

Getting To Know Gay Folks

A recent Chieftain article about banning a book at the library on LGBTQ people and the controversy surrounding it brought back to mind how I came to get acquainted with Gay folks. I have always been a “straight” person in my life and never interacted with Gay people until I met a fellow named Marc. Some background is required.

In the late 70s I lived in Portland as a bachelor and rented out my spare bedroom to help pay the mortgage on the house. The 70s was a period of positive free thinking and varied lifestyles with none of the negative sectarian politics of today, at least in Portland. There were a wide variety of people that rented my extra bedroom. There was Clark the emergency room doctor with his small dog who loved hiking in the mountains. There was Thane the recent Oklahoma bible college graduate who was experiencing for the first time the non-bible freedom of having a good time. There was a young woman who was the quirky daughter of wealthy parents who was rebelling in her alternate lifestyle. But the person I remember most was Marc.

Marc was a large, strongly built guy, more like a logger, who grew up on a Wisconsin dairy farm. Marc was working as a young upward-bound manager at Tektronics in Beaverton. I noticed that Marc did not date and through a girlfriend of mine I offered to set him up. I thought that first it would be a good idea to partake in a common hiking activity. So, I arranged for four of us to travel to the ranch on Tenderfoot Valley Road where my father could transport us to a jumping off spot into the Eagle Cap. Dad took us to Lick Creek where we proceeded to hike the same trail into the Upper Imnaha that I had regularly taken 15 years earlier as a Forest Service fire guard. We went up the North Fork and over Tenderfoot Pass and out to the Lake. However, I noticed that Marc did not respond to his hiking blind date, and they never dated after the hike.

One weekend Marc announced that he was going on a trip to Vancouver B.C. When he returned a couple of days later he had a big grin on his face and said he had something important he needed to talk to me about. We sat down and Marc proceeded to recount how in his life he had never been attracted to women and that the trip to B.C. was a test to find out why. On that trip he discovered that he liked other men and had experienced a mind changing experience. Marc was “coming out”. He offered to move out of the house if this offended me. I had always strived to be moderate and tolerant of other people’s lifestyles, so I said that was not required. Over the next two years I had a first-row seat to the gay culture in Portland and it turned out to be very positive and informing for me.

The first thing to appreciate is that the gay culture is full of great cooks. The food at their get togethers was superb and every weekend there was a gathering at someone's house to eat and be social, including mine. I also learned of the complex emotional feeling that goes with having to be guarded about who you tell about being gay. Marc had to hide his status at Tektronix and only shared it with close friends; he couldn't even tell his conservative, dairy farming parents. Another lesson I learned was about all the sub-cultures that exist within being gay. Some members are masculine, and some are feminine, Marc was definitely masculine, and no stranger would ever talk to him and suspect that he was gay. There was also a division between people who were looking for deeper long-term relationships and those that were only looking for exciting sexual encounters (much like the rest of society). At that time San Francisco was the center of the hardcore sex scene, which was a turnoff for the gays in Marc's circle. However, it is that flashy subculture that the conservative media and Hollywood loves to portray since it sells ad copy.

I'm not the kind of person that wants everything I read and view to be introduced by what sexual preference they have. For example, I don't need the writer or artist introduced as a "gay artist". Just tell me what they do and whether they are good at what they do and then I will read or listen to their work and make up my own mind. At the same time when I read that individuals are fearful of a library book about LGBTQ people that might be viewed by others, it tells me that they have never had a chance to meet and get to know such people. They have had limited experiences in their life with those of another lifestyle. Marc became the vice-president of the largest hardwood plywood company in North America and in retirement in Portland is a talented cabinet maker. So instead of banning books, get to know your LGBTQ neighbor, you will find they are nice people.

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