I was only a boy. If I am not mistaken she was talking about a certain cousin of hers who, indeed is a male chauvinist. (My mother learned such vocabulary from her association, since ended, with the Communist Party. While she, true to the spirit of anti-sexist politics, has often used the ideology of anti-sexism in her personal life, the Party has attacked modern-day feminism in the name of its narrow brand of proletarian politics.)

My relationship with my mother, however, has not been all that great. My negative attitude toward my mother was quite simple; I knew that I was a sissy, I knew that being a sissy was a terrible thing, and somehow I associated my mother's care, affection and protective attitude toward me with the fact of my being a sissy. So I resented her and her ebullient affection, and most communication between us was spoiled by this dynamic. After coming out, and especially after understanding the undesirability of straight manhood, I was able to open up to my mother and to accept her affection. She can kiss me now as much as she likes, and I kiss her back not reluctantly but sincerely. My mother found out about my gayness accidentally — she spotted a gay liberation button I left carelessly on a sweater. I had been wanting to tell her anyway. She was not happy with the news, and she still has not recovered from the shock and disappointment. She is not one of those very rare mothers who will show up at a gay liberation march. But I think I have convinced her at the very least that there is much value in the improved communication between us, and she continues to respect and love me. She shares with me, too, in a way she did not before.

It is common for a male homosexual who is a fully grown man to live with his mother. While I once thought such an arrangement ridiculous, I could now seriously consider it. In general, I believe in communal living arrangements where there is a full age span from small children to old folks.

My sister and I (she's four years younger) were great friends and playmates throughout childhood. But when she became a sexual being, she entered into awesome conflict with my basically puritanical parents. From that moment on, there was a great barrier between me and my sister. I couldn't be open with her about sex, I believed, because I couldn't reveal my own truths. I didn't want to know her side of things because then I'd have been

obligated to tell about myself (out of the question). So I *seemed* to take my parents' side. Only many years later, after I came out, did we begin to get close again. Now we have a "no secrets" relationship which is by no means perfect but which is unusually solid for brother and sister.

My aunt (my mother's sister) is someone I consider one of my best and most loyal friends. I have felt that way about her ever since I was a small child. She was the first relative I told about my gayness, and her response was consistent with this established loyalty and trust. Perhaps her involvement with people in the theater and the dance has been a factor. She is an open, incredibly self-aware person. Last year, while I was on a visit to Florida, she and her husband were quarreling, as they often do. At her bidding, I went out with her several evenings to drink and dance at a nearby resort hotel. In the meantime, I discovered a lively gay dancing bar just a few blocks away from her apartment. Being somewhat bored by the straight scene she's taken me to for several nights running, I suggested we go to the gay bar. She immediately accepted, and we both had a very nice time together, socializing and dancing, not only with each other but with people we met at the bar. Many gay men I know have close, loving relationships with an aunt or a grandmother.

Perhaps one of the most important relationships I have had with a woman is with Karla Jay, a lesbian with whom I have worked together on various gay liberation projects. [Ed.: She and Allen Young are co-editors of the gay liberation anthology, *Out of the Closets*.] To the extent that this working and social relationship has been successful, it is in part due to my conscious efforts toward respecting Karla's autonomy as a woman and as a lesbian, and in not permitting the straight male world to assume that a man is always in charge. In any case, no matter what my intentions might be, Karla is not going to put up with any shit from me or from any man.

It is one thing for gay men to have private relationships with women. We are also confronted with the reality of a strong, vital, growing feminist movement. We are men, not women, yet we cannot and should not remain aloof from the demands of angry proud women. As a starter, we can read feminist literature and support the demands of the organized women's movement. We should see such demands as being in our own interest.

One small group of gay men who call themselves "effeminists" have argued that gay men should place themselves virtually in the service of women. These men, I think, envision a world run by women with men in subordinate positions. They want gay men to take the lead in this reversal of power. It is my understanding, however, that most feminists and most gay liberationists, most people of good will, seek a world of equality without power trips. That, presumably, is why we are busy combatting male supremacy. Having said this, I think it is worth point-

ing out that gay men are already more at home than straight men in such situations as cooking and housekeeping. It has been my observation that straight men assume that women will serve them in certain areas, especially cooking and housekeeping. I do not think that gay men, when they live with women, make such assumptions, except married closet cases who can be typical husbands.

The area of child care and education, which our culture assigns to women, is of special interest to gay men. Many of us are exploring ways out of the trap set by society which separates us from the newer generations. It is no coincidence that among men who choose elementary education as a field, for example, the percentage of homosexuals is quite high. Many of the married homosexuals I have met say they are motivated largely by their love for their children. Some gay men seek out work in child care centers, although unfortunately many of these centers, whether run by agencies or parents, do not welcome homosexuals or anti-sexists on their staffs. There are gay fathers with the custody of their own children, and there are gay men who would like to adopt children, though this is usually impossible. Some gay men, of course, are not particularly interested in children. Although some may dogmatically label this as "privilege" or male chauvinism, it seems to me to be as much a matter of individual choice for gay men, as it is for straight married people or lesbians, to remain childless.

It is not always easy for a gay man to figure out how he relates to the half of humanity he is not involved with sexually — especially when society implies that sex is the main reason for men to relate to women. But relating to women is a part of gay life that is real and important, since we define "gay" as more than just a sexual preference. The relationship of gay men to women is, in many ways, entering a new era with the advent of gay liberation and the second wave of feminism. Our tendency to relate more easily to women on many levels is a well established fact, to the extent that we recognize and accept the parts of our personalities that are more "feminine." Still, ours is a society which teaches men that women are for fucking. If we accept this most male supremacist notion of women, then we have no use for women. As I said before, I believe there are a significant number of gay men who have such a view. (Straight men with such a view, perhaps the majority of straight men, do indeed have a "use" for women, but it is precisely within the confines of that word "use.")

I have indicated that gay men who are out of the closet, who have broken the barriers of shame, self hatred and secrecy, are able to discover equal relationships with women. If we have love and respect for all human beings, in their fullest dimensions, we can find rich and fulfilling relationships with women, perhaps the richest and fullest relationships we can have.

—Allen Young



"Love Talking to Boys," a pen and ink drawing by Simeon Solomon, 1865.