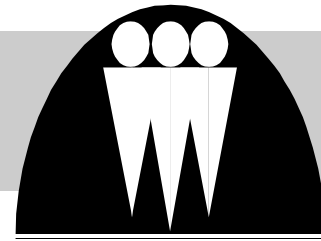


Reunion

Autumn 1995

The Family Fellowship Newsletter



Issue 6

Kathryn Steffensen

Family Focus

Many people are alarmed by the level of anger and hatred evident in our society today. We are being assaulted by strident and divisive rhetoric from the very people who should be encouraging us to act upon our more noble instincts. It's as if the reservoir of American goodness is being drained away, and our land of promise is drying up, and becoming a wasteland of parched bones and contention. The one characteristic of all primitive societies is a horror of diversity. Where are the calm voices of reason to remind us that the chief test of a complex civilization is the amount of diversity it can tolerate and absorb. Our very survival may depend on our ability to accommodate some discomfort with differences. And it should be noted that accommodating does not imply that we are advocating another's point of view. We are simply allowing it to be.

As a mother of a gay son I have become personally and painfully aware of discrimination. If tolerance were easy we wouldn't still be having so much trouble with it. It is natural for us to organize our personal and social groups among those who are similar to us. I am a perfect example. For over fifty years I conformed to my community's prescribed limits of normality, morality and propriety. A majority consensus creates the false illusion of absolute truth which can subsequently justify intolerance and discrimination. I was a member of such a community.

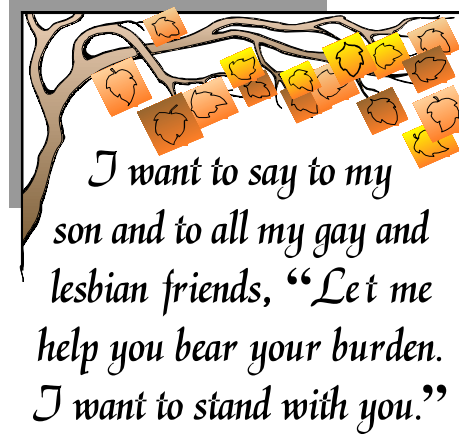
My comfort and complacency were shattered seven years ago when my son, Erik, informed me that he was gay. Instantly I was emotionally connected with a group which is misunderstood and persecuted. Persecution from a few friends and family members can take the form of subtle exclusion and indifference. But in the larger community it can escalate into the denial of basic civil rights and even verbal and physical abuse.

My first reaction was profound confusion. Clearly my son was not a depraved and perverted person. Here was major cognitive dissonance. All my assumptions about same-sex orientation were neatly pulled out from under me and I was in free fall. As I was forced to discard unsubstantiated myths, I scrambled to replace them with verifiable knowledge. This was the start of a difficult journey of discovery. Wallace Stegner, the eminent Western author, says, "Verifiable knowledge makes its way slowly, and only under cultivation, but fable has burrs and feet and claws and wings and an indestructible sheath like weed-seed, and can be carried almost anywhere and take root without benefit of soil or water." So if we are

to be lovers of verifiable knowledge we must gird up for the quest.

I experienced grief and loss, loss of my expectations. My grief was not because Erik is gay, because I recognized immediately that he was unchanged. He remained the same admirable person he's always been. My grief was because I sensed that most of the people Erik had been comfortable with, who had loved and supported him, would now consider him an aberration, even a threat to the very society which had nurtured him. Where he had been a respected and contributing member, he would now be a pariah. Friends and relatives would feel justified in despising him and would invoke God to vindicate themselves. He was outside their bounds of normality, morality and propriety. It was almost unbearable of me to think of his being marginalized this way.

I was disoriented. My definition of myself and my family in relation to our community was



no longer valid. I used to belong, now I didn't. I experienced a deep sadness — not to feel comfortable anymore in a society where I had moved with ease and some degree of privilege. I sensed an insistence on a sameness of attitude that could never include me again. I was isolated, a prisoner of silence. Whom could I trust? I sensed I possessed secret and potentially dangerous information. I felt duplicitous since I could not be outwardly identified with the despised "Other."

Disappointment is my most pervasive emotion. I feel as if I have been orphaned. The very people I had counted on to be there for me when the chips were down have often come up short. Perhaps I am unfair to expect a level of understanding and tolerance that I could not myself have met a few years ago. I have been

sustained by some wonderfully supportive friends and family who have welcomed my disclosures — have listened supportively — have been willing to examine new information — have continued dialogue with me about it — and most importantly, have not dismissed me with their opinions and judgements.

No one has been blatantly cruel to me, but the common response is a variation of this, "Of course I still love Erik, but I can't accept his lifestyle." Isn't it interesting that straight people have "lives," while gays and lesbians have "lifestyles." What they mean is that they can't accept him, and then he is never mentioned again. He disappears from their radar screens. It's as if he were dead. Because one of our daughters died a year after Erik came out to us, I know that people are uncomfortable talking about her, because they simply never do. No one tells me they miss her, or reminisces about her endearing qualities. Death is not mentioned in our polite society. That's how it is with Erik. There are subjects which are beyond the pale, too painful to talk about. The people who ask about Erik with affectionate interest are mainly those who are unaware that he is gay.

Family Fellowship has given me someone to talk with. I have been enriched by the sensitive and caring parents I have grown to love and depend upon. I now meet socially with gays and lesbians who are expanding my understanding of our common humanity. But I still live a double life, operating behind enemy lines, so to speak, suffering the casual and callously cruel condemnations of acquaintances.

My personal story is one of gradually and reluctantly relinquishing the privileges and comforts and security of my primary community in order to fulfill my obligations to defend the rights and validity of my child. Erik has gently prodded me. He has touched my heart when he has said, "Mother, I am not considered to be a valid witness for my own condition. No one will listen to me, but they will listen to you."

So, I'm beginning to speak out when someone says something unkind or untrue. I say something like this, "If you knew my son I know you would like him. He makes the world a better place. He is an honest, hard-working citizen. He is kind and considerate and generous to a fault. He loves everything beautiful. I'm sure you wouldn't mind living near him or working with him and you certainly wouldn't want him harmed or denied the rights all Americans enjoy."

I'm gaining more courage. And I want to say to my son and to all my gay and lesbian friends, "Let me help you bear your burden. I want to stand with you." 🙏

Family Fellowship is a volunteer service organization, a diverse collection of Mormon families engaged in the cause of strengthening families with homosexual members. We share our witness that gay and lesbian Mormons can be great blessings in the lives of their families, and that families can be great blessings in the lives of their gay and lesbian members. We strive to become more understanding and appreciative of each other while staying out of society's debate over homosexuality. We seek to put behind us all attitudes which are anti-family, which threaten loving relationships, and which drive family members apart. All who can support these goals are welcome to contribute to this newsletter. However, the views expressed here belong only to the individuals who express them.



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Claire Malmstrom

I am a Child of God ..." The music touched my soul as the 250, mostly male voices, rang with such enthusiasm. The song, a favorite of children and adults alike in the Mormon Church, was strangely fitting in the lovely old church of another denomination. As tears blurred my sight, I thought with sadness of such a large group of people being forced to hold their meetings in a building rented from the Unitarians. Being denied their own religious edifice in which to meet was just another of the many persecutions suffered by the group. Looking around me, I recognized a few I knew, talented young men and women in many different fields. What was I doing here? Certainly a stranger in their midst, I had come to hear a speaker that I admired. I had been warmly greeted at the door, but I felt like an intruder, which indeed I was. How did I come to be here?

The polyester clad nurse went quietly about her hourly rounds, as the doctor silently watched his patient recovering from a violent seizure. Tubes protruded from the nose and arm of the lean young man. The machine at the bedside vibrated with jumping lines reporting the action of the heart. Around the mouth and trickling into the neat trim beard, was a black residue from the charcoal that had been forced into his throat to absorb the contents of the stomach. While taking notes, the doctor thought to himself "What gets into the kids today? What events in their lives could be so traumatic as to make them resort to such drastic means? Why are we seeing so many young people attempt suicide today?" With a shake of the head, he moved on to the next patient in the intensive care unit and picked up the chart of an old man dying from a massive heart attack.

Struggling to open his eyes for the first time in days brought an awareness of light and shadow, fuzzy but painful to his senses. Thoughts tumbled through his mind like scraps of paper in the wind, disappearing rapidly. The small sharp discomfort from the nostril tube pricked his nerves as he tried to focus his eyes and then the awareness began. "I'm alive. I failed. I failed and I can't bear to live. Why didn't they let me die?" A sob tore from his throat and the machine at his side started beeping. The doctor straightened up from the next bedside and laid a hand upon the shoulder of the young patient, pushing him gently back upon the pillow. "Hey, it's okay now. You are going to be all right. Just lie quietly and later when you feel up to it, we'll talk." Before he had finished the sentence, the young man's rigid body relaxed into a merciful sleep.

A few days later, as he entered the hospital psychiatric unit, the doctor motioned him with a nod to the only other chair in the room. His abrupt "Let's talk" was contrary

to the waltzing around approach the young man had expected. He was here only because the hospital insisted he see a "shrink" before he could be released. "Okay, anything, just to get out of here so I can get on with my unfinished business. I'll tell him what he expects to hear and then I can do what I started to do ... get on with my death so to speak." The irony of that thought made him smile. Before the time was up, he felt restless, pent up. A fact observed by the doctor. "Okay, that's it for today. I want to talk with you tomorrow same time." And having said that, he pushed back the chair, rose and left the room. The pattern was repeated the following morning and the one after that, and then the Question was thrown at him. The Question that changed his entire life. As he groped for an answer, a feeling of release came over him as though a poison had been drained from his body, a release that weakened him, causing droplets of sweat to break out upon his brow. Sobbing, he bowed his head, covering his face with both hands.

All of these memories pass through my mind as I sat silently admiring the president of the Affirmation Group, our son David, a returned missionary who still loved his church but found he was no longer welcomed there.

Our son and his partner Chuck have been in a loving relationship for seven years. We feel we have gained another son. Nothing in their relationship has ever been offensive, depraved, or perverted in any way. Chuck had also made an unsuccessful suicide attempt. The world loses many young men every day through this act that some homosexuals feel will spare them and their families the pain and humiliation that is sure to come because of their orientation. Yet we as a society continue to let it happen because we have been taught that they truly are sinners, and are not worthy to live.

We feel blessed that both of these young men survived. They are loved and are of great value to their friends, family and society in general. But I feel the pain of each unkind word uttered in our church meetings and by our church leaders toward our sons and daughters whom we know as talented, creative, loving, compassionate, contributing members of society. My faith is severely tested almost weekly. Our sons have left the religion that has said "We do not want you in our midst," even though both served faithfully and honorably for two years in the mission field.

Interacting with others through Family Fellowship is vitally important to me. I continue to hope and pray that greater understanding and acceptance will come, if not in my lifetime, then at least in my children's. Now you readers know (if you read the first issue of our newsletter), about my two gay children. On these pages I would like to proclaim my love for them and reach out with love to all our other homosexual children. May we all have the surety that the hymn "I AM A CHILD OF GOD" can be sung by each and every one of us. 🙏

Bishop Keith Frogley

During the Korean War I was assigned, along with about fifty other young men, to undergo four months of background checks and preliminary schooling in order to qualify for the Army Language School in Monterey, Calif. After a year of study and discipline we would be assigned to the Air Force Intelligence branch. Thirty-five of us were eventually enrolled.

After approximately two months into the study year, on a Monday morning, we discovered that four of our group were missing. The Captain informed us that they had been sent back to headquarters to be discharged because they were gay and a security risk. During the six months we had all become close friends and we were shocked with the turn of events. We voiced questions and anger with what we believed to be perfunctory and unjust. The Captain, with intensity, informed us that we would be better served to place our focus on the weekly minimum grade standards, or we could all be sent back for reassignment. "This is not your issue," he said. At that point I convinced myself that the gay community and any rights they might have really wasn't my issue.

When my son Kent called home one day a couple years ago and said he was coming out to talk to us, I told my wife that he probably wanted to borrow some money. When he arrived and told us he was gay, I was relieved. After we had talked for a few hours, I was not only ready to loan him the money, but I fully realized that his pain and isolation within our family, church and community for these many years was my pain and had become my issue. Since that time, as I have studied to understand my son, and the overwhelming misunderstanding of the community in which I had become so comfortable, I fully decided that this was my issue.

"The necessity of believing without knowledge, nay, often upon very slight grounds, in this fleeting state of action and blindness we are in, should make us more busy and careful to inform ourselves than to restrain others ... there is reason to think that if men were better instructed themselves they would be less imposing on others. For where is the man that has incontestable evidence of all that he holds, or the falsehood of all he condemns." Those words of John Locke have engaged a restraint on my propensity to light the fires of contention. Now, that which I would defend, I would question, and that which I would question, has become that which I would better know.

Each man seeks to be identified as that which would establish his acceptance, being better perceived in the minds of others, and as such he sometimes becomes almost unknowingly identified with endeavors that tend to discredit himself as he defends and sustains that which he should better improve. This while seeking to enlarge his influence in the attempt to rise. How sad the man, who after years of disciplined endeavor comes to find himself exposed, even in his own mind, to have misused the best of

his cause and the basis of his good intent. This might be exemplified in dozens of ways, i.e.: for years the justification of slavery, child labor, blue laws, women's vote, minimum wage, civil rights, blacks and the priesthood, etc. This, seemingly, is sustained in our minds by the assurance that our polity is superior to our own thought, feelings, or endeavor.

We end by deferring our own volition to that of the majority and find ourselves accepting the implementation of, as Carl Sandburg said, "the ugliest thing in the world, which is a word, and the word is *exclusive*." He rolled that word off his tongue in indictment of those who would participate in the practice of exclusion.

How sad we then soon become, as we discover our best intentioned constraints, even indirectly, focused upon another. How great our discomfiture or even pain when the shadow of our error is removed by the light of greater understanding. 🏠

Kent Frogley

I'm sure my story is a common one. I was the oldest of six children, raised in what many of my friends have described as the Mormon poster family. I knew I was different from the other kids in my neighborhood at a very early age. I was twelve when I discovered that the name for my difference was "homosexuality." I went through a very dark three years after that, when suicide was often in my thoughts. The love I felt for my parents prevented me from ever acting on my suicidal urges. I found a group of friends in Junior High and High School



that helped a lot in mending my damaged self image. I believed that eventually I would outgrow my sexual orientation. (I now look back and wonder if my straight friends ever thought they would outgrow their heterosexuality.) I thought my mission might help me move towards heterosexuality. I returned from my mission as a Shiite Mormon, totally committed to the church, and jumped into life at the BYU. I went to graduate school in Chicago and then moved to New York City to begin a career with a large advertising agency. Throughout all this time I buried my feelings in career and social activities. I was very involved in the Manhattan Ward and dated a

variety of women in New York, including one I came close to marrying. We are close friends still.

My return to Utah at the age of 28 began what I have come to describe as my process. I knew that before I could even begin to deal with my sexuality, I would have to deal with the church. I spent the next seven years processing myself out. I had to give up the notion of a group of people marching lockstep into heaven as the doctrinal drums of Mormonism pounded out the beat. After years of denying my sexual identity, I decided if I couldn't change it, I was going to own it. My official coming out was New Years Day three years ago. I came out to my parents one year later. I know everybody's journey is different. When I was young I thought my answers could all be found in one place from one source. I realize now we can't weave our life out of whole cloth, not even the whole cloth of Mormonism. There are flaws in the material, threads that when pulled too hard unravel. There are lessons it cannot teach, experiences it cannot give. We have to take the best of all areas of our life to create a patchwork — a cloth of many colors so to speak.

We are accountable for our lives. I realized that if I persisted in Mormonism, denying my identity, pretending to be something I wasn't, I would be robbed of my life. If I stayed in Mormonism, playing the bachelor role in my ward, I would be moved slowly but surely into the shadowed periphery of Mormonism. Sitting quietly, patronized by the church leaders, and blamed for all the single women in the ward, I would take my place in a church where leaders have been known to say they would rather see their children dead than break the law of chastity. I did not wish to follow in the bloody spiritual wake of those people whose souls had been slaughtered on the altar of theology. I reclaimed my life. I realized I could not reconcile myself with Mormonism, and maybe that's not really the goal anyway.

There is no connection between my life now and what I thought my life would be like, when at the age of 20 I gazed into the future. My career is different. I'm not married, at least not to the female virginal shimmerance that always floated just beyond my desires. (Instead, I've got this good looking guy who looks like a virgin!) And through all the emotional and spiritual wrestling that has ensued as I reclaimed my life, I find that I'm very happy. Can I ask for more than that?

If we blame events or people for the person we are, we fail as individuals. You may be falling out of an airplane but you still can decide how you're going to feel about it. Are you going to scream in terror the whole way down or are you going to enjoy the view? Either way you die but who had the better time? And when it comes to life we all slam into the ground eventually, even if it takes eighty years. So whatever challenges face us in life, they are *our* challenges. If we run away from them we deny ourselves the God-given opportunities to learn and to grow. I believe God sent me here as I am to learn the lessons that I will learn from being who I am: honesty, integrity, compassion, service, humility and to refrain from judgment, one of the hardest tasks for me. So again, whatever challenges face us in life, they are our challenges and we shouldn't deny ourselves the God-given opportunities which bless us all. 🏠

The entries below list some ways that families and family members are reaching out to each other, sharing their experiences, and holding their families together. This space is provided for anyone to report on and advertise activities that share the goal of strengthening Mormon families dealing with this issue, regardless of what organization the activity may be sponsored by.

For more information about Family Fellowship write to:
P.O. Box 9451
Salt Lake City, UT 84109
Phone: (801) 272-3806

Forum Fireside July 9, 1995

— Gary and Mildred Watts, Provo

The last Utah County Family Fellowship Forum was held on July 9th in the Clark Auditorium at Utah Valley Regional Medical Center. Approximately 125 people were in attendance. Derek Casper and Allison Dunn spoke and shared their experiences in straight-gay marriages. As is the custom, the meeting was followed by a light buffet and was enjoyed by all.

Memorial Service for Marolyn Frogley August 10, 1995

At Marolyn Frogley's funeral August 10th, her children paid touching tributes to their beautiful and talented mother. However, Marolyn's influence extended beyond her immediate family. She was the soul of Family Fellowship. She was the fiercely loyal mother every gay and lesbian fervently longs for, the compassionate friend every parent desperately needs, and the concerned and informed citizen every sound society depends upon. She opened her heart and her home to all those she sensed needed her listening ear, her intelligent conversation, and her unconditional acceptance. She lives on in the hearts of all of us who loved her so well, and we can remember her best by following her example of pure Christian love.

Parent Retreat August 26-27, 1995

— Gerry Johnston, Salt Lake City

The purpose of the Parent Retreat was to have a good time and become better acquainted. The fact that people didn't want to leave testifies to the success of the first Northern Utah Retreat. Forty participants gathered the last weekend in August in the relaxing Heber Valley. Twenty-one were overnight guests in complimentary accommodations.

Frank and Carol Mensel hosted the Saturday gathering in their spacious Heber home. The magnificent view from their deck included hot air balloons rising over the rolling green fields with Mt. Timpanogos in the distance. We lingered over Frank's scrumptious waffle brunch and then assembled for a discussion led by Lynette Malmstrom, L.C.S.W. She helped us better understand the challenges we all face as parents of gay and lesbian children. We considered various coping strategies and expressed our honest feelings.

The afternoon was unstructured and included indoor and outdoor activities. After an early pizza supper, we shared personal stories and had a lively exchange of ideas.

A Poor Wayfaring Man of Grief



In prison I saw him next, condemned
To meet a traitor's doom at morn.
The tide of lying tongues I stemmed,
And honored him 'mid shame and scorn.

Text by James Montgomery, 1771-1854

Although Family Fellowship parents don't all agree on how our children should express their sexuality or what the Church's response to its gay and lesbian members should be, we do all agree that we need to build bridges of understanding and love among family members. It's nice to have a safe and accepting place to talk about our mutual concerns.

The Homestead Resort in Midway was the setting for the Sunday Brunch, after which we spent a leisurely afternoon visiting at the Christensens' mountain cabin. We're already looking forward to the 1996 retreat. We hope it will be bigger, but it couldn't be better.

Provo Reconciliation

— Janie Bennett, Sandy
— Tyler Yates, Lehi

The Utah County Reconciliation program recently had a gay member visit from Holland. He was very excited about the existence of such a support group, and since he has been trained in psychology, he was interested in obtaining some information to help him start a similar group. Among the information given to him were back issues of the Family Fellowship Newsletter, "Reunion."

According to a letter he sent us, he showed the information to his parents, local church leaders, and many friends. His mother was so impressed, she and a friend translated all the newsletters so they could reach more of the native people. As if this were not exciting enough, a friend of his from Norway has

expressed interest in translating them into Norwegian and making copies for distribution there.

We are not alone in our unique challenges and joys. Not only are we connecting with people in the United States but also Japan, Mexico, and now Holland and possibly Norway. Keep up the good work! There are a lot of people who need our love and support.

Forum Fireside October 8, 1995

— Gary and Mildred Watts, Provo

The next Utah County Family Fellowship meeting is scheduled for October 8th in the Clark Auditorium at Utah Valley Regional Medical Center, 1034 North 500 East, Provo. Millie Watts will share her perspectives on the joys of e-mail and networking and will be followed by Lynette Malmstrom, L.C.S.W., who will speak to the title, "Dropping the H-Bomb." She will express her ideas about how and when to share your stories as we look ahead to National Coming Out Day which is scheduled for October 11th. She will be speaking to gays, lesbians, parents, siblings and friends. It promises to be an entertaining and informative evening!!!! Please come; we are looking forward to meeting together again. A light buffet will follow. To assist us in preparation for the buffet, please RSVP to Millie or Gary Watts, 374-1447; John or Nancy Crawley, 375-2777; or Gerry Johnston, 568-1141 in Salt Lake City, preferably by October 6th.

Volunteers Who Wish to Help Family Fellowship

Several folks have contacted Family Fellowship wondering what they can do to help. We continue to feel the most helpful thing you can do right now is to make a family history of your experiences with gay and lesbian family members. This could be an in depth account of the type published in our booklet series or a shorter account which could be included in the newsletter. For more information, please call Claire Malmstrom at (801) 768-9112.