

Evolving

Kearsarge UU

2 October 2016

By Rev. Les Norman

A few years ago, President Obama made the statement that his thinking on gay marriage was evolving. This provoked a storm of outrage from the commentariat. No surprise there. Any statement from the President on this or indeed almost any subject would produce a storm from some segment of the media. The storm also provoked me to write a letter to the Monitor, the theme of which was that all parents of gay children know what it is to experience an evolution. But an evolution of just what? Here's someone you have known since the beginning of childhood, someone of whom you imagined you knew every detail, who has now sprung upon you this surprise, a surprise which is probably unwelcome. At the least, it changes all your expectations for your child's future. Some adjustments will have to be made if you are to live comfortably with this new knowledge, this new person.

I, along with my wife, Janet, and our youngest son, Nick, started that process in what seems today like a prehistoric age, 1987. Nick was home for Christmas, just prior to his 25th birthday, from his job in Minneapolis. After lunch on the 26th he said, "Mum, Dad, I have something to tell you. "I'm gay." This is pretty much how such stories start in many, perhaps most, families. Parents are rarely the first to be told the secret; sometimes it's withheld from them for years, or so it was, back in the dark ages of the last century.

What does one do when earth-shattering news like that is received? Our response was to make certain that the lines of communication were still in place. Each of us crossed the room, gave Nick a hug, and told him we still loved him.

I suppose it would be more useful to you if I spoke in generalities, of commonly accepted truths that apply always and everywhere. I'm not going to do that. I'm not sure that there are any such stories, anyway. Every real story is the story of a unique individual; mine is no different. It happens to be the one I know, and I believe it follows a pattern that is by no means unique. I hope it tells you enough about the generality of stories, of the evolution of feelings and attitudes, that you will find it useful.

Our feelings in the weeks after Nick had returned to Minneapolis were painful. They were, after all, based on a foundation of ignorance and prejudice about homosexuality and homosexuals. In addition, the agreement we had made with

Nick to keep everything secret did nothing to help our feelings of isolation and distress. Everything was colored by a general sense of shame, shame that such a thing should have occurred in our family, shame that it might stem from faults in Nick's parentage and upbringing. Most of all, we were fearful for Nick's safety, something that was beyond our control.

After a few weeks, Janet did the sensible thing and spoke with her group of women friends. I gathered that they gave her some comfort, though not a great deal of help or useful information. That left me in a not untypical male bind. Men, at least men of my generation, don't have a group of male friends with whom they can share their deeper feelings. Where was I going to find space to let off some of the pressure? The answer came from what seemed an unlikely place — the workplace. I was at that time still employed at Digital Equipment. For a year or more I had been a member of a small group meeting at monthly intervals to explore the issues of diversity in the workplace. Would not diversity of sexual orientation be an acceptable topic for the group?

With some feelings of trepidation, I did tell the group what had befallen our son and ourselves. They were sympathetic. Well, that was it, really. None of them had anything to offer by way of help or support. Indeed, why should they? However, as we went our separate ways, one of the women said she had something to tell me, in private. "I'm a lesbian" she said. This was a woman I had known in the group for over a year, and she had never revealed this to us! She went on; "There's a group called PFLAG, Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays. The local group meets every month at a church in Arlington. I think they could help you."

I filed away that information about PFLAG, but I didn't do anything for several months. This was still too raw and scary a subject to risk spreading the news. Nick had come out to us in December 1987, but I didn't attend a PFLAG meeting until February 1989. On that evening I went downstairs at the Arlington church hoping it was going to be useful to me, but resolved that, if I saw there anyone who knew me, I would say I had mistaken the directions and really needed to be in the AA meeting upstairs.

In fact, I knew no one, but I did find fathers and mothers who were in the identical situation to myself, and who seemed to be handling it with confidence and grace. I was no longer alone. (I should insert at this point that those early months had an additional trial, which was that Janet, my wife, and I were dealing with our individual hang-ups, prejudices and stereotypes about homosexuality and Nick's situation. These kept us apart, unable to share easily the feelings we were dealing with. That's not an uncommon situation.)

So the PFLAG gathering gave me what I was looking for — assurance that ours was not a unique situation, nor one that was impossible to cope with. Even more directly, it gave me friends with whom I could share my feelings and fears. They had been there already, and their experiences gave me the assurance that the future for Nick could be bright.

Also at the meeting were two or three gay men and lesbians. Why were they there? I gathered from their contributions to the discussion that they were either uncertain about their future reception at home when they disclosed their orientation, or they had in fact disclosed it and been rejected by one or both parents. PFLAG provided for them a welcome where they could be open and know that they would not be rejected. I was learning that sexual orientation is unlike other traits of minority groups in that the possibility of family rejection is a real and hurtful possibility. Nick himself had told us, after he had dropped his bombshell, that he had a support group back in Minneapolis who were prepared to offer him practical and sympathetic support when we rejected him. Yes, he did say "When" not "If". How sad.

After attending a couple of PFLAG meetings I had a revelation, a paradigm shift in my thinking about this problem that Nick had presented us with. Yes, there was a problem, but was the problem with Nick and his sexual orientation? No; that I didn't accept as a problem; it was a natural part of who he was. The problem, as I now saw it, was how society treated people of different sexual orientations. As I said, that realization created a paradigm shift in my thinking. What it also was for me, though I didn't realize it immediately, was that I was no longer passive in my feelings about this but was actively determined to do something about it.

There was one action I could take almost immediately, and that was to march with PFLAG in the Boston Gay Pride Parade. I told Janet and, somewhat to my surprise, she said she would join me. Finally, we had come back together in our understanding of how we were to proceed. The march was a total blast. If you want to experience a total sense of being affirmed, do what we did. The PFLAG contingent was cheered from the sidewalks every step of that march.

That was a beginning for me. After this start I became active, almost without trying, and certainly not because I had any interest in self-promotion, in a variety of LGBT activities. Let me, before I move on, say a few words about that set of initial letters. Back in 1989, PFLAG was concerned solely with gays and lesbians. At that time, other types of sexual and gender orientation and identity were unknown to us. I recall conversations at PFLAG meetings when the subject of bisexuality came up. The gays and lesbians who were present would contend, quite heatedly, that such a thing was merely a temporary point on the road which would lead to either acceptance of being gay or lesbian, or a realization

that one was really straight. Now, bisexuality is recognized as being a stable position. It was this kind of discussion that led to the realization that people, especially young people, could be in a state of questioning their sexual orientation. This, in turn, led to the provision of high school and college Gay/Lesbian alliances.

Somewhat later, the question of trans-gender and trans-sexual came up. These, too, became issues for PFLAG to wrestle with. But they weren't issues; they were people who came to our meetings looking for help, and for acceptance, acceptance that was not coming to them from society at large.

In 1992, I was called as pastor of the Congregational Church in Sanbornton, NH. My profile had been circulated fairly widely, on both coasts and, as I had expected, responses were few, though also, as I had hoped, they were solid. The reason I had expected responses to be thin on the ground was that I had clearly stated that I had a gay son, and that I was actively involved with PFLAG. In 1992, this ruled me out of consideration in many congregations. However, after a couple of exciting, though ultimately negative candidating experiences in other places, Sanbornton and I found ourselves happily matched. As one of the search committee said, "Being a straight man with a gay son, you can speak to both sides of the congregation".

There were indeed two sides, divided over the issues of homosexuality. For several further years this continued, though with little outright animosity, and with a gradual decrease in negative feeling. There eventually came a time when the majority, those in favor of declaring the congregation Open and Affirming, wanted to be able to say that the congregation welcomed gays and lesbians. However, this could not be explicitly stated unless a vote to that effect had been taken. So, the decision to take a vote was made, and a series of open congregational discussions followed. It became clear that there were only a few who were opposed, though sadly it seemed unlikely that they could be swayed from their position. At the final discussion, those members who had experienced a close family member being gay or lesbian were asked to show their hands. Over a third of those present did so. That seemed to be the turning point; there was no longer any doubt that we were doing the right thing by taking a vote. The vote, a secret ballot, was overwhelmingly in favor. As a result, two families did leave the congregation, though one returned after a couple of years and, I hear, the second returned after I retired. I should say that this entire process was led by members of the congregation, such things are not helped by the pastor taking the lead. Of course, though, it was well understood what my position was, and I continued working at PFLAG and with the denomination, in New Hampshire.

I have a conflicted opinion on taking a vote on these matters. It puts a stake in the ground, certainly, but at what cost? One thing it doesn't do is provide closure. In Sanbornton and elsewhere I've experienced the sentiment: "That's over and done with." It's not, for at least two reasons. First, assuming the congregation is lively, there will be new members coming in, and they will need to be introduced to the ethos, the culture, of the congregation. An ongoing program of education and re-education is an essential element of remaining welcoming. Second, there have been over the past thirty years a number of new issues arising in the field of human sexuality. Each of these has caused some concern, and has generated the need for education of the congregation. In many cases these issues arise in society generally: gay marriage, for instance, but sometimes they may arise as matters within the congregation. Two such things arose in Sanbornton. One, a "straight spouse" with a wife leaving him because she had determined she was a lesbian. Two, a male to female transgender member. Each of these was dealt with calmly within the congregation.

What the vote does provide, or should do, is a sense within the congregation of how we feel and how we behave as members of a welcoming community. We don't tolerate anti-gay words, such as "faggot", and we don't act negatively or obnoxiously when we see two women holding hands in the pew. Such reactions are not reflective of who we are. Nor do we react negatively to behavior that is outside the norm, whatever it may be, because we are welcoming of all, especially of those who are different, though we do reserve the right to correct behaviors which wantonly stray outside the acceptable. But suppose the service is interrupted one Sunday by loud cries from an unknown woman in the congregation. Do you escort her outside, or does one of the deacons try to comfort her, sitting beside her for the rest of the service, and whenever she comes on subsequent occasions? That is what happened to the Plymouth congregation after their Open and Affirming vote. The journey of being welcoming may take us to some strange and unexpected places. It may mean learning about variety of mental illnesses and physical handicaps, and of the weaknesses and strengths of others, often unexpectedly. This world of transcendent creation is indeed a wonderful place. Let us open our arms and our hearts to welcome it in all its manifestations.