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Narrative possibilities for unpacking “homophobia”: Responding to the complexities of men’s life journeys.

Art Fisher

I grew up in rural Nova Scotia, Canada, in the 1960's, in a river valley where men mostly farmed and worked in the woods and women mostly stayed home and raised children. My father Harold worked as a sawyer in a lumber mill, and my mom, Jessie, had given up a job as a psychiatric nurse in the city to marry my father, move to the country and raise us children. In the country she was the only nurse for miles and went to stay with farm families when someone was dying and needed injections for pain. She helped people cope with the care-giving and grief involved in the death of loved ones. She didn't take money for this. It was just a neighborly thing to do.

I was the youngest of five children and my mother and father gave me an incredible amount of attention and affection, as if I was the greatest gift in the world. I didn't know, until I was older, that a few months before I was born, one of my sisters, Nellie, had died. She was eight when she died. She had been sick since she was born. My mother had apparently cared for her at home all that time and dad hired a housekeeper to help mom, in spite of having very little money and in spite of many people telling my mom and dad that Nellie should be institutionalized. I learned about Nellie's life and about some of the pain over Nellie's death from my mother when I was around ten.

At the same age, I was also learning about my body. My body was teaching me that I was attracted to boys rather than girls. I remember being very confused and troubled by this attraction. Girls are supposed to be attracted to boys. Then I must be a girl, not a boy. But I look like a boy, not a girl, or do I? I began to scrutinize my body and become very disturbed by what I thought I noticed: a feminine way of walking, my face, my voice, my hand gestures, my hands themselves looked feminine to me, small and weak... I started to police my body movements according to ideas about “normal” gender development. My body was revealing disgusting evidence of something horribly wrong with me and needed to be hidden and fixed up. I was very confused and secretly felt like an outsider, a freak, an abnormal and shameful genetic mistake.

Life was so solitary in the country. There was not much possibility of learning about myself through having sex with other boys. Only once did a boy from a farm nearby want to see me naked at the swimming hole in the brook, and I fled. He must be a genetic mistake too I thought.

I remember secretly blaming my mom and dad: If only they hadn't lost Nellie, maybe then I would've been normal. Maybe her death made them so sick with grief that they turned me into their little girl. I blamed them for causing this mess. These secret stories of my horribly mistaken abnormality, my mom and dad's parenting mistakes, and that other sick boy who lived up the road constituted my private self-hating world.

As I grew into my teens I had no awareness of a culture or history about being gay. I had no access to any documentation of my history or of people like me. I remember piecing a history and a community together, bit by bit, as I discovered alternative stories. My first amazing discovery was an interview with Leonard Matlovich that I managed to watch on television by accident one day, alone after school. Leonard Matlovich had been discharged from the U.S. military after “coming out” as a “homosexual” and was now in the media. I remember studying him closely in front of the television: *his* voice, *his* gestures, *his* hands, to see if he acted like me. I thought he talked kind of wimpy, but, so did I. I finally had an alternative story about someone like me that made connections with a larger society, and, made connections with a debate in that larger society about people like me.ⁱ

So, it became larger than just me and that other sick boy up the road. Other alternative stories started coming into my life: My sister sends my brother a book in the mail, an unknown selection from a book club list. He reads the dust jacket, curses at my sister for sending him a “homo” book, and throws the book in the garbage. ...Later that night, I rescue the book and I hide it. At my next chance to be alone I take it out of the closet. It’s a hardcover first edition. It’s E.M. Forster’s Maurice, written much earlier in the 1900’s but published just now, in the 1970’s, after Forster’s death. I remember reading that book with incredible speed and incredible shivering and I remember reading it over and over and over. It was the first time I ever read a story about two men falling in love... It meant a lot to me that they got to live happily ever after.

I can now understand that as a young man I engaged with these stories of Leonard Matlovich and E.M. Forster’s Maurice not merely as a passive young victim of cultural dominance but rather with the agency of a young participant in culture. These alternative stories assisted me in standing up to the dominant story of “my sickness”. The 1970’s led me to discover more alternative stories that assisted me, stories about “gay liberation”, “coming out”, “homophobia” and “heterosexism”.

I am now forty-five. I have been loving, struggling and sometimes so pissed off with the same boyfriend for the past ten years. And my mom lives with a dementia diagnosis, now needing the same care and love she used to give to so many others. I’m glad she got to know this boyfriend before she started to forget him. My father never got to know him or me really. He died at home, in my arms, with lung cancer when I was nineteen. When I come to conferences like this, I often think about my mom and dad. I often think that they would be so proud of how their son turned out. You see, one of my secret stories is that I used to think I would end up living on the street, a literal outsider, if I survived at all. I never thought I would ever be happy, or feel connected, or feel loveable, or have a family of my own. The possibilities I experience in my daily life now were not imaginable before.

What I am curious about, at forty-five, is this: It seems as if the alternative “gay liberation” ideas that assisted me as a younger man (ideas about “coming out”, “homophobia” and “heterosexism”) have become ideas that restrain me in later life. You see, the happiness, the connection, the lovability I now feel is a result of both participating in these very important

alternative ideas and then becoming suspicious of them and opting out of them.

The alternative discourse on “homophobia”, “gay” identity, “resistance” and “difference” that may have been invoked as an extremely helpful step toward survival and self-acceptance when I was younger has functioned as a *barrier* to re-negotiating identity practices and moving toward greater self-acceptance, connection and a sense of participation in culture as I age.

This makes me curious about the complexity of “gay” men’s life journeys, and the complexity of life beyond the “straight/gay” dichotomy. And I am sharing my experience with you as an invitation for you to join me in curiosity about this complexity.

I’m curious as to how alternative ideas about “homophobia” as the problem have very helpfully invited me in from the margins and, at the same time, keep me at the margins in significant ways. For example:

“Homophobia” discourse restrains my sense of connectedness with persons through inviting me to pathologize them: “Homophobia” implies a medical discourse of ill intentioned “phobic” and “irrational” fear within “straight” people. This maintains a simple “straight/gay” dichotomy in culture by reversing the judgements of “irrationality” that sustain “otherness”. Rather than me participating in the dominant “othering” of myself as “irrational”, homophobia discourse invites me to alternatively participate in the social construction of “straight” people” as “irrational” and “other”. This encourages my separateness from persons, based on assumptions about their “straightness” and “ill intentions” being opposed to my “gayness” and “good intentions”. It encourages the marginalizing idea that “my” community is “gay” versus “straight” community. This assumption that “gay community” is where I ought to find connection has often left me disappointed, my expectations and hopes for finding community leading to endlessly unfulfilled longings for community.

“Homophobia” discourse restrains my sense of participatory agency in culture: It suggests that while “straight” people are the “homophobic” ill intentioned agents of dominant culture, I passively “internalize” this “homophobia”. These ideas about passively internalizing “homophobia” don’t fit with the story I want to tell about the complicated agency of that little boy I used to be – the little boy who both participated in the dominant

gender story by hating and policing his body and hands, and, used this same body and these same hands to sneak books into his room, bit by bit piecing together an alternative story.

A large part of my concern within narrative practices in this context is around externalizing “homophobia” as the problem *per se* and personifying it as “irrational”, “bad” or “evil” without unpacking the implications of this discourse. For example, does this naming of “homophobia” as the problem and personification of “homophobia” as evil increase “gay” men’s shame over facing self-participations in the masculinity policing of our culture? Does it block us from noticing “absent but implicit” evidence of our full participation in society within our “alternative” re-creations of dominance? Is this what “homophobia” discourse attempts to name in the first place: the agency involved in the policing and regulation of dominant sex and gender practices?

You see, I think it is extremely disturbing that, while “Homosexuality” may have been removed from previous DSM diagnoses, the idea of “Gender Identity Disorder Syndrome” has been added to the DSM IV. The psychiatric construction of “Gender Identity Disorder Syndrome” is a means for achieving the same social policing and regulation of dominant masculinity among men previously achieved through the psychiatric construction of “Homosexuality”. I am not suggesting that “homophobia” discourse is “wrong”. Rather my concern is that, if “homophobia” discourse is unquestionably taken up as factual and complete, it may render invisible complexities of this on-going masculinity policing among men. I am suggesting that holding onto the activist, social justice intentions of “homophobia” discourse requires taking responsibility for this discourse at the level of ideas. This involves noticing: the practices of power “homophobia” discourse invites us to notice, and, the practices of power “homophobia” discourse may re-constitute and obscure.

Through facing my “alternative” participations in “dominant” practices of masculinity policing, I re-negotiate my identity, and make visible in my life a much more profound sense of my social agency and social connectedness. It seems to me that if “homophobia” discourse is essentialized as the facts about the problem, without unpacking these complexities, then we may notice victimization-only, rendering invisible the masculinity policing that leads to: “gay” men’s hurtfulness toward each other, “gay” men’s eroticization of “homophobic bad boys”, and “gay” men’s hurtfulness

toward women. We keep marginalized ideas about “gay” men’s “alternative” culture in place through rendering invisible the amazing complexities of these men’s actions and desires.

And we keep ideas about “straight” men’s “dominant” culture in place through rendering invisible the amazing complexities of these men’s actions and desires:

...I’m still a little boy I think, piecing together alternative stories with the help of others. Ironically some of the greatest help in recent years has come from the movement I experience in my journeys with men in conversations about abuse, toward female partners, as we respond to men’s abuse to women.

I find it profoundly disruptive and transporting, for example, that many of these men hate themselves *like I have*, that many of these men want love *like I have*, and that many of these men have felt excommunicated from the possibility of love in their lives, *like I have*.

The “straight/gay” dichotomy and related ideas about “homophobia” get profoundly unpacked through our conversations and connections with each other. Agency workers in my community often report back to me the comments they hear from men who come to talk with me a first time. Sometimes a very rural and very rough and literally scary macho guy can be heard to say after a first conversation, “Well, I think he’s gay but he really makes me feel cared for.” These are some of the complexities I want to make visible: a “gay” man’s participations in the social policing of dominant masculinity, and, a “straight” macho guy’s longing for an alternative way of life.

ⁱ (Since I wrote this speech I am still thinking about Leonard Matlovich. He died in 1988, after living with AIDS for some time. His stone marker in a Washington, D.C. cemetery is inscribed with his own words: “When I was in the military, they gave me a medal for killing two men, and a discharge for loving one.”)