

Close Your Eyes – Guided Imagery

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(This guided imagery exercise illustrates for straight allies what it might be like to live as a straight person in an all-GLBT world. Allow for many pauses during the reading to allow the impact to set in.)

If you feel comfortable, sit back and close your eyes and imagine if the following were true. Go back to your teenage years. You are 13. For just this once, regardless of your real sexual orientation or gender, pretend that you are a heterosexual. If you're a guy, you're attracted to women. And if you're a lady, you're attracted to men, from first crush on up.

Now, also imagine that you have been adopted, when you were a baby, by a gay or lesbian couple. Don't think about logistics. Just go with it, go with your feelings. Your parents love you very much and they are quite proud of you. They have ideas about what will make you happy in life and want to look out for you. They care.

In this family, you have an older sibling. You can choose whether it is a sister or a brother (your imagination). This brother or sister of yours is gay or lesbian. He or she has a boyfriend or girlfriend. Above all, you notice that your parents welcome the couple in their home.

Everyone is happy. That's right, you see, everyone in this world is gay.

You notice that it seems everyone is looking to you. Expecting the same thing. Nothing's blatantly stated, just understood. Without saying anything at all, your parents tell you "To be loved in this family, to be respected and cared for, bring home a gay or lesbian date. This is what will make us proud."

How do you feel?

Do you tell anyone? Who would you tell how you feel?

Let's move ahead a bit. 16 years old! You've survived junior high and now high school waits in the near future. Grades are good, family's alright, but how many things have you begun to notice about your world and yourself? Everywhere you look, it's "gay" or "lesbian".

But, not everyone is gay. There are people attracted to the opposite sex. You learned the word "straight" as a kid, quite a put-down then. Now you know the

clinical term, “heterosexual”. In fact, there was a show on the other day, a news segment talking about higher heterosexual teen suicide rates, and a debate on whether that came from their “illness” of being heterosexual or from their constant societal pressure to be gay. You switched the channel when your sister or brother walked into the room, but not fast enough for her or him to remark “serves ‘em right.” Were you hurt by that statement?

Has your parent occasionally asked if there’s anyone special you’re interested in, all the while sounding more concerned every time you respond “no?” Your brother or sister kids around with you, telling you how your life will be, how to catch that gay guy or lesbian around school. Ever feel tense when “heterosexuals” come up in a class discussion? Everyone seems to snicker and tease. Hear the rumors about the supposedly straight teacher? Was it also the one you expected?

But, at least you’re lucky. Everyone assumes that you’re gay or lesbian. Well, you do act normally gay or lesbian, which is a good thing you think because it seems safer, whether you’re afraid to act “straight” or that’s just the way you are. How does that feel?

What’d you think about the boy pushed down the stairs? Everyone, including you, knew it was because people thought he was hetero, but nothing could be proven. Eventually, he transferred out of that school. Did you ever have the courage to talk to him, as him how he feels, tell him maybe that you sympathize?

In the library, you searched once and there’s a book, about 10 years old on “Straight Rights.” Do you think you’d have the courage to find it? Open it up? Go to the check out and worry over the bewildered look from the librarian? Are you afraid that a friend might find the book in your bag and never talk to you again?

On TV, conservatives are demanding that a “heterosexual” parade not be allowed. You’ve seen the clips of the different costumes and banners exclaiming “Straight Pride.” Are all straight people like that? Are you like that? In the distance of those photos, you can see “normal” looking people, always out of focus. Who are they?

By the way, how is your gay or lesbian cover going? Are you worried anyone suspects?

Now, you’re in college. Freedom! Right? Eventually, you see it’s not too much different. College is all gay, too. Well, there is that straight group that meets in a classroom on campus. But, no respectable lesbian or wants to be seen with them, much less talk with them. When you’ve walked past their flyers, how many are ripped off or have graffiti? Was it a friend who did that? Was it you?

As a junior, you're a gay newsstand (but, then again, all the major papers and magazines are gay). One section has two magazines, though, one for men, one for women, and best of all for you, they're for "straights." You buy one, read it, amazed perhaps at its contents. Straights all across the nation doing things and trying to get legal rights and actually living what you would consider "normal" lives.

Eventually, after college, you start to see and date a person of the opposite sex. Things go well overall...you move in. Have you told your family about you and this person? Have you come out as straight? If so, how'd they take it? If not, why? Were you worried about finances, since your parents were paying a considerable chunk of your tuition? How do you feel now? What if your partner is not out and you are just his or her "friend" or "roommate" whenever his or her parents call or a friend stops by? How does that feel to hide?

At work, there's a gay man, seemingly obsessed with jokes about straight people and what it means to be a real man. When he tells his latest joke, your lesbian boss chuckles along. Do you feel concerned? Do you think now would be the time to ask about domestic partner benefits? There's no insurance coverage for your partner, despite working there for many years? What if he or she were to get sick? Could you afford out-of-pocket medical expenses? Are you concerned over losing your job if you were out? After all, in 39 states, it's still legal to fire a straight person. But even so, would it be labeled as some other reason to cover up the injustice? How do you feel?

One day, on the way home from work, a neighbor asks, "How is your roommate doing? Are things alright?" You turn, confused. You find out that the most important person in your life was rushed to the hospital over five hours ago. No one thought to contact you. At the hospital, you try to visit but the nurse won't let you through, because it is "family only" and since you cannot marry this person, you do not have anything tying you together as family, even though you've now lived as a couple for a decade. Do you try to explain to the gay and lesbian staff that the person you love and care for is in the intensive care unit? That you are a straight couple? That you need to, have to see your partner? What do you say? How do you feel, knowing that there have been court cases before where the family of a straight person can forbid the right of his or her partner to even visit? Do you call in sick to work the next day? How would you explain why you were out from work? What happens when your partner's parents come to the hospital to visit and ask "Who are you?"

How do you feel?

When you are ready, please open your eyes.

Discussion

- Name some of the things that you felt during the exercise.
- How did it feel to be singled out, in school, at work, in emergency situations?
- Did it feel right not to be able to celebrate your partnership?
- How would you have known with whom it was safe to talk?
- How could have your peers, Resident Advisors, Orientation Leaders and professors let you know it was safe to talk with them?
- Think about the environment at WPI
 - How easy would it be for a GLBT student here to be out and be in..
 - A Fraternity or Sorority?
 - A sports team?
 - Does all the talk about the ratio tend to put an emphasis on dating members of the opposite gender?