

The More Things Change.....

By Arlene (Ari) Istar Lev

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Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people, and our families, have certainly been in the public eye in the past few years. For the first time, when clients ask me how they can broach gay subjects with their children, I can easily say, "Just sit and watch television with them for a few minutes!" Whether a parent is struggling with coming out to a child, or a parent is wondering about her teenager's orientation, sexual and gender issues are visible in media, even in little kid's media. I took my boys to see *Ella Enchanted*, a remake of the Cinderella story, and sure enough there are crossed-dressed giants, singing backup, something I don't remember from the original Grimm's brothers' tale. I lean over to my 4 year-old son and ask, "Are those guys or girls?" He shushes me, "Probably guys in girl's clothes. Who cares?"

It's a whole new world. Lesbians and gay men are parenting in unprecedented numbers. The latest census report tells us that there are 3.1 million same-sex households raising between 1 and 9 million children. At least one same-sex couple is raising a child in 96% of all counties, according to the last U.S. census. 60% of adoption agencies nationally will place children in lesbian and gay homes. Increasingly LGBT households are multiracial, due to large numbers of interracial adoptions, both domestically and internationally. Gay men even have their own surrogacy agency in Los Angeles! Undoubtedly the question of whether LGBT people can be parents is moot. *We are* parents, and we are rearing another generation of children who absolutely know we can be great parents.

Gender issues are also getting lots of media attention. When I asked a class of social work students what "transgender" meant five years ago, they looked at me blankly. Now many of them know, and some of them have some strong opinions about everything from to the social construction of gender, to transgender civil rights, to the removal of Gender Identity Disorder from the DSM. Students tell me they are seeing families with transgender members: young teens struggling with their gender identity, and fathers contacting the elementary school to discuss how his gender transition will impact his children.

Just this morning I learned of David Reimer's death by suicide. Known in the professional literature as the "John/Joan case," David was a young boy whose penis was accidentally severed during a routine circumcision. At the advice of John Money, the eminent sex researcher, he was raised as a girl. Money touted this case as an example of the plasticity of gender, and thousands of intersex children have undergone similar genital surgeries to "fix" their gender ambiguity. It was finally exposed that "Joan" has lived as a man named David his whole adult life, and that Money's experiment was a failure (Read: *As Nature Made Him* by John Colapinto, HarpurCollins, 2000). Now David is dead, one more casualty of society's attempt to manipulate young peoples' bodies and identities, and the professional fear of addressing sex and gender issues head-on.

It has been nearly 30 years since Gay Liberation has emerged, and according to Erick

Erickson's developmental stages, thirty is when people begin to think about intimacy and settling down. LGBT people are not just talking civil rights anymore ("We're Here, We're Queer, Get Used to It"), we are talking about domestic partnership coverage for our families and creating safe schools for children. Indeed, we are even talking about getting married, embracing an institution that we once defined as the cause of enforced heterosexuality. By the time you are reading this, lesbian and gay people will be legally married in the state of Massachusetts. The closet is history.

But the fight is far from over. Oklahoma just passed a law to not recognize same-sex second parent adoptions. This means that if my family is driving through Oklahoma and has a car accident, my partner will not be recognized as the parent to our children. If I died in that accident, she would not be able to make medical decisions for our children and they can be removed from her illegal custody by social services.

Sometimes we become complacent, since generally things are so much better than they were a quarter century ago. But things are not always "better" for young people struggling with their sexual or gender identity in rural America; things are not always better for transgender people who are denied custody and visitation for their children routinely in almost all 50 states; things are not always better for the older lesbian facing surgery who does not have legal paperwork protecting her relationship or assets, and does not even know that she should. AIDS hasn't gone away, and masculine women and feminine men are often mistreated when seeking healthcare, especially in medical emergency situations.

Where do we as social workers stand on these political, social, or educational issues? NASW has amazing policies in place that support and defend LGBT people, but how do we translate these issues into our workplaces and clinical practice? I still have clients who tell me that their last therapist told them they couldn't be bisexual; they had to choose. I still have clients tell me that their counselor told them that if they do not feel sexual desire for their partner, they cannot be gay. I still speak with young people who have been told they will go to hell for being gay by their religious leaders, and that they are only going through a phase by their school counselors. I think we have a long way to go to educate our colleagues, and create the kind of environment where LGBT people will feel safe and protected within the nation that we live.

I work with a number of organizations committed to improving the lives of LGBT families. Locally, I work with Rainbow Access Initiative (www.rainbowaccess.org) an LGBT training program for health and human service providers. Funded by a grant through the NYS Department of Health, we train providers to understand the unique medical and psychological needs of LGBT people. Nationally, I am a Board Member of the Family Pride Coalition (<http://www.familypride.org>), the only organization dedicated to advocacy and education of LGBT families. I am also a member of the Harry Benjamin International Gender Dysphoria Association (<http://www.hbigda.org/>), an international, multidisciplinary organization committed to understanding and treating gender dysphoria. I invite you all to find LGBT organizations -- locally, nationally, and internationally -- that you can support, and that will continue to work to support LGBT families. Our children are depending on us.