

## **I/You/We: The Three Pronouns of Coming Out**

Coming out of the sexual-/gender-identity closet is an intensely personal experience for all who take the step. There isn't a formula, a set time, or a magically perfect way to do it. Coming out is the hard work of recognizing who we are and what we want, being honest and open with ourselves and others, and then being willing to act on that knowledge in order to live a life of integrity, wholeness, and pleasure.

The opposite of coming out of the closet is living in secrecy, fear, and shame. Staying in the closet is like living in an upended casket, dying a little bit inside every time a family member, friend, neighbor, or coworker asks what should be a friendly, innocent, and welcoming question: "Anyone special in your life?" "What did you do over the weekend?" "When will you settle down, get married, and raise a family?"

The necessary work of coming out is something that distinguishes LGBT people from all others, and yet the process is remarkably similar for all who must undertake it. It is we who consciously set ourselves apart by telling parents, family members, and closest friends that our sexual and emotional energy sparkles for someone of the same sex, or that we are attracted to both men and women, or that our birth sex does not match our internal gender identity. When we come out we identify ourselves as different from the vast majority of people we know and we distance ourselves from those who love and know us best by telling them that, in one very significant way, they knew us not at all.

Coming out of the closet is not something that all LGBT people *must* do, but imagine how many of us would be openly and identifiably LGBT if all of us did come out. It also helps put us into contact with other LGBT people. Coming out must be done

repeatedly throughout our lifetimes because, unlike other minority groups who are identified by skin color or gender or other physical characteristics, LGBT people are not necessarily obvious to others. Despite popular notions of “gaydar,” we wear no mark of homosexuality. Each new person we meet, each new social or employment situation we’re in, summons us out of the closet. Every medical care provider, for instance, needs to know about our sexual orientation or gender identity/expression in order to provide us the best care. Every teacher of our children needs to know about our family configuration so that our kids’ families are recognized and respected in the classroom. Most of us have been raised by heterosexual parents and live in a predominantly heterosexual extended family. After we come out to immediate family, we will have more opportunities to come out to grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and on and on.

LGBT people report the hardships of living a closeted, secret life. With millions of words, LGBT writers and thinkers have described the toll exacted by the intimate self-censorship of the closet as blows to self-esteem and mental and physical well-being. The decision to live openly and honestly as LGBT resolves internal conflicts created when we do not tell others our personal truths, but the penalties for coming out can also be harsh. We come into closer contact with homophobia and its relentless assaults on our lives and our human dignity. Coming out of the closet vividly demonstrates to us the ways in which LGBT people are not free, not equal, and not welcome to participate in society.

Paradoxically, when we come out we declare our personal existential independence from the constraints of enforced or assumed heterosexuality and bear the brunt of heterosexual supremacy and homophobia. At the precise moment we come out and slam shut a closet

door behind us, the social costs of being openly lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender shoot up and off the charts. Suddenly, if others know we are LGBT, we can be:

- rejected by family members or friends or coworkers;
- fired from our jobs;
- denied housing or educational opportunities;
- discharged from the military;
- attacked on the street or at school;
- abandoned by our religious or other social communities;
- legally stripped of our capacity to care for our life partners and immediate family members.

Coming out carries risks but also offers rich rewards. Although it can at first seem that negotiating the world after we're out is as treacherous as negotiating the world while we're closeted, the sharp contrasts in the two experiences bear exposure.

1. We no longer live, tell, and perpetuate a lie about ourselves.
2. We are able to join the ever-growing LGBT communities in which we can build friendships, loving relationships, and long-lasting bonds with people like us who provide support, nurturance, and context for our lives.
3. We can apply ourselves to the righteous task of changing the world so that those who come after us need not endure the internal conflicts of lying, or the pain caused by external hostilities toward LGBT people.

We win the ultimate prize when we come out: to live honestly, to find community, and then to challenge homophobia as part of a historic movement for social justice for LGBT people. We win when we stand our ground and declare ourselves LGBT. We win when we enter into a community of people like ourselves. We win when we roll up our sleeves and get to work, confronting, defying, and erasing homophobia.

### **What Will It Take to Erase Homophobia?**

Much like the old joke, “How do I get to Carnegie Hall?” “Practice, practice, practice,” ridding the world of homophobia requires the concentrated work of people who are determined, thoughtful, and unwavering in the quest to erase homophobia. The LGBT social justice movement rests on the idea that each person can change his/her thinking about homosexuality because all of us who work in the movement already have changed our thinking about our own sexual or gender identities. We have lived through a change of mind and heart: our own. We have seen, felt, and acted on one fundamental change in our own lives by coming out of the closet. We have passed through three important phases of coming out:

1. I am lesbian/gay/bisexual/transgender.
2. You who share this with me are my community.
3. We will work together to change the world.

Every celebrity, elected official, musician, entertainer, athlete, doctor, union member, teacher, nurse, administrative assistant, hedge fund manager, farmer, artist, rancher, university professor, preacher, rabbi, nun, fireman, cop, actor, writer, waiter, bartender, journalist, factory worker, and child care worker who lives life openly as a lesbian, gay man, bisexual, or transgender person has experienced the same earthmoving change in their lives.

But now that we're out, what do we do? When we come face-to-face with expressions of deeply held prejudice against our selves and our communities, how can we respond in an effective, concerted, and strong-minded way? While individuals can do much in the context of their personal lives to oppose homophobia, we will be most successful—and efficient—when we join with other earnest seekers of social change. In our social movement, as is true of other social movements, the bulk of the work is accomplished by people who come together in organized groups that reinforce and weld individuals' commitments into a forceful and orderly series of actions to effect change. These organizations provide structure, strategy and tactics, leadership, and resources to LGBT people and straight allies who have the passion, the time, and the dedication to work within their communities to promote change. The LGBT social justice movement is comprised of thousands of advocacy organizations at every level of the political sphere: local, state, federal, and international. Virtually all of the LGBT advocacy organizations that are formally organized are “nonprofit” groups, by which is meant the group exists for purposes other than generating profits to shareholders. Nonprofit LGBT advocacy groups may be staffed or not or may be incorporated or not. All have members and volunteers

whose time, energy, and support feed the organization. These groups are powered by ordinary people who want to create fundamental change in how lesbians, gay men, and bisexual and transgender people are thought about and treated.

New York City's famous Stonewall Rebellion of June 1969 revealed to LGBT people all across the country that by working in concert, we could fight back against government-sanctioned repression. By standing up against the routine police raids on gay bars, the dykes and fags and drag queens of Stonewall ignited our modern LGBT social movement. In 1969 there were a handful of "gay" organizations in the United States; today there are thousands of LGBT organizations and institutions to meet the interests of LGBT people in all their diversity. Community builders across the country have created groups that bring us together for wide-ranging purposes: politics, fun and recreation, emotional support, professional growth, worship, and sport. Most large and medium-size cities are home to organizations that offer social and cultural outlets, health care and mental health services, and information and support for LGBT people at every stage of life. LGBT groups cover topics such as HIV/AIDS and other health issues, education, legal and political action/advocacy, religion and spirituality, sports, recreation and fitness, youth and school-based activities, and support groups centering on coming out, starting a family, alcohol- and substance-abuse issues, domestic violence, racial identities, sexual orientations and practices, professional and employment affinities, gender variance, and HIV-positive status. Name a topic or activity of great relevance to LGBT people and it's a good bet you can find an organization that focuses on it.

The construction of LGBT community in nearly every large and medium-size city and college/university town means that most of us can find other LGBT people and meaningful LGBT community life. Social groups in our communities offer the support and camaraderie of other LGBT people to expand our own understandings of how we live as LGBT people. Political groups build the necessary structures and gather energies of committed LGBT people to take on projects of legal reform. And even for those who live in a town without a visible LGBT community, access to the Internet brings us into contact with countless other LGBT people. Most of us no longer need to live in isolation, thinking that we are the “only one.” Just as the brick-and-mortar aspects of community exist for us, so, too, does the online community exist. Resources abound. Check them out. Sample what the LGBT world offers. After all, it’s yours.

After we come out, though, we experience homophobia in a very different way than when we were in the closet. A closeted person experiences homophobia, and the topic of homosexuality, as something to avoid, or something that threatens to blow a cover, or even something to slyly prop up so as to deflect suspicion of queerness away from us and on to others. But once we’re out, homophobia exasperates and irritates us and often motivates us by creating a different kind of internal conflict: instead of “What’s wrong with me?” we think: “What’s wrong with her/him/this world?” For many of us, the vexing frustrations created by homophobia call us to action.

What can we do to erase homophobia? Recognize it. Call it out. Challenge it. Defy it. Refuse to live within its stultifying confines. Work with others to wipe out homophobia from the public square and the laws and policies of public and private

institutions and governments. Just as racism seems intractable in our society, homophobia seems a poison equally resistant to antidote. We must keep in mind, though, that every successful challenge to homophobia, whether personal, political, or institutional, is both a potent teaching moment and another step toward its eventual eradication.

### **Organizations: The Key to Action**

Political organizing and action springs from LGBT groups that have social change and community organizing at the core of their missions. These groups identify and name the ways that LGBT lives are constrained by oppression of homosexuality and nontraditional gender expression. Some LGBT organizations that are not explicitly political turn their energies toward social action projects when they encounter overt homophobia. For example, school-based LGBT groups often organize to support openly LGBT students and their straight allies. But if a student group's posters are defaced with anti-LGBT graffiti and the administration fails to take strong action to support the student group by declaring a zero-tolerance policy for anti-LGBT behavior, the student organization likely will launch itself into advocacy tactics to compel the administration to take a strong stand and to galvanize other students, faculty, and staff and parents to support its cause. Of course, not all LGBT groups are or will be political groups. For instance, the (fictional) Lesbian Literary Leopards who dedicate themselves solely to a mission of holding regular book club meetings probably won't change their spots and become a roaring political machine. Move on to explore other organizations to find those that have the appetite and the gusto for political action.

Political groups or LGBT groups that can be politicized typically hunger for new and eager members. But don't charge in expecting to run the show. Remember that any organization with a history will have its own agenda or program and will want to integrate new members into the ongoing work. Be respectful. Attend at least two meetings during which your focus is as an observer; listen and learn about the group and its goals, its leadership, and its group process before you offer your opinions. After the first meeting, volunteer to take on a basic housekeeping chore for the next meeting, like bringing the lemonade or getting the handouts copied. By doing so, you express your interest and commitment without prematurely entering into policy discussions or opinion debates among members of longer standing. As you become familiar with the group and its leaders and members become familiar with you, start talking. Let your opinions and views be heard in the meetings and participate in the group's decision-making process. Assert yourself, but don't be aggressive. Collaborate and become part of the team. Your confidence will grow and others will develop confidence in you. Take advantage of opportunities to be a part of the social scene. If the group debriefs after the meeting at the local coffeehouse, join in when you can. Bring a plate of cookies to a meeting. Offer to host a potluck that precedes a meeting. Sharing food and drink brings people together in a special way that makes planning political action and sorting through a thorny issue easier and more productive.

### **Filling in the Organizational Gaps**

If you live in a community or on a campus that is not home to an organization for LGBT people, consider getting together with a few friends to start one. Begin your discussion by

brainstorming among yourselves about why a group by, for, and about LGBT people interests each of you. This will enable you to learn about all of the needs and desires you want to address. As the initiating group, you will also learn what kind of organization most interests you as a whole. If your discussion primarily centers on opportunities for social networking, outings to museums, or day trips to go hiking, then forming a social/artistic/recreational group meets those needs. If the group gets jazzed about sharing information on knitting or diving into the latest bestseller, then a hobby group meets those needs. But if your discussion returns to the problems that LGBT people experience because of homophobia and gender-expression prejudice, then there may be interest in a political action organization. This kind of organization has social change and community organizing at its core and creates durable change in the policies and laws of institutions, both public and private, working to ensure that LGBT people do not suffer arbitrary discrimination, like loss of jobs and housing or lack of access to education and health care. While informal brainstorming among friends can shed light on injustices against LGBT people, keep in mind that the group's action agenda must remain flexible and open to input from other interested people. LGBT people don't necessarily share a common experience of oppression, and new issues and new contexts for action will continually be brought forward by new members of the group.

After the initiating group has set the priority goals and formulated a draft mission of the organization, a founding meeting should be held so that interested people can join in to shape and launch the group. The initiating group must reach out to as many potentially interested people as possible so that attendance at the launch meeting is strong

and a group larger than the initiators shares the crucial first phase of organization building. Methods of outreach and notification include: fliers or other forms of written announcements; postings in a local/community newspaper; and information circulated via the Net and other electronic means. But the very best way to invite folks to your launch meeting is *to talk directly and personally* with people you know, explaining why you think an LGBT organization is needed and asking them to attend the meeting and take part in the new organization's creation.

At the launch meeting, the initiating group offers an agenda that includes their vision of the new LGBT organization: its mission and goals, how it will achieve those aims, a proposed structure, and a road map or plan for the first three to six months of the group's life. Two members of the initiating group should be prepared to facilitate the discussion at the launch meeting; one or two should take notes and help the facilitators keep track of the meeting agenda and time frames for each topic. The initiating group should be prepared for attendees at the meeting to have informational questions, complementary and sometimes conflicting ideas about missions and goals, suggestions about group structure, and so on. In a room of twenty LGBT people, there can be numerous different ideas and opinions on any one subject. The facilitators must strive to allow for maximum participation by attendees while sticking to the agenda and time frames for each topic. As well, facilitators need to lead the group through a decision-making process, even if the best outcome is to postpone a final decision until the next meeting. Some attending the launch meeting will not attend a second meeting because the group's thrust and focus don't interest them; some won't come back because they don't

have the time or energy to play a central role in the new organization, even though they support the formation of the group. But no attendee should leave the launch meeting thinking that the initiating group does not want, need, or welcome his/her participation in the new group. The “welcome mat” thrown out by the initiating group includes:

- a clear and simple agenda given to each attendee at the start of the meeting;
- a sign-up sheet so that all attendees’ contact information is collected;
- some simple refreshments;
- structure and facilitation that invite feedback and participation by all.

None of us can change the world on our own. It takes a movement to change the world; it takes organizations to build the movement; it takes working with others to birth and power organizations.

### **Political Action Needs Leadership**

LGBT political action groups share a common mission: to change the social and political status of LGBT people so that none of us fear punishment, persecution, or prosecution for being who we are. Political action groups need three basic components to do the work:

1. a plan of action that strategically and effectively deploys the energy and resources of members, supporters, and constituents;
2. members who make the action possible and meaningful;
3. leaders who can lead the group.

Leaders in the LGBT movement vary widely in their skill sets, their capacities to lead others, and their abilities to think strategically.

It is not uncommon for LGBT organizational leaders to rise from the ranks with no actual experience or formal training in how to lead an organization. In a relatively small social-change movement like ours, failures of leadership prompt charges of egotism, self-aggrandizement, self-interest, and bunker-mentality authoritarianism, rather than an acknowledgment that too many of our leaders learn on the job. Stepping up to the most visible position within movement organizations or projects, no matter how large or small the group or project, makes the leader a target. Our group leaders are not larger-than-life superheroes. They are women and men who need support and encouragement from a trusted circle of friends and advisers. In return, our group leaders need to listen as often as they talk and to consult many colleagues before they decide. The conundrum is this: Not all of us want to unite, motivate, inspire, and direct the energy and resources of a group of people toward accomplishing the goals we all want to reach, and yet leadership breathes life into our movement and our organizations.

Absent a coherent strategy for raising leaders who are supported to succeed, some of the best opportunities for leadership development can be found in internship/fellowship programs at our larger political organizations. Many of these programs offer a modest stipend or college course credit for short-term internships. For people, young or old, who can forgo a weekly paycheck, the internships give participants hands-on work experience in a social-movement organization, the chance to make meaningful contacts with staff members, résumé-building work, a bird's-eye view of life in a political

movement, and the potential for recommendations to future employers both in and outside politics.

### **Organizational Angst Comes with the Territory**

The LGBT social justice movement is energized largely by the work of volunteers, people who give willingly of their time and energy. Volunteer leaders, volunteer members, volunteer boards of directors, volunteer committee chairs and members, volunteer event organizers. When volunteers' nerves get frayed, they can take their energy elsewhere. In the LGBT movement, as in most human endeavors, we invariably frustrate one another, annoy one another, and delight in one another. Human beings are flawed instruments for communication; our minds and hearts are fraught with unspoken and unconscious motivations; we often react with fear and anxiety and protectiveness, rather than confidence and power and generosity. Any LGBT organization, in fact any community-based organization, will be riddled with human drama and interpersonal angst. It's the unavoidable dilemma of individual consciousness: no one can ever completely know or empathize with anyone else, and so we imperfectly interpret the behaviors of others. As activist leaders, it is our job to motivate, inspire, and help others imagine the creation of a better world and to work toward that despite the human foibles that will inevitably occur along the way. We need to deal honestly and openly and compassionately with our colleagues and peers, and also be bold about protecting and guiding the world-changing work in which we are engaged. We need to keep this work

uppermost in our minds so that we and others around us remember that what is most important is the eradication of homophobia.

## **Game Plan for Chapter One**

### ***Coming Out***

Coming out means acknowledging one's sexual orientation/gender identity and acting positively on that self-awareness. People come out at varying times of life and under widely different life circumstances. Many LGBT people note that coming out is a lifelong experience, since we constantly meet people who don't know and can't discern our sexual orientation or gender identity.

### ***Coming Out: Twelve Steps to Personal Liberation***

1. I acknowledge within myself that my sexual orientation brings me to states of attraction, love, affection, and desire for persons of my sex; *(or)* I acknowledge within myself that my gender identity differs from the construction of my physical body.
2. I come to appreciate that my sexual orientation/gender identity is fully and naturally and undeniably a part of who I am.
3. I decide to be true to who I am.
4. I examine the ways in which truth to myself can risk my current relationships.
5. I examine the ways in which truth to myself can invite new relationships into my life.
6. I step forward into a changed life by telling others that I am: a lesbian; a gay man; a bisexual person; a transgender person.
7. I ask those around me for support and understanding as I explore a changed life.

8. I am willing to hear from friends, family, and my loved ones what my declaration of sexual orientation/gender identity means to them.

9. I seek others like me.

10. I seek relationships with others like me.

11. I make myself fully aware of what my sexual orientation/gender identity means in the community and country in which I live.

12. I join with others to transform the community and country in which I live so that no others will be afraid to live true to their own sexual orientation/gender identity.