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A Surprising Source of Family Strength

How acceptance of gay family members can
be a beacon of light for the family

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Like other gay men and women, I was “outed” by accident.

I was working for the family enterprise at the time. My father had remarried, and had children who were much younger than me. When my father and stepmother went away on trips, they often asked me to stay with the children.

One night I was on the telephone in a bedroom talking to my partner. The conversation was innocent enough, nothing more than “look forward to seeing you” and “I love you.” But unknown to me, my younger sister was listening from the next room. She figured out right away that I was gay. Later, when my parents came home and I’d left the house, she told them.

Later that week, my father and I went for a drive. “You know you’re my son, and I love you very much,” he said. “And I will always love you. But I want to know who John is...”

There it was. I was blindsided ... forced to have a conversation that I’d been avoiding for years. Looking back, both my father and I tried hard to keep our emotions in check during that conversation. There were tears shed in the car, on both our parts.

I was most worried about what my father might think. How would his wife react? As it turned out, they didn’t take it very well at the time. They didn’t take it well in the sense that they no longer wanted me to be around my younger brother and sister, when they were away traveling. I was horrified that they even felt that way.

We lived and worked in a small, close-knit, Western town. What if the news got out at the family business? My coming out caused a lot of anxiety and tension in the family. As a result, the only way I could deal with things at the time was to simply pull away. To run from the stress and anxiety. That’s a natural inclination of young people everywhere, and the crux of the problem for many gay men and women today.

The statistics are disturbing

It’s an emotionally raw time when you’re coming out. The emotions run high on both sides of the family. I like to think that love conquers all, but in many cases, people don’t know how to love unconditionally ... at least not at first.

A reluctance to accept gay family members may be the reason behind the shocking statistics about gay youth and their family relationships. According to survey data from The Human Rights Campaign, 40 percent of homeless youth in the U.S. are gay. Many lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgendered (LGBT) youth tend to be cut off from their families or communities. LGBT youth are significantly more likely to be bullied and physically harassed. The majority of teen suicides are linked to being gay.

Perhaps most disturbing of all, when The Human Rights Campaign asked gay and straight youth about their most important challenges in life, the results couldn't have been more divergent.

For straight youth, their priorities were getting good grades, getting into college, finding a job and launching their careers.

For gay youth, their top life challenges were about being accepted by their family, being bullied, and being afraid of being openly gay. For gay youth, it was all about acceptance and fear.

When you or your family members are going through this process, it's easy to wonder, "How are we ever going to get through this? How are we going to stay together as a family?"

Moreover, if you're coming to work every day for a family business, it's the "elephant in the room" that everyone is afraid to talk about. In my case, the interaction between me and my parents and family members complicated every aspect of our work.

My journey to acceptance

At this point in my life, I am finally able to share my story in the hope that it will help others.

First, it's important to realize that this isn't something happening to "other families." It's happening to families everywhere in America. There are a lot of variations when it comes to estimates. But the largest study ever conducted by noted research firm Gallop shows that 3.4 percent of Americans self-identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgender. That means, by the time your extended family has 30 or more people, chances are you have someone in your family who is gay.

Second, it's important to understand that being gay is not really a choice. I remember as a child looking at JC Penney and Sears mail order catalogs. My friends would sneak a peek at the girl's underwear section, but I looked at the men. I never mentioned this to anyone. It was my deep, dark secret.

One of the primary feelings when you come to terms with being gay or even admitting it to yourself, is that you are different and alone. The sense of not belonging or fitting in sparks one to seek out and connect with those who are more like you. Today, I see how this action may be perceived by family members as pulling away from them – when in reality, it's not about them.

In some cases, young gay people simply run away. I often meet kids who tell me "I left home at 16 or 18 or 20 or after college, and I never went back. I don't tell my parents that I'm gay, and they don't know I'm gay." I was raised as a Mormon, from my mother's side of the family. So I was very guarded about being gay for many years.

Unfortunately, in my opinion, the gay community has a sad and devastating history of being ostracized by birth families. It therefore does not traditionally encourage close connection with blood relatives. This is the genesis of the sense of "community" or "gay

family" among the LGBT world. This was recently validated by the Human Rights Campaign Survey, which reported that 26% of LGBT youth say their top issue is that their families do not accept them.

As with many families, my situation was complicated. My parents divorced when I was young, so our lives included step-parents, step-siblings and half-siblings. My father took over the family business after the early passing of my grandfather. My grandmother, daughter of the founder of the family business, became the matriarch of our family. She and I became very close after my grandfather's death.

A turning point in our family came nine months since being outed by my younger sister. Relations with the family were strained, but the holidays were quickly approaching. We had no idea what to expect. Would my partner and I be included in the holiday celebrations? Should we ask? Were they afraid to ask?

I had a conversation with my grandmother and she asked me what I was going to do. She said we should all have dinner together at her house. I said, "You know, granny, I'm not sure that's a good idea."

But not long after that, she had a conversation with the rest of the family. She told them, "Look, Tim's gay. John (my partner) is great. We need to get over this. He'll be a really nice addition to our family. God knows we have enough of our own issues already."

She expected everyone to be at her house for holiday dinner. That was that. We all attended dinner and the issue was never discussed again.

Leadership is key

Having one person take a leadership role like that can truly pave the way for

acceptance. Sometimes this leadership comes from unexpected places.

One time I was visiting my partner's sister for Christmas. It was early in our relationship, and John and I were cautious about visits and self-conscious about any displays of affection or discussion about us being a gay couple.

Soon after we arrived, we were all sitting in a well-appointed living room and I began looking at the family photos on the mantle. Suddenly, I let out an audible gasp. It made John's sister come rushing over to see if everything was alright.

There, on the mantle, was a large framed photograph of John and me as a couple. I pointed to the photo. She just chuckled, and said how much she loved the photo. We were an important part of the family, she said, and she considered me to be the newest member of the family. This ... coming from a woman who'd just had a baby a few weeks earlier! It still brings tears to my eyes nearly 20 years later.

Many of my in-laws have since welcomed me with open arms. A few remain "skeptical" but at least are tolerant. I have learned to accept this as a major accomplishment.

Add the dynamics of a family business

Being gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered clearly brings another dimension to working in a family enterprise. I believe being gay had a big impact on me not being directly involved in the business long term, and an impact on my partner and me not staying in my rural hometown.

Our family business was founded in a small town in a rural state. Over the years, the business has grown and is

now located in multiple states across the western USA. I didn't understand it when I left the business (after 12 years), how much this weighed on my father. Although I was groomed, from a young age to someday help run the family business, it has not happened.

Even more of a personal challenge, we did not talk about this, at any level. It has only been in recent years, with the help of a great therapist, that I have had the courage to confront my father and ask the dreaded question: Why not me?

What really bothered me was that my father never asked me to come back to the family business. I'd been there for 12 years, then left to gain experience elsewhere in the financial industry.

That evolution brought me to Chicago. But my father never called to say "I'd like you to come back." I was the oldest of all the kids. There was a time when we were all working in the business. When I left, and they didn't ask me to come back, I really took it hard. I was raised with the expectation that I would come back to the business and perhaps even run it one day.

I was living in Chicago and one day my father came to visit to attend a mortgage industry conference. I asked my father about the business, and we got to talking. He explained the hardships he'd gone through with the business. How he bought out his brother's interest, then had to struggle to keep key employees. At one point, he made several key employees partners in the business. One of them is now CEO and owns a significant share of the business.

It wasn't the news I wanted to hear. But we had a great day together anyway, before his conference, playing golf. We had some great conversations together. I learned how he was very worried about me coming back home. "I love the fact

that you got away and you're making it on your own, and you aren't part of the "Volk Yoke," as he called the family business." He was proud of me.

I dropped him off at his hotel and said goodbye. But somehow, our wallets had gotten mixed up. So I got a phone call within minutes to come back to the hotel.

He'd just finished checking in and was standing in the middle of the lobby. He'd taken some extra money and was putting it into my wallet instead, as any father might do. Something just welled up inside me and I asked him, "Dad, did I disappoint you?"

And there we stood, two grown men, tears welling up in our eyes. "Absolutely not!" he said. "Everything is as it should be. You and John were meant to be here in Chicago." And in an instant, I realized that perhaps my dad was truly concerned about our wellbeing. He did not think it was best for us to be back in a small rural town.

It is ironic that a few years later, I was working as an advisor to the patriarch of a large and prominent family. All of his children were grown. He spoke of his grandchildren with great love and affection. I asked him, "Why are none of your kids in the family business with you?" He looked me straight in the eye. He said he never asked them, because he did not want to put them in a position of having to tell their father "No." Despite our age difference, our worlds collided. I thought, perhaps my dad never asked me for the same reason. Perhaps he wanted to save me from stewarding his grandfather's dream or having to face the burden of the family's livelihood.

Today, my father and I have created a partnership, launching a real estate development business together. It is

fun and I find it quite empowering. He is an unbelievable supporter, providing financial means, guidance and counsel. I have found a level of enjoyment working together that I never felt while working in the main family enterprise.

During our talks, my father shares what's happening in the family business, his concerns and successes. We have found great value in each other's counsel.

The point of all this is to say that, over time, being gay can become a non-event. Today, my father and stepmother even ask John and me to help with my siblings and the grandkids. John's family has done the same. All told, we now interact and encourage 28 nieces, nephews and siblings. My parents also want to draw upon my family office expertise to figure out how the third generation can avoid the pitfalls of entitlement that so often plague third and fourth generation family enterprises. "I really would like you to spend more time with your brothers and sisters" my father said. So we've come a long way as a family.

Parting thoughts

Today, I am much more empathetic to all the ramifications gay men and women and their families have to go through. This is a very deep secret and it is easy to see how it can damage relationships, sometimes with irrevocable consequences.

Fortunately, my parents kept telling me that they loved me. They said that no matter what, I was their son. I've also been very fortunate that my natural mother was my strongest supporter. She embraced me and supported me and my partner, John, throughout this time.

Additionally, I have had good guidance from several older gay men who encouraged my partner and me

not to give up. They encouraged us to be even more present at family functions, significant events, birthdays, graduations, and holidays. So we sent cards. We made phone calls. We made the effort.

It was challenging at first. But I decided that not having my parents (who had been my biggest supporters) in my life was an unacceptable option. I think my parents came to the same conclusion.

If you are struggling with coming out and being accepted by your family, I would suggest four things:

First, you have to be honest with yourself. You have to be comfortable with who you really are.

Second, you have to have faith that in the end, things are going to be okay. No matter how bleak they may seem at first.

Third, you have to find someone that you can confide in. It doesn't matter if it's a sibling, parent, grandparent, aunt, uncle, niece or nephew. Or, if you're an only child, try to find a mentor, someone who has gone through a similar experience. You need someone you can talk to about what's going on in your family and what you're going through. Someone who can be an emotional support to you.

Finally, as I mentioned before, you have to be there for everybody. You've got to stay in contact and celebrate the events that are worth celebrating. You cannot give up on your family before they have had every chance not to give up on you. In fact, you need to be even more present. You need to show up so you don't lose that connection. You need to send flowers on Mother's Day. You need to be there for Father's Day. You need to be there for the major events.

I believe that it's our willingness to give support to others that endears us to our family. I guarantee over time, they will not only forget that you are gay, you will become the rock within the family.

Today, our family is closer than ever. My partner and I have become one of the key stabilizing forces within the family, as they have become for us. We are just as surprised as anyone.

There is a period of adjustment for everyone. Coming out is only be the beginning of a dialogue about the "elephant in the room." Not everyone will be okay with it at first. But things will get better, if you have the support you need and are determined.

And as a family member, learn to embrace the differences among us. Learn to respect each other for who we are, gay or straight. By opening our eyes to what's really important, family unity and love, we can all truly learn to open our hearts.

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