

Are We Not Family?
The Transition from Heterosexual Marriage
to Partnering with a Woman

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Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION.....	1
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW	
2.1 Introduction: Families and Family Therapy in a Heteronormative Culture	7
2.2 Feminist Postmodern Theory	10
2.3 The Concept known as Sexual Orientation: Conceptualizations and Research	
2.3.1 Biological Essentialism.....	17
2.3.2 Stage Models of Sexual Identity Development.....	17
2.3.3 The Problem with Categories.....	20
2.3.3 Gender and Sexual Orientation.....	22
2.4 Female Sexuality: Androcentrism, Research and Theory.....	24
2.5 Moving Out of a Heterosexual Marriage	28
2.6 Lesbians as Mothers: Research	36
2.7 The Discourse of Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Children are “No different” and “Normal”	38
2.8 The Lesbian and Gay Family	41
2.9 Summary	45
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY	
3.1 Introduction.....	48
3.2 Foundation of the Method: Qualitative Research and Ethnography.....	48
3.3 The Crises of Legitimation and Representation in Qualitative Research.....	50
3.4 Autoethnography as a Method.....	54
3.4.1 Key Empirical Works	55

3.4.2 Key Concepts	57
3.5 Conducting an Autoethnography: General Steps.....	58
3.6 Conducting an Autoethnography: Specific Steps	
3.6.1 Data Collection	60
3.6.2 Data Analysis	62
3.7 Critiques of Autoethnography.....	63
3.8 Summary and Conclusion.....	65
 CHAPTER 4: “OPENING” AN AUTOETHNOGRAPHY	
Part I: Forty-three.....	68
Part II: New York City.....	75
Part III: Home and Family	86
Part IV: The Tornado	112
Part V: “Mommy has Something to Tell You”.....	139
Part VI: New Jersey: The State that Doesn’t Hate.....	157
 CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION	
5.1 Introduction.....	163
5.2 Self in Context: Time, Location and Privilege	164
5.3 Heterosexuality	
5.3.1 Heteronormativity.....	168
5.3.2 Gender - The anchor of heterosexuality.....	174
5.4 Homonegating Processes	
5.4.1 Introduction.....	179
5.4.2 Biculturalism.....	179

5.4.3 Internalized Homophobia and Heterosexism	181
5.4.4 Passing	186
5.4.5 A Family Comes Out	191
5.4.6 Covering.....	200
5.5 The Binary Discourse	
5.5.1 Lesbian?	203
5.5.2 Essentialism	206
5.5.3 Motherhood	211
5.6 Reflections: Assessing “Are We Not Family?”	214
5.7 Summary	220
CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSION	
6.1 Feminist Postmodern Possibilities	223
6.2 Implications for the Marriage and Family Therapy Field.....	226
6.3 Future Directions for Research	231
6.4 Are We Not Family?	232
NOTES.....	235
LIST OF REFERENCES	236
APPENDIX A: Permission to Reprint.....	ix
APPENDIX B: Permission to Reprint.....	x
VITA	254

Abstract

Are We Not Family?

The Transition from Heterosexual Marriage to Partnering with a Woman

Jacqueline Hudak

Dr. John Lawless, Supervisor

What is the context in which the transition from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman becomes possible? Feminist postmodern theory provides the theoretical foundation for this research project, which examines the dominant binary discourse in sexual identities, the nature of heterosexuality, and the cultural context that both facilitates and inhibits this transition. Autoethnography is the research methodology employed, which affords the ability to be both subject and researcher. As such, the researcher moves between personal narrative and the cultural landscape and then back again, highlighting the roles of language and the dominant cultural discourses. Ideas considered 'normal' or 'natural' such as heterosexuality, the binary construction of sexual identity and what constitutes healthy child development are deconstructed and reconsidered.

Results indicate that the dualistic binary construction of sexual identities, steeped in the theory of biological essentialism, is still a very powerful and privileged cultural narrative. The limitations of dualistic thinking are elucidated as they relate to the dichotomous hetero/homo depiction of both individuals and families. The categories of heterosexuality and homosexuality can best be understood as bodies of knowledge, rather than as static entities. This research reveals the presence of an additional narrative, that of sexual fluidity for women, which has not become integrated into the dominant discourses.

Heteronormativity and heterosexism are ubiquitous and pervasive facets of the cultural context; heterosexuality remains the dominant and privileged mode of relating, the standard against which ‘others’ are measured. This has hampered both theory and research by exerting pressure for individuals and families to assimilate to heterosexual norms. It has further inhibited theorizing about the presence and impact of heterosexual privilege in the marriage and family therapy literature.

The words *marriage* and *family* are central to one of the most fiercely debated issues of our time. At stake is the very definition of marriage: Who controls the definition, and for what purpose? Due to the pervasive cultural climate of heteronormativity, implications for the field of marriage and family therapy include the need to actively re-define marriage as inclusive of gay and lesbian couples. Future directions for research are discussed.

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

It is February 2004, and a conversation takes place between two twelve-year old girls. They are old friends, having weathered the changes that have landed them in the turbulent years of middle school life. One asks the other:

“Kate, what do you think of gay people?”

“I think they’re really cool. Just look at Ellen DeGeneres and Rosie O’Donnell. Why, are you gay?”

“No,” says Lily, “but my Mom is”.

It is later that same evening, and Lily and her mother continue the conversation:

“Mom,” says Lily, “I still only want my friend Kate to know. Everyone else will really tease me at school.”

“OK, Lily” is the reply, “we’ll just go at your pace. No one else will have to know now.”

For almost thirteen years my daughter has known me, her mother, as a heterosexual woman. It has been a very short time, only a few weeks, since I shared with her and my nine-year old son that I am partnered with a woman. Now we go forward together, live our lives, work, go to softball games in the spring, have holidays and birthdays. We negotiate all the moves and changes that attend my divorce from their father. But how do we make sense of this enormous transition in our family?

Typically I would consult a book, locate an expert. I have been a family therapist for over twenty years. The invisibility of this family transition and limitation of existing theory is striking, as we seem to be without a map to chart our course through these

tumultuous changes. My particular family story, of me as a woman who, in her mid forties, leaves heterosexual marriage and partners with a woman, is unavailable in our cultural landscape. There are few books on the subject, little to guide me as I field the often-spontaneous questions: “So, Mom, what’s it like? Is it really a choice?”

The focus of this research project is to understand the experience of a woman who leaves heterosexual marriage with children, to partner with a woman. The passage from ‘heterosexual’ to ‘homosexual’ impacts not only the individual woman, but the family in which she is embedded. Together, they must negotiate the meaning of this change. This research project will utilize autoethnography to focus on the experience of a family that began in heterosexual marriage, divorced, and transitioned to incorporate the mother’s lesbian partner.

This narrative is not solely concerned with one family’s personal journey. This researcher will move between personal narrative and existing theory to achieve the following goals:

- To examine the dominant binary discourse in identities and deconstruct that discourse as it does or does not relate to the real life experiences of individuals and families. That data would add to the critical examination of how identities are negotiated and constructed over time.
- To examine and interrogate the institution of heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage. It is rare that the pervasiveness or coercive nature of assumptions implicit in dominant heteronormativity are scrutinized in the marriage and family therapy literature.

- To construct a counternarrative that would guide and support children and families through such a transition.

In my family, as in the culture at large, conversations were happening. In November of 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Court ruled that the exclusion of same-sex couples from the benefits of marriage was against the state constitution. Three months later, in February of 2004, unlike any other time in American history, images of gay and lesbian couples and families flooded into American homes. These images were not of the celebrity, but of the thousands of ‘ordinary’ gay and lesbian couples who exercised their right, for that brief time in San Francisco, to marry. Television, newspapers and news magazines were filled with photos and accompanying stories of exuberant couples, many with long histories together. Accompanied by children and parents, these couples waited hours in the pouring rain to engage in this heretofore exclusively ‘heterosexual’ ritual of love, *family*, commitment and legal sanction. There were daily articles in the press about gay marriage; social critics drew parallels between the gay marriage and the civil rights movement (Rich, 2004, February 29). The images of gay and lesbian couples captured the momentum of a social movement, a movement that questioned the longstanding definitions of marriage and family.

The 2000 Census indicated a huge increase in the number of same-sex couples sharing households in the nation, reflecting a decade's worth of political and social gains that have made gay men and lesbians more willing to report their living arrangements. The numbers have grown significantly in 10 states for which figures have been released: more than 700 percent in Delaware and Nevada; more than 400 percent in Vermont, Indiana, Louisiana and Nebraska; and more than 200 percent in Connecticut, Illinois,

Massachusetts and Montana (Bradford, Barrett & Honnold, 2002). Yet even those numbers may reflect a serious undercount in the number of gay and lesbian couples living together (Badgett & Rogers, 2003). The portrait emerges however, of a nation that is increasingly diverse in terms of family structure. Yet, deep divisions within American society remain; the words *family* and *marriage* remain positioned at the center of one of the most contentious, fiercely debated social issues of our time.

The prevailing ideologies, or dominant discourses regarding this issue are strikingly polarized, and this polarization frames the thinking of most, perhaps all discourses. Conversations tend to constrict around one of two positions: for, or against, gay marriage. This polarization means that ideas and opinions cluster in two contrasting positions. Complex individual, family, and community issues easily become lost when locked in a ‘for’ or ‘against’ debate. In fact, research has indicated that voter referendum on the question of same-sex marriage is divisive to communities and damaging to individual and family well-being (Russell, 2004).

In this light, the need for scholarly research cannot be understated. It was such research that provided the empirical foundation for the removal of homosexuality from the American Psychiatric Association’s list of mental disorders in 1973 (D’Augelli, 2002). Research has not only further supported the parental rights of lesbian mothers, it has documented their very existence in a culture that only equated motherhood with heterosexuality (Golombok, Spencer, & Rutter, 1983).

Several professional associations have already taken public positions in support of gay marriage and parenting. The American Psychiatric Association and The National Association of Social Workers already have issued position statements supporting same-

sex marriage (Drescher & D'Ercole, 2003). The American Psychological Association issued a policy statement in 2004 on sexual orientation, parents, and children that supported same-sex marriage and parenting (Paige, 2005).

The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy, the largest family therapy organization in the country, has struggled with whether or not to take a position on the issue of gay marriage, and has been silent on issues related to sexual orientation as well as same-sex relationships. At the 2004 annual conference, the presidential plenary was devoted to "Marriage, Politics, and the AAMFT." A task force report was presented that concerned the most recent findings on marriage, same-sex partnering, and lesbian and gay families. Amid responses that ranged from tearful ovations to angry departures, the president read a report largely favorable to gay and lesbian families and clearly against discriminatory practices. In his summary of the report, James Morris stated:

Though the future development of same sex marriage is impossible to clearly anticipate, in our review of the research it was difficult to find any scientific justification for efforts to restrict this development. Our profession has historically allowed clients to define their family unit without regard to any particular legal standing. But the current societal focus on marriage and efforts to in some quarters deny particular individuals access to it, as well as its entitlements, risk limiting both how we see our own field and how it is seen by our clients and the larger society. Failure to address these issues forthrightly, from a scientific stance, may result in consequences we do not intend and cannot easily predict. (Hotvestadt, Hovestadt & Morris, 2004, p. 12)

The present need for research and scholarship regarding the meaning of marriage and family is abundantly clear. At this time of social upheaval, the field of marriage and family therapy can be instrumental in moving beyond the current simplistic and polarized discourse. The limits of this dualistic thinking are many: Rachel Hare-Mustin (2004) states, "...to see both sides of a question is the surest way to prevent its solution, because there are always more than two sides." (p.15) Family therapy researchers are poised to enter this cultural dialogue. The family therapy tradition of adherence to systemic principles such as interdependence, simultaneity, and mutuality is necessary to counter the current polarized debates. Research on the family transition from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman will contribute data about how parents and children together negotiate and make sense of several critical issues. These include the binary discourse in identity and sexuality, as well as the meanings of marriage and family. The study of meaning making in the everyday lives of families would examine the dominant discourses of our day and generate understandings of their impact. This data would enhance both the professional and cultural conversation by widening the scope of questions asked and issues considered. In this endeavor, language, the words themselves, *marriage* and *family*, will be deconstructed. A postmodern lens is employed to question *whose* definitions of marriage and family are steeped in the discourses, and toward what end.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction: Families and Family Therapy in a Heteronormative Culture

Research in the field of family therapy pertaining to the transition of a woman with children who leaves heterosexual marriage to partner with a woman is almost nonexistent. This review of the literature will be multifaceted to reflect the multiple and complex issues she and her children face. Because it has been only 30 years since homosexuality has been declassified as a mental disorder, the context of heteronormativity in which research questions have been asked, data generated, and theories produced is considered. By thus situating the literature review in its historical and political context, the foundation is laid to describe, imagine and generate alternative narratives that will enhance family scholarship.

The real life conversation between my daughter and her best friend demonstrates what Laird (2003) describes as a “historic moment in American society, but one that is rife with paradox.” (p. 176) Laird goes on to describe the simultaneous depiction of gays and lesbians as “chic and pioneering, and as a major sign of social deterioration and the source of destruction of the family as we know it.” (p. 176) Despite the increased visibility of gay men and lesbian women, there remains no definition of family in the public consciousness that refers to same-sex couples with children. In fact, in the not too distant past, the notions of lesbian mother or lesbian family would have been nonexistent, the constitutive terms seen as mutually exclusive. This culture of heteronormativity (Gamson, 2000) dictates that a viable family consist of a heterosexual mother and a father raising children together. Heterosexuality and heterosexual forms of relating are the norm. All other forms of relational experience are thus viewed in contrast. For example,

the descriptive term “couples” means heterosexual couples, then, there are gay and lesbian couples. Families are nuclear and headed by two heterosexual parents, then, there are gay and lesbian families. Similarly, “woman” means a heterosexual woman, then, there is the lesbian. Heteronormativity sustains the dominant norm of heterosexuality by rendering as marginal any relational structure that is other.

A review of the family therapy literature bears this out; until recently the concept of the gay/lesbian family has been virtually unheard of in the family therapy field. This fact was confirmed by two major scholarly literature reviews. Allen and Demo (1995) and Clark and Serovich (1997) found that the marriage and family therapy fields generally ignored gay, lesbian, and bisexual issues. For example, Clark and Serovich surveyed 17 journals published from 1975 to 1995. Of the 13, 217 articles published, only 77, or 0.006% focused on gay/lesbian issues, used a gay/lesbian sample, or included sexual orientation as a variable. Goodrich (2003) cited the availability of only two early texts on working with lesbian couples in family therapy as an indication of the intense homophobia in the field from the 1960s to the 1990s.

The omission and subsequent invisibility of the gay man and lesbian from family therapy literature might compel one to think of homosexuality as a recent phenomenon. But historical scholarship has shown that across centuries, intimate and romantic friendships between women were common, even expected, without ascribing the category of lesbian or homosexual to describe these sometimes life-long bonds (Faderman, 1981). The categories of heterosexual/homosexual are thus historically relative. Katz (1995) provided historical analysis of the concept of heterosexuality as an outgrowth of the work of early sexologists, and the subsequent impact of this concept on scientific culture.

Bohan (1996) cited the use of the term homosexual in an historical context, first used in 1869.

In addition to being time-bound, the categories of heterosexual and homosexual are culture specific; in each culture sexual orientation may be viewed differently. For example, in certain communities it is common for men to have sex with other men, yet eschew the label of gay or even bisexual. Carballo-Diequez (1997) found that in communities of Latino men, such behavior is commonplace, yet not considered an indication of non-heterosexuality. Bohan (1996) cited the homosexual activity between young and adult males in Melanesian cultures, considered a rite of passage. Currently, there is attention being given to heterosexually married African American men, who regularly engage in sexual relationships with other men. Called being on the down low, this phenomenon has received the attention both of the media and the African American community (Boykin, 2005; King, 2004).

Yet, these narratives remain largely unavailable in the current discourse about sexuality, marriage and the family. Unless the word gay is attached, *marriage* implies *heterosexual marriage*. Heterosexuality is the default position, the norm, and as this researcher will show, the standard against which all others are measured. In common discourse, as Warner (1993) pointed out, “humanity and heterosexuality are synonymous.” (p. xxiii) This notion of heterosexuality goes far beyond the institutions that marginalize and punish any relationship viewed as other. In this vein, heterosexuality is, of itself, a social and political organizing principle (Seidman, 1996). Intrinsically linked to the structures of male dominance, heterosexuality can be viewed as a coercive patriarchal institution (Kitzinger, 1987). Rich (1980) described this culture of

compulsory heterosexuality as a powerful cluster of forces within which women have been convinced of the inevitability of both marriage and sexual orientation toward men. Thus, there have been strikingly few attempts to explain how an individual develops a *heterosexual* orientation. Research into the development of heterosexuality is constrained by the governing belief that it is natural (Moser, 2001). Research has focused upon homosexuality because it has been viewed as deviant. Thus, implicit in discussions about sexual orientation is the notion that heterosexuality is both normal and mentally healthy, and that non-heterosexuals are abnormal and psychologically disabled (Bullough & Bullough, 1997).

Feminist Postmodern Theory

Feminist postmodern theory encompasses a broad range of ideas, philosophies and critiques. Pertinent to this research project are the basic tenets of a postmodern theory, the influence of feminism, narrative theory and its subsequent impact on the family therapy field, and queer theory.

Postmodern theory may best be described as a critique of the age of modernity, which was characterized by a belief in reason and emancipation through the accumulation of knowledge (Kvale, 1992). The human was viewed as a rational being, capable of objectively measuring, codifying, and knowing the world through empirical research. The very essence of modernist theory is the belief in a knowable world (Gergen, 1992). That is, is it possible to know the “Truth” and through rigorous scientific inquiry, to know and define the state of the world as it really is. These concepts, reason, truth, and objectivity, basic to the modernist way of knowing, were called into question by postmodern theorists.

Postmodern theory is difficult to articulate precisely because it is not a unified theory. Postmodern theory is heterogenous (Kvale, 1992). It raises metatheoretical questions in that it examines the status and nature of theorizing itself (Flax, 1990). The diverse discourses, or statements and beliefs, of postmodern theory seek to question taken for granted ideas about truth, power, knowledge, self, and language that have served as authority and legitimation for contemporary Western thought (Flax, 1990).

In *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, Kuhn (1970) analyzed the history of science by using examples from historical case studies. He described scientific paradigms, the generally accepted perspective of a particular discipline at a given time in history. This analysis focused on the nature of paradigm shifts, and challenged the dominant notion that scientific theories develop in a linear, cumulative fashion. A paradigm shift alters the way that words are defined and changes the ways that scientists look at their subjects. The paradigm defines what questions are considered valid, and the rules used to determine the truth of a particular theory. Through the use of detailed case histories in scientific discoveries, Kuhn demonstrated in his analysis that knowledge is *dependent*, upon the culture of the groups of scientists, rather than on a particular method of discovery. According to Kuhn, science is thus only one kind of discourse or narrative that is believed to be true. This view of science as but one narrative among many as well as dependent upon context was a radical departure from the previously held notion of science as truth or fact.

Another seminal postmodern work was Lyotard's (1979) *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. In this text, Lyotard dealt with the nature of knowledge, how it is legitimated in a society, and the nature of legitimation itself.

According to Lyotard, narrative knowledge, or knowledge in the form of stories, which include scientific theories and cultural myths, explain and legitimate what is known as fact. Cultural myths function as authority for existing customs and power relations. These narratives are ethical and political prescriptions for society and regulate what is considered truth. Lyotard proposed that overarching philosophies of history, or what he calls grand or master narratives, were no longer credible. He exposed, through analysis of language and language games, that there are many truths, and that knowledge is context dependent, fragmented, and local. There is no universal system of thought. From a postmodern perspective, all knowledge is thus narrative knowledge, subject to historical, political, and cultural influences.

The critique of knowledge and power and the opening for multiple realities brought about by postmodern theory converged with feminist theory and science (Flax, 1990; Harding, 1990). Feminists regard gender as a principal organizing mechanism of social and family relations, which generally involves imbalances of power (Myers-Avis & Turner, 1996). The modernist rhetoric of an autonomous, objective and reasoned self perpetuated a masculine definition of reality (Hare-Mustin, 2004). According to Hare-Mustin (2004), feminism is “an oppositional form of knowledge to patriarchy.” (p. 16) Postmodern feminists have been heavily influenced by the writings of women of color, who defy the notion of a single, universal voice of woman (Anzandua, 1987; Collins, 1986; hooks, 1990 ; Hurtado, 1989). Gender often intersects with other relations of domination and oppression, such as class or race. The monolithic concept of woman shifted to include a politically, culturally and historically situated woman with experiences and knowledge specific to her “in the material division of labor and the racial

stratification system.” (Olesen, 2000, p. 222) Postmodern feminists assert that there is no single truth or reference point that captures the experience and voice of all women.

Richardson (1993) writes:

The science practice I model is a feminist-postmodern one. It blurs genres, probes lived experiences, enacts science, creates a female imagery, breaks down dualisms, inscribes female labor and emotional response as valid, deconstructs the myth of an emotion-free social science, and makes a space for partiality, self reflexivity, tension and difference. (p. 695)

Several themes in postmodern feminism are particularly relative to the current research project and are worthy of close consideration. First, is the examination of the very way that Western knowledge is organized. As Hare-Mustin (2004) states, Western knowledge is organized “around a series of dualities, of operations of comparing and contrasting.” (p. 15) Indeed, binary and hierarchical relationships are central to Western thought; in all of these dualities, one term is privileged or held as central over the other (Derrida, 1976). Tong (1995) asserts that postmodern feminism is very closely linked to Derrida’s theory of deconstruction, which is inherently critical, anti-essentialist and committed to breaking down traditional binaries. Deconstruction is a critical thought process in which the task is to locate and deconstruct, or take apart, those concepts which serve as the rules for a particular theory or narrative.

From a feminist standpoint, binary oppositions are linked to the polarization of male/female (Crotty, 1998). Examples of this are male over female, reason over emotion, mastery over submission. Lather (1992) asserts that in feminist postmodern thinking, binary, either/or positions are being replaced with a logic that is “both/and” (p. 90). This

both/and thinking is crucial in the area of identities, for it opens the possibility for simultaneity in defining self. In one application this would indicate an ability to express *both* heterosexuality *and* non-heterosexuality. Likewise the both/and construal creates opportunity to explore a variety of contextual issues such as ethnicity, class, or race that simultaneously impact a sense of self as well as options available in the environment. One can experience gender oppression *and* racial privilege. Thus, according to Lather, one lives in “webs of multiple representations of class, race, gender, language, and social relations.” (p. 101) Meanings can vary even within one individual over the course of a life.

Postmodern feminist theory is also concerned with the relationship between knowledge and power. There are multiple ways of knowing, and science, as it has been represented, is but one among many avenues to identity (Lather, 1992). Feminist postmodern theorists assert that historically, dominant groups have controlled the production of knowledge. This has been achieved through the access to institutions of higher learning, the media, as well as publications (Hare-Mustin, 1994). Olesen (2000) describes the postmodern feminist worldview as “a series of stories and texts that sustain the integration of power and oppression.” (p. 225) Thus, what remains silenced, unasked, unarticulated is as important to these theorists and researchers as the theory or text itself. Knowledge itself is interrogated. Postmodern feminists ask “Whose version of reality is raised to truth status?” and “for what purpose?” (Hare-Mustin, 2004, p. 17)

These questions are central to the current debate in the family therapy field about the meaning of marriage and family. The scholarly literature has promulgated the discourses of relationship and parenting as heterosexual. Yet since the late 1980s, some

family therapists have been integrating postmodern principles into their work (McFayden, 1997). Mills and Sprenkle (1995) attribute the postmodern evolution in family therapy to changes in ideas about the definition of family. The approaches most influenced by postmodernism include collaborative language systems (Anderson, 1995, 1997; Anderson & Goolishian, 1992) and narrative therapy (Freedman & Combs, 1993, 1996). A major translator of postmodern thought in family therapy is Michael White (1989, 1991, 1995; White & Epston, 1990). His narrative therapy is premised on the idea that lives and relationships are shaped by dominant knowledges and stories; the individual internalizes social discourses that define who they are as well as how they should live their lives. Narrative therapy helps clients to resist succumbing to the dominant stories, reauthoring their lives according to alternative or preferred stories of identity. Narrative therapists abandon their role as expert and position themselves instead in collaboration with clients endeavoring to create alternative and liberating narratives.

In this vein, feminist postmodern theory can be viewed as a mode of inquiry. Rather than search for truth these researchers inquire about the way that meanings are negotiated in daily life, the control over meanings by those in authority, and how meanings are represented in language (Hare-Mustin, 2004). There is an interest in the largely social nature of people and their surroundings, and what these interactions can or will permit (Shotter, 1992). An example of feminist postmodern inquiry is further demonstrated in the work of queer theorists (Sedgwick, 1990; Butler, 1990). Queer theorists reject both categories, heterosexual and homosexual, and, according to Gamson (2000) favor instead a queer identity, meaning an identity “always in flux” (p. 349). This

analysis does not focus on specific populations of gay or straight, but on the sexual categorization process itself. Queer theorists question the very categories of sexual identification (Sedgwick, 1990). They use the term queer to describe a broader identity that is more open and fluid, and which stands against the perceived rigidity of the categories of gay and lesbian, and male and female (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990). Research and theory shifted from examining the lives of lesbians and gays to “the ways the very homo/hetero distinction underpinned all aspects of contemporary life.” (Gamson, 2000, p. 354) The sexual categories themselves came under scrutiny, as well as the processes by which these categories were negotiated and deconstructed. Thus, from a feminist postmodern standpoint, research questions could be posed as to how sexual categories are created, and toward what end.

Sexuality studies began to focus on the politics and history of the categories themselves. Seidman (1996) explains:

Queer theorists view heterosexuality and homosexuality not simply as identities or social statuses, but as categories of knowledge. This is a normative language as it shapes moral boundaries and political hierarchies...Queer theory is suggesting that the study of homosexuality should not be a study of a minority – the making of the lesbian/gay/bisexual subject – but a study of those knowledges and social practices that organize “society” as a whole by sexualizing – heterosexualizing or homosexualizing – bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, culture, and social institutions. (pp. 12-13)

Feminist postmodernism provides the theoretical foundation for this

research project about the transition from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman. As this researcher moves to an examination of the scholarly literature, the critique provided by feminist postmodern theory will illuminate the heteronormative paradigm that has shaped research by defining the questions to be asked, and the rules within which to query.

The Concept known as Sexual Orientation: Conceptualizations and Research Biological Essentialism

The essentialist perspective on sexual orientation is grounded in the ontological tradition of realism and conveys the notion of a true, fixed reality. This reality is believed to exist whether or not it is seen or acknowledged; it exists, albeit dormant, awaiting discovery. When applied to sexual orientation, the essentialist perspective assumes that sexual orientation is a core, fixed, immutable aspect of one's identity. It is always present, even when it is not assigned meaning by the self or others (Bohan & Russell, 1999). In this paradigm, there are individuals who are fundamentally gay or lesbian, across culture and time, and the sex of one's partner becomes definitive of one's core character and being. This paradigm gave rise to early and influential models of sexual identity development, and continues to impact present day discourses.

Stage Models of Sexual Identity Development

Stage theories are located within a large body of literature that has dominated the discourse on human development. This discourse emphasizes the interior life of the individual, progressive linear movement through time, and the individual psychological resolution of crises (e.g. Freud, 1953; Kohlberg, 1969). Interestingly, these crises are at times described as dualities that must be resolved, eliminating one and choosing another (Erikson, 1959, 1968). This paradigm obscured the contextual variables of a person's

life, such as gender, economic circumstances or race, and implied both homogeneity and a static unchanging endpoint to the process of human development. Further, the solitary focus on the interior psyche prohibits an analysis of the multiple and simultaneous systems of power and oppression that would shape and direct an individual's behavior and choices.

It was from this template that stage theories of the coming out process were born. Major contributors to this body of literature include Cass (1979) and later, Coleman (1982), and Troiden (1989). Each of these theories was characterized by a linear format and was grounded in dualism and essentialism. In Cass's theory, the starting point is a heterosexual self, and movement through the various stages is prompted by the incongruency of homoerotic feelings. Coleman (1982) similarly describes the internal processes and outward behaviors in stage-related developmental tasks. Implicit in all of stage theory are the notions that sexual orientation forms at an early age, sexual attraction is involved, and the identity cannot be changed. Integration of a homosexual sense of self is linear and sequential and has a static endpoint.

The dissonance described by these authors was based in large part upon the social alienation presumed to be encountered when one comes out as gay or lesbian. All of these authors faced the challenge of incorporating ideas about homophobia and oppression in a theory that had limited analysis of the sociopolitical context. This was due to the fact that such theories were grounded in individualistic thinking about personal power and disregarded the significant impact of gender. Thus, they incorporated the notion of interacting with the environment, but that environment remained largely undefined and unspecified in terms of homophobia or oppression (Spaulding, 1999).

This lack of analysis led these authors to presume that the models were applicable to both men and women; this was problematic in that heterosexualized gender norms influenced this process differently for men than for women (Bohan & Russell, 1999).

The political benefit of positioning sexual orientation as biologically fixed is arguable, and this view has served as the organizational cornerstone for the lesbian and gay community (Haldeman, 1999). Yet empirical research has repeatedly failed to demonstrate that biological factors are a major influence in the development of female sexual orientation (Veniegas & Conley, 2000).

The cultural need to categorize and the linear and fixed trajectory that dominates theories of human development obstruct a view of sexual orientation that is more fluid and subject to change over time. Such a position would challenge the dominant discourses and scholarship that saturate our culture, and could potentially inflame an already homophobic climate. Haldeman (1999) makes an important case, though, when he questions the validity of the recent research into the biological causes of homosexuality:

Studying the causes of lesbian, gay, and bisexual orientations, however, reinforces the incorrect assumption that there is something wrong with them in the first place. Does it really make a difference even if it were possible to discover a physiological basis? Doesn't this search for a biological 'cause' open the door to a biological 'cure'? How about putting an equivalent amount of effort into determining the causes of bigotry, which seems to be the primary problem affecting LGB individuals? (p. 61)

The Problem with Categories

It is from the essentialist tradition that the binary categories of heterosexual/homosexual have been constructed, and that the lesbian/heterosexual identities have been positioned diametrically. This remains the dominant contemporary narrative, despite both past and present evidence to the contrary. For example, the work of Kinsey and colleagues over fifty years ago (Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948) depicted this binary construal of sexual orientation as seriously flawed. These researchers found a range of self reported experiences that could change over time. Since that time others have expanded upon this work. Shiveley and DeCecco (1977) and Storms (1980) proposed two continua, heterosexuality and homosexuality, and argued that they were separate dimensions. Shiveley and DeCecco attended to the issue of affectational attraction and noted that this could be present with or without same or opposite sexual attraction. Klein, Sepekoff and Wolf (1985) proposed a model that recognized sexuality as both a dynamic and multivariate process. These researchers asked respondents to reply to questions based on their past, present and ideal situations in response to a number of variables such as sexual attraction, behavior and fantasies, emotional and social preferences, and hetero/gay lifestyle. The results indicated that sexual orientation is not static over time and revealed the inadequacy of the labels hetero/homo in describing an individual's sexual orientation. Taken as a whole, this body of research renders the idea of discrete categories for sexual identification as without much merit.

Rothblum (2000) pointed out that in a categorical definition of sexual orientation behavior, desire, and identity are assumed to be congruent. Yet research does not bear

this out. In the National Health and Social Life Survey, (Laumann, Gagnon, Michaels & Michaels, 1994) probability sampling was used to survey over 3000 adults; the results indicated a low correlation among sexual behavior, desire, and identity. Further, the longer the period of time covered in respondents comments, the fewer respondents reported having sex with only same-sex partners.

Employing the dualistic categories heterosexual woman/lesbian woman further implies a homogeneity to each. Intrinsic in this categorical paradigm is an assumption of uniformity of experience that highlights similarity along a singular dimension – that of sex and gender of sexual partner. Sex of partner becomes the defining characteristic that obliterates other crucial dimensions of the woman's life, such as age, race, and social class, as well as one's sense of self and self concept.

In reviewing national surveys, Rust (2000) found that bisexual behavior is more common than exclusively same sex behavior, especially for women. Importantly, she found that there is considerable overlap in the actual sexual experiences of individuals who identify as bisexual, lesbian, heterosexual, or gay. That is, sexual behavior did not correlate to sexual identity. She also found that women are more likely than men to use multiple identities at the same time. In another review of major scientific findings about womens' sexuality and sexual orientation, Peplau and Garnets (2000) found that female sexuality is more flexible than male sexuality and is more likely to vary over the course of the life cycle. Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) reported in their research (N=100; N=164) that women are more likely to identify in ways that are inconsistent with their sexual behavior. In fact, Peplau and Garnets (2000) proposed that sexual fluidity is the cornerstone for understanding and theorizing about women's sexuality. The lack of

congruence between women's sexual behavior and reported desire implies that sexual behavior per se may not be what is most important to women and may not define their sexual orientation. This is an issue of significance, since sexual behavior has been employed in the majority of research as the measure of one's sexual identity. Thus, the constructs of heterosexual and lesbian, situated as mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed categories, bear little resemblance to the reality and complexity of individual lives. The experience of a woman is indeed more intricate than this polarized dichotomy would suggest.

Gender and Sexual Orientation

Bem (1993) also pointed to the inadequacies of binary categories, and built upon the notion of polarization as it relates to gender. In the paradigm of biological essentialism, gender and the concepts of masculinity and femininity are viewed as intrinsic, innate components of self. In the late 19th century, social scientists generated theories concerning the innate biological origins of male/female difference. The categories of masculinity and femininity became positioned as mutually exclusive and diametrically opposed, much in the same way as the hetero/homo construal of sexuality.

For example, the inversion model of homosexuality (Ellis, 1928; Krafft-Ebing, 1950) stipulated that lesbian women were masculine in their personality, their attractions to women, and even their physiology. In this view the distinction between lesbianism and heterosexuality was a *gendered* distinction. Heterosexual women were believed to be feminine, and as Rust (2000) pointed out, it was this belief in the "mutual exclusivity of womanhood and manhood and the inescapable impact of gender that produced concepts of gendered eroticism, and also the belief that sexual attraction must be directed toward

either men or women.” (p. 215) Thus the distinction between lesbian and heterosexual became powerfully gendered, which fostered and sustained the notion of a distinct boundary between lesbian and heterosexual women. In this paradigm, the potential for a feminine woman to love a feminine woman simply does not exist. According to Bem (1993) it was this theorizing about gender deviance that gave rise to the tradition of gender polarization and subsequently, extreme heterosexism.

The inversion model has been refuted (Peplau, Spalding, Conley & Veniegas, 1999); there is no correlation found between heterosexuality and femininity or lesbianism and masculinity in women. Nor is there any correlation found between gender conformity and sexual orientation in women (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). The idea, for example, that far more lesbians than heterosexuals were tomboys in their youth is unsupported by scholarly research.

Some scholars have sought to understand the purpose of adherence to these binary categories despite the growing body of evidence to the contrary. For example, Bohan and Russell (1999) cited the work of Sampson (1993) who argued that establishing distinct lines of group membership functions to serve those in power. By constructing identities for people who depart from the heterosexual norm, heterosexuality, an abstract concept, is rendered real and importantly, normal. This fosters the perpetual reproduction of heterosexual normativity. Hare-Mustin (1991) asserted that categories of difference ultimately lead to hierarchies, with some superior and others deficient. By minimizing similarities in lesbian and heterosexual women, focusing only on their difference, lesbian women and heterosexual women remain in mutually exclusive categories with heterosexuality as superior. Such a categorical

conceptualization cannot contain the body of data that speaks to the fluidity of women's sexuality over time. Yet the dominant narratives remain categorical and static.

Female Sexuality: Androcentrism, Research and Theory

The impact of androcentrism accounts for the invisibility of women's distinct sexual experience in the academic literature. Androcentrism is defined as the privileging of males, male experience and the male perspective (Bem, 1993). The male is the standard against which all others are measured. Thus the male sexual standard, which focuses on sexual behavior and sex that is genitally defined, is assumed to represent female sexuality as well. Since androcentrism has permeated virtually all psychological research and theory (Bem, 1993) the experience of women has been represented as somehow deviant from the norm, or rendered invisible. This applies to the dominant theories in the literature on sexual orientation and include, for example, stage theories of the coming out process. Androcentric thought applies to the very measurement of sexual identity, genital sex, even though that is not necessarily how women construct their sexual identities.

An example of the complexity of researching aspects of sexuality is found in the recent work of Baumeister (2000). Building upon the data that indicated the fluidity of women's sexuality, Baumeister sought to examine sex differences in what he called erotic plasticity. He used the term erotic plasticity to refer to "the degree to which a person's sex drive can be shaped and altered by cultural and social factors, from formal socialization to social pressures." (p. 348) He proposed that compared to male sexuality, female sexuality is more socially flexible and responsive. Baumeister hypothesized that the sexuality of adult women is more responsive to changing conditions. He analyzed the

data from Lauman, Gagnon, Michael and Michaels (1994) National Health and Social Life Service survey and found religion, education and acculturation more likely to influence female sexuality than male sexuality. Critics have noted however, that female sexual flexibility may be due more to power and sex role differentials than socio-cultural influences (Hyde & Durik, 2000).

Diamond and Savin-Williams (2000) explored the varying trajectories of lesbian sexuality. This research did not compare women and men, or seek differences in their milestones or trajectories. Their data consisted of two independent studies. The first was a longitudinal study of the sexual attractions, behaviors and stated identities of approximately 90 women between the ages of 16 and 23, first interviewed ten years ago, then at two-year intervals (Diamond, 1998, 2000a, 2000b). The second was a study of 78 female and 86 male non-heterosexuals between the ages of 17 and 25 (Savin-Williams, 1998). A standardized, qualitative interview protocol was used to examine the “quality and context of sexual identity milestones, not just their timing.” (Diamond & Savin Williams, 2000, p. 76) In analyzing their findings, the authors contend that variability in both the emergence and expression of same sex desire for women over the course of the life cycle is normative and is best explained by the interaction between personal and environmental contexts.

Peplau, Spaulding, Conley and Veniegas (1999) used the term “intimate career” (p. 86) to refer to both the sequencing and the patterning of women’s relationships over time. Emphasizing the formation of same and other-sex bonds, this model recognizes that sexual orientation can change over the course of the life cycle, and that the pathways

to identities are multiply determined and diverse. A career analogy recognizes that like job categories, sexual identities available in society change over time.

Researchers have suggested that love and intimacy are important components in understanding women's sexuality (Golden, 1996). Emotional intimacy often has a central role in women's sexual experiences, and researchers asserted that this is crucial to acknowledge and analyze (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Rust (2000) suggested that women may be more likely to construct identities based on components other than sexual behaviors and feelings. Peplau and Garnets (2000) stated:

If we were to conceptualize sexual orientation on the basis of women's experiences, we might well rename it relational orientation and then note that eroticism can be a vital component of intimate relationships. In summary, an adequate understanding of women's sexuality and sexual orientation will require a shift away from focusing on sexual behavior toward studying erotic relationships. (p. 110)

The diversity of women's experience has lead scholars to propose different typologies in identifying distinctive types of women. There does seem to be a distinction between those women who knew early in life that they were somehow different from the heterosexual norm. Golden (1987) explored the diversity and variability in women's self defined sexual identities and questioned whether sex between women was central to the definition of being a lesbian. In her interviews with college-aged women, Golden found a major distinction between those who felt their lesbianism was essentially beyond their control and those who felt it was consciously chosen. She proposed the categories of primary and elective lesbian. Within the category of elective lesbian, Golden found two

distinctive sub-patterns. Some women viewed their lesbianism as a strong feeling about their essential nature, and interpreted past heterosexual experience as inconsistent with their seemingly real selves. Other elective lesbians did not experience contradiction with prior heterosexual experience, and did not feel the need to reinterpret or reconstruct their past. Blumstein and Schwartz (1976) found a similar group of women in their research. They interviewed a number of women who transitioned to lesbian relationships after “a very long and quite satisfactory period in the former category.” (p. 172)

Jennes (1992) hypothesized that sexual identity development was the process of reassessing the particular categories available in terms of the applicability of their meanings over time. One could begin to identify as lesbian when one’s experiences fit one’s understanding of the meanings attached to a particular category.

The word lesbian can thus have a variety of meanings. Rich (1980) proposed the lesbian continuum, which viewed all facets of women-bonding as lesbian. Kitzinger (1987) focused on the political meanings of lesbianism and the connection to traditional gender roles. Some women described becoming a lesbian as a political choice, and as an expression of feminist politics (Golden, 1987, 1994; Stein, 1997).

Rather than being driven by sexual urges, a substantial number of women feel they choose to become involved with another woman for various other reasons. Whisman (1996) found that some women did not feel they were attracted to other women until they discovered the existence of lesbianism. This happened by meeting a lesbian woman or reading about lesbian relationships. Other researchers found that women chose to partner with other women in the hope of attaining a more egalitarian and emotionally intimate relationship (Rosenbluth, 1997). The defining features of the

category lesbian, as well as the trajectories to attaining that identity can vary tremendously from woman to woman.

In summary, there is a small but growing body of work that positions women as central to the research question instead of being contrasted to men. Although some data is available that examines the impact of contextual factors such as age and education, much more is necessary to understand the interplay between those complex processes. Also, the role of class, ethnicity and religion are poorly understood.

Some researchers have proposed an agenda that spans from childhood to old age and noted that early antecedents of women's sexuality have been overlooked. For example, Peplau and Garnets (2000) encouraged the examination of personality characteristics such as independence or risk taking, hypothesizing that lesbians may be women more willing to engage in risk taking behavior. Little is known also about how children come to form the concept of sexual orientation.

Moving Out of a Heterosexual Marriage

The study of moving out of heterosexual marriage is complicated by a number of factors, not the least of which is the fact that some of the people attracted to or acting upon same-sex relationships have labeled themselves as gay, lesbian or bisexual before and during the marriage and some have not. Nonetheless, from the 1970s to the 1980s there were numerous studies published that explored the lives of gay and bisexual men married to heterosexual women (Bell & Weinberg, 1978; Gochros, 1985; Latham & White, 1978; Wyers, 1987). These studies focused on why gay men married in the first place, their experiences in marriage, and the effects of their actions on their wives. The

experience of the heterosexually married woman who then becomes a lesbian is virtually absent from the early material.

The more recent data available on the crisis of coming out while heterosexually married can be organized into several genres. One is the popular, more narrative depiction that relates personal stories with little or no theoretical underpinning or scholarly analysis. This would include, for example, popular books such as *And Then I Met This Woman: Previously Married Women's Journeys into Lesbian Relationships* (Cassingham & O'Neil, 1998), and *From Wedded Wife to Lesbian Life: Stories of Transformation* (Abbott & Farmer, 1995). Other books that analyze the subject are infused with a decidedly essentialist viewpoint; for example in *The Other Side of the Closet: The Coming Out Crisis for Straight Spouses and Families* (Buxton, 1994) couples are labeled as sexual mismatches and individuals must take on the 'true' bisexual or homosexual identity.

In *Lesbian Epiphanies: Women Coming Out in Later Life* (Jensen, 1999) the author denotes a lesbian solely by her sexual proclivities. She presents material from in-depth interviews with twenty-four women who identified as lesbian after a heterosexual marriage. The author states: "It is my position that women either have the predilection or capacity for sexual attraction to their same gender or they do not have it. They may choose to act on it or not, but they do not 'become lesbian,' as if all women may be likely to choose this path." (p. 5) Implicit in this narrative is the notion that a true self was dormant, hidden, denied or suppressed. This essentialist focus indicates that prior heterosexual relationships are somehow inauthentic. One of the dominant themes is of women being out of touch with major aspects of themselves. Thus, from an essentialist

perspective, there is a single or correct sexual orientation. If an individual transitions from heterosexuality as an adult, the assumption is made that he or she was *always* gay, thus rendering their personal history as false (Bohan & Russell, 1999).

This essentialist posture also applies to the difference between same-sex and opposite-sex extra marital affairs or remarriage. As Laird (1999) observed, the married person who engages in extramarital same-sex sexuality is virtually forced into a shift in primary sexual identity. According to the preponderance of scholars, researchers and clinicians in this field, the person is now fundamentally different. The spouse's sense of reality can be destroyed. Laird stated: "Both husband and wife, limited by the narratives in the cultural surround, suddenly rush to label the offending spouse as really bisexual or gay or lesbian, a situation that differs markedly from the heterosexual affair." (p. 22)

French (1992) studied what happened between couples as one became aware of his or her gay/lesbian identity. In her small and uneven sample, (16 heterosexual women, 20 gay men, 7 lesbian women, 4 heterosexual men), French acknowledged first "the complexity and diversity of their loves, sexualities, and marriages." (p. 88) As she interviewed couples about the strategies employed as they negotiated the transition, four themes emerged that were categorized as distinguishable turning points. In the beginning, these couples showed very little difference from many heterosexual marriages. All of the gay men in her sample said they had questioned their sexuality prior to marriage, and the women "had their lesbianism revealed to them only during the marriage." (p. 88) When a spouse became aware of his or her gay or lesbian identity, he or she made decisions about telling their partner. In each case, the partner's reaction was similar: they were reluctant to acknowledge that the shift in sexuality was the source of

their marital difficulties, and assigned it instead to financial difficulties, work, or the children. When this issue could no longer be denied, all were thrown into crisis and turmoil, confronted with a situation they never expected. French described this turning point as very painful and distressing, and noted that couples employed diverse strategies to deny that their marital difficulties were due to the partner's same-sex attraction. This process was particularly difficult for the women in her study, because "they were negotiating a shift in their sexual identity, not only for the first time, but also as married women and for some as mothers." (p. 93) They were acutely aware of the risks they faced, most stressful being the possibility of losing their homes and children. Couples then began to make choices about open marriage, remaining married with no sexual relationship, or divorce. Interestingly, the gay men preferred to stay married; it was their wives who opted for divorce. Some couples continued to provide financial, emotional and practical support to each other even after their marriages had ended.

Charbonneau and Lander (1991) conducted a survey of thirty women who had changed their sexual orientation in midlife. They pointed out that in our culture, midlife is generally viewed as a time to reevaluate one's life, a time to think about changing careers or partners. Their purpose was to explore the social dynamics involved in the process of change, particularly to illuminate aspects of the social context that were supportive. The authors found that participants had not questioned their heterosexual identities until a variety of events prompted them to do so. Most participants had been involved in political or social justice work, and reported being somewhat used to seeing themselves as outsiders. They described the changes in this transition as enormous. Almost all of the women recalled specific events that framed the change, whether it was

falling in love with a woman, being involved in the women's movement, or specific life cycle events, such as death of a parent, a divorce, or returning to school. The authors cited two themes that emerged regarding how the participants explained this transition: either as choice or self discovery. Those that understood it as self discovery felt they had always been lesbians, but had not known it; those who felt it was a choice had a more political attitude toward the transition. That is, they were actively seeking more egalitarian relationships, and over time, ended up with a same-sex partner. This data is consistent with Golden's (1987) research with college-aged women, and her findings of primary and elective lesbians.

Colucci-Coritt (2004) examined the phenomenological experience of women who came out as lesbian while heterosexually married. Seven women were interviewed to gain insight into what the process was like as well as what were the emotional and practical challenges. All of the women in her study described the intense inner conflict of two life cycle events occurring simultaneously: coming out as a lesbian and separating from their husbands. Several of the women spoke about continuing to care about their husbands and experiencing great pain that they were hurting them. All expressed a fear of losing custody of their children. Like Jensen (1999), Colucci-Coritt found that women saw heterosexual marriage as inevitable and lacked any role models to help navigate the transition. Their intense shame for disrupting the family system, coupled with fear about others' responses to their being lesbian added layers of complexity and emotional pain. Even though all of the women in Colucci-Coritt's study reported being attracted to women prior to heterosexual marriage, they also had lingering questions about the level of satisfaction in their heterosexual marriage. Specifically they wondered

whether they would have come out as a lesbian if they had been more satisfied and fulfilled in their marriages.

Existing data thus supports that many women appear to have a more fluid sense of themselves and their sexuality over time. Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) pointed out that this has long been apparent in the literature, but had yet to be explicitly theorized. In a fascinating piece of research that attempted to explore the psychological processes involved for women in making the transition from heterosexuality to lesbianism *without* resorting to essentialist models, these researchers interviewed 80 white, middle class women. Criteria for inclusion in the study were that participants reported being actively heterosexual for a minimum of ten years, having no sense of doubt about being heterosexual during this period, and claiming a current identity as lesbian, with or without sexual experience with women. The aim of the research was to examine the creation of a context in which sexual identity transitions became possible. The authors began with the assumption that such choices, rather than driven by biology or the emergence of a true self, could be viewed as “influenced by a mixture of personal reevaluation, practical necessity, political values, chance, and opportunity.” (p. 189) They attempted to understand how women construct, negotiate, and interpret their transition from heterosexuality to lesbianism.

Their results were organized under three categories: Interestingly, they began with barriers and resistances to identifying as a lesbian, which captured the cultural context of heteronormativity. The first theme that emerged was compulsory heterosexuality, and participants discussed negotiating an identity they were taught to avoid. A majority of the women spoke of the invisibility and silence that surrounded the issue as well as the

perception of lesbianism as abnormal or perverse. Other themes in this category included the experience of multiple oppressions, such as race, ethnicity, class, age or disability, and blocking it out, just refusing to allow themselves to ask the question about being a lesbian. Others used rationalizations, such as, “We’re just good friends”, or, “It’s just a phase.”

The second category was making and describing the transition to lesbian identity. Over three quarters of the sample described having sex or falling in love with a woman as the marker of their transition to lesbianism. Yet the authors extracted an important theme that denoted the need for acknowledging a passion for another woman to claim a lesbian identity. This entailed not only having sex with another woman, as one could do and still not identify as lesbian. Rather it entailed remembering fragmented experiences, and naming them to form a coherent whole. Often women recalled same-sex experiences that they had forgotten about or minimized. In this description, several typical features emerged: a moment of essential awakening, or recognition, exuberance, and seeing the world anew. It was experienced by the majority of women as a very dramatic change. Although these depictions were positive, the acknowledgement was not without conflicting emotions: on the one hand, a sense of relief was expressed and, simultaneously, the fear of its implications. The social circles these women once moved in as heterosexuals were perceived by many as closed; they described a painful sense of being outsiders in a world in which they once felt at home. Many women experienced profound grief and loss of relationships with spouses and family.

The authors pointed out that many women who learned to identify as heterosexual recount and reinterpret their previous feelings for women within a different framework.

Although, similar to the previously cited work of Charbonneau and Lander (1991), the participants in Kitzinger and Wilkinson's study used the language of self discovery, these researchers proposed that it is better understood as self-reconstruction. This researcher thinks the use of language is significant here in the nuanced meanings of the terms discovery and reconstruction. Something discovered is previously not known, and in this context is usually found unexpectedly or accidentally. Discovery also implies something was there, dormant, yet essential and real prior to awareness. A self-reconstruction is a remodeling or rebuilding that implies intention and necessitates agency on the part of the individual. Each of these depictions imparts a different narrative of sexual identity development.

Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995) further noted that completing the transition to a lesbian identity does not mean attaining a static identity. That is, a woman continues to discover what being a lesbian means, and how she wants to live her life. "In an important sense, she becomes lesbian, and then yet more lesbian." (p. 198)

Finally, almost all of the women reported that one of the first things they became aware of as lesbians was the oppression they now faced, as well as a new understanding of the privileges that are garnered from a heterosexual identity.

The above studies indicate the enormity of the emotional processes associated with moving out of heterosexual marriage and partnering with a woman in midlife. Two significant transitions occur at the same time: questioning identity, and separation and divorce. Researchers note the enormous emotional struggles as a woman negotiates this change, with herself as well as family and community.

The issue of coming out to one's children after being known as a heterosexual mother is almost completely absent from the family therapy literature. In one small study, O'Connell (1999) explores the experiences of adolescents whose mother came out as a lesbian either before or after divorce. Eleven young adults between the ages of sixteen and twenty-three were studied by using an open ended interview with a questionnaire guide. The researcher was interested in knowing what their experience was like, particularly as it impacted their feelings about friendship and sexuality. O'Connell found that the younger the child at the time of disclosure, the greater level of both acceptance and comfort; disclosure at early or mid adolescence elicited more intense responses such as shock and disbelief. Common themes that emerged included feelings of loyalty and protection toward their mother, the fear of losing friends and being judged, confusion about sexuality and fear of being gay or lesbian. Secret keeping was another common theme, although this was related to the mother's comfort level with her lesbian identity: a higher comfort level in the mother was correlated with more openness on the part of the children. All of the subjects reported benefits of having a lesbian mother, most notably an increased understanding of prejudice. Most of the subjects interviewed related that their parents' divorce was more significant than their mother's sexual orientation.

Lesbians as Mothers: Research

The term mother implies heterosexuality and as such the lesbian mother challenges the dominant discourse about women and parenting. Romans (1992) suggests that the lesbian mother "presents a threat: she challenges the dominant ideologies of gender, motherhood, and family which together are felt to contribute significantly toward

the stability of society.” (p. 99) Weston (1991) points out lesbian mother is an oxymoron insofar as it joins a sexual identity (lesbian) with a procreative identity (mother). Indeed, Martin and Lyon’s (1972) description of the cultural perception of lesbians as “hard, sophisticated female(s)” (p. 23) stands in stark contrast to the discourse on mothers. Maternal behavior is typically thought of as tender, nurturing, gentle, feminine. Thus, the term lesbian mother automatically invokes homophobic comparisons to the heterosexual mother, and positions the sexual orientation of the lesbian mother as the decisive and salient characteristic of her parenting.

The research in this area is dominated by a defensive posture necessitated by the heteronormative, homophobic climate of our culture. The reason for conducting research in this area originally was to empirically evaluate the basis on which lesbian mothers were commonly denied custody of their children. The two main concerns expressed regarding the children of lesbian mothers were: 1. that they would be bullied and ostracized by peers, developing psychological problems, and 2. that they would show atypical gender development, such that boys would be less masculine and girls less feminine than boys and girls from heterosexual families (Tasker & Golombok, 1997). The common assumption was that children would have difficulties in four developmental areas: family relationships, psychological adjustment, psychosexual development, and peer relationships (Tasker, 2002).

The first studies of lesbian and gay parenting were published in the early 1980s and focused on evaluating the psychological well being of school-aged children with lesbian mothers (Golombok, Spencer & Rutter, 1983; Green, Mandel, Hotvedt, Gray & Smith, 1986; Kirkpatrick, Smith, & Ror, 1981). These women became mothers in the

context of heterosexual marriages, later identified as lesbian, and managed to retain custody of their children following separation or divorce. Their children were compared to children brought up by single heterosexual mothers. Findings from the studies revealed no statistically significant differences between the children in the lesbian and heterosexual families on any of the interview or questionnaire measures of psychological adjustment. None of the children were confused about their gender identity and no differences in gender role behavior were found. On the basis of these studies it was concluded that children of lesbian mothers were not developmentally disadvantaged (Golombok & Tasker, 1994; Patterson, 1992, 1995).

Allen and Burrell (1996) summarized the available quantitative literature comparing the impact of heterosexual and gay/lesbian parents. In their meta-analysis of the existing data, the authors examined parenting practices, the emotional well being of the child, and the sexual orientation of the child. Once again, the results demonstrated no differences on any measures between the heterosexual and gay/lesbian parents regarding parenting styles, emotional adjustment and sexual orientation of the children. Allen and Burrell state clearly, “The data fail to support the continuation of bias against homosexual parents by any court.” (p. 19) Similarly, Patterson (2004a) summarized research findings and concluded as well that there was no evidence to support bias against gay and lesbian parents.

The Discourse of Lesbian and Gay Parenting: Children are “No different” and “Normal”

The children of gay and lesbian parents are represented in the literature in a fairly consistent language that, as mentioned, highlights similarity when compared to children of heterosexual parents. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) analyzed this tendency toward

similarity in an article entitled “(How) Does the Sexual Orientation of Parents Matter?” Researchers, they contend, are bound by the presumption that governs the debate about gay and lesbian parenting; namely, that healthy child development depends upon parenting by a married heterosexual couple. The pervasiveness of this climate exerts “a powerful policing effect on the basic terms of the psychological research and public discourse on the significance of parental sexual orientation.” (p. 160) Because anti-gay rhetoric would seek evidence of harm to children, researchers that are sympathetic to gay parenting defensively stress its absence. “With rare exception, even the most sympathetic proceed from a highly defensive posture that accepts heterosexual parenting as the gold standard and investigates whether lesbigay parents and their children are inferior.” (p. 162) This implicitly places the burden on gay and lesbian mothers and fathers to prove that they are no less successful than heterosexual parents. Thus, they must stress similarity and, consequently, the mandate is set to find no difference between the two groups. This difference equals deficit discourse is a direct result of the way in which heterosexism has operated to shape and constrain this research. As long as sexual orientation can be used against parents to deny custody, the discourse around difference remains problematic and highly charged. However, Stacey and Biblarz encourage scholars to move beyond what they perceive as a reticence to theorize at all, and take advantage of the opportunity to learn from these families. They cite the implausibility of the no difference findings, and point out that any theory of sexual development would consider a parent’s sexual orientation. They conclude that children of lesbian and gay parents do differ in what they call “modest and interesting ways” (p. 178) from children with heterosexual parents. For example, children raised by lesbian parents have a more

expanded gender repertoire, are more tolerant of diversity, and seem to grow up to be more open to homoerotic relationships. They note that these differences are not causal but are indirect effects of other variables associated with heterosexist conditions under which lesbian and gay families currently live.

The discourse of comparing gay and lesbian families to heterosexual families is also explored by Clarke (2002). In her analysis of how these families are portrayed she examines the normalizing strategy. This strategy consists of emphasizing sameness and downplaying difference through the use of specific language produced to counter negative depictions of lesbian and gay parenting. For example, the adage “Parents don’t matter, so long as the child feels loved” emphasizes love and security over family structure. Emphasizing ordinariness highlights the similarities between the everyday lives of gay/lesbian and heterosexual families. This strategy suggests that gay/lesbian families are normal because they share the ubiquitous qualities associated with the day to day reality of family life, making gay/lesbian families more familiar and comprehensible. It also provides a powerful contrast to the stereotypes of gay and lesbian life as exotic and different. To address fears about the development of children, the strategy of highlighting compensations for deficits is employed. This entails listing the many available men or women to act as compensatory role models in the life of the child.

Clarke not only critiques this normalizing construction but evaluates possibilities inherent in advancing lesbian and gay rights in the public domain. The benefits of this strategy, she asserts, include making gay/lesbian families recognizable in the world. In assimilating to the heterosexual norm rather than challenging it, normalizing strategies allow lesbian and gay parents to participate in public debates; the safety of normalizing

does not kindle fears. However, the tone of normalizing discourse is fundamentally defensive, thus reinforcing the pre-eminence of heterosexual families. To respond to concerns, for example, about the lack of a male in a child's life, lesbian mothers in the normalizing discourse offer compensation rather than a critique of men's contribution to family life. To abandon this normalizing discourse would mean articulating a challenge to traditional family values. Clarke notes that more radical constructions of gay and lesbian parenting are rarely articulated and do not become part of the discourse about families.

Dunne (2000) asserted that the ways in which lesbian parents prioritize egalitarian ideals offer a basic challenge to the organization of gender. Lesbian co-mothers "redefine the meaning and content of motherhood, extending its boundaries to incorporate the activities that are usually dichotomized as mother and father." (p. 25)

The Lesbian and Gay Family

In our culture, family usually means blood relatedness and legal marriage. Yet as Weston (1991) points out, gay and lesbian families do not fit any tidy division of kinship into relations of blood or marriage. They choose their families, retaining blood ties and combining the elements of choice and love. Tasker (2002) discussed the variety of parenting arrangements in families led by a gay or lesbian parent, and noted that many lesbians and gay men have made regular commitments to caring for children who do not live with them and who are not biologically related to them.

The definition of a gay/lesbian family is further complicated by the fact that there is no clear demarcation between heterosexual and gay families. As Laird (2003) points out, gay/lesbian families usually have one or more heterosexual members, and

heterosexual families can have one or more gay members. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) discuss the virtual impossibility of gathering reliable demographic data on such basic questions as the number of gay/lesbian parents, or the number of children residing with them.

Visible lesbian and gay parenthood is a relatively new phenomenon and most studies are of children of a transitional generation of lesbian and gays who became parents in the context of heterosexual marriage. Once again it is almost impossible to separate the impact of a separation and divorce and possible remarriage from a parent's sexual orientation. Because many more formerly married lesbian mothers retain custody following divorce, the small amount of research available is actually on post-divorce lesbian motherhood.

In the only longitudinal study to date, Tasker and Golombok (1997) reinterviewed the children in their original study as young adults, the mean age being 23.5 years. They sought to provide data about long term developmental outcomes, in the four areas outlined in the previous research: family relationships, mental health, peer relationships, and psychosexual development. Once again these now young adults were compared to those of heterosexual mothers. The children of the lesbian mothers were no more likely to have sought mental health services, and did not report higher levels of anxiety or depression. As young adults, children of lesbian mothers were more likely to be proud of their mother's sexual identity compared to those raised by heterosexual mothers. Young people from lesbian mother families were no more likely to be teased or bullied when compared with the other group. Over half of the young adults from the lesbian led families were able to inform at least one close friend who did not react negatively. Even

when unable to tell friends, the young adults did not report that it inhibited their social life, as in having friends over to their home (Tasker, 2002).

Golombok and Tasker (1997) reported that no differences were found in the groups regarding those who had felt same sex attractions. However, those who had grown up in a lesbian led family were more likely to consider the possibility of having lesbian or gay relationships. Although the vast majority of children of lesbian and gay parents grow up to be heterosexual (Bailey & Dawood, 1998), these findings suggest that parental attitudes are important in broadening the child's thinking about sexual identity.

The findings of this longitudinal study also lend insight into the dynamics of lesbian coparents as compared to heterosexuals in remarried families. In Tasker and Golombok's study, 85% of the heterosexual mothers and 88% of the lesbian mothers cohabited or remarried, which meant that most of the sons and daughters experienced growing up in a stepfamily. Hall and Kitson (2000) noted that most knowledge about stepfamilies is limited to heterosexual partnering; even though many lesbian mothers form committed relationships with a new partner, the partner-child relationship is invisible and ignored in the literature. These authors applied Cherlin's (1978) model of stepfamilies as incomplete institutions to lesbian led stepfamilies, underscoring the role of heterosexism and homophobia in the lack of institutionalization. Two key elements that serve to institutionalize in Cherlin's model are language and the law. Hall and Kitson described the lack of agreement by families, researchers and clinicians alike about what to even call the partner/stepparent in lesbian stepfamilies. The lack of legal status further negated the legitimacy of lesbian stepfamilies.

Yet despite these obstacles, these families appear to do quite well. Brown (1989) used the concept of normative creativity to describe the ability of gay and lesbian couples to create norms and boundaries where none exist. The lack of clear rules about how to be gay or lesbian or form such a family often compelled creative solutions not available in the dominant structure.

In Tasker and Golombok's (1997) follow-up study, young adults from lesbian mother families reported more positive relationships with their mother's female partner than others did with stepfathers. They further described a greater flexibility in the way the lesbian partner joined the family when compared to a heterosexual stepparent. The new lesbian partner was less likely than the new heterosexual partner to have a clearly defined role in the child's life when initially moving into the home. Although the lack of definition sometimes caused stress in the lesbian stepfamilies, it also meant that the relationship between the child and stepparent could evolve in a fashion and pace regulated by their particular needs. "Thus", Tasker concludes, "the lack of prescriptive roles in lesbian led families may help to accommodate additional family members." (p. 87) When assessing the involvement of the non biological parent in the lives of the children, non biological mothers in lesbian led families played a more active role in daily caregiving than did most fathers in heterosexual families (Tasker, 2002). Other research indicates that lesbian couples want to share parenting and find a more equitable balance to the work/home equation than do most heterosexual couples with children (Dunne, 1998).

In studying the ways in which women allocate work and parenting, Dunne (2000) found that the mothering experiences that lesbian women are opting into are *qualitatively*

different from those in heterosexual coparenting. That is, mothering is usually carried out in a context where mothers experience a great deal of practical and emotional support from their partners, routine domestic responsibilities are shared, and there is a mutual recognition of a woman's right to an identity beyond the home. Without the prescriptive gender divisions of labor, both within and outside of the home, these lesbian co-mothers have greater latitude to operationalize their egalitarian ideals, particularly in relation to parenting. Dunne states:

In their everyday lives of nurturing, housework, and breadwinning, respondents provide viable alternative models for parenting beyond heterosexuality...Their positioning outside conventionality and the similarities they share as women enable and indeed insist upon the redefinition of the meaning and content of motherhood. (p. 32)

Summary

In this literature review, research has been presented related to all facets of the transition of a woman, with children, who leaves heterosexual marriage to partner with another woman. Theory and data regarding the binary and gendered construal of sexual identities, and stage theories of sexual identity development have been reviewed, as well as data on moving out of heterosexual marriage. Research on gay and lesbian parenting has been presented along with the discourses that impact such research. Existing data on gay and lesbian families has been reviewed, specifically the experiences of lesbian stepfamilies, and lesbians as co-parents. This literature review has been situated within the culture of heteronormativity, and the subsequent impact on research and theory has been discussed.

The concept known as sexual identity is built upon several premises. This includes the notion that one's sexual attractions and behaviors are intrinsically linked to a core identity and sense of self. In this paradigm, as Foucault (1978) pointed out, sexual acts do not remain acts but become the defining component of identity. In the essentialist tradition, sexual identity has been viewed as a fixed and static component of an individual. Models of identity are largely based upon membership in particular groups, and within this perspective identities are constructed within sexual and gender binaries (McPhail, 2004).

The notion of sexual identity as a fixed core aspect of oneself is inconsistent with emerging data about women's sexuality, yet remains firmly embedded in the dominant discourses on identities. This essentialist perspective fails to address the experiences of women, and the documented fluidity of their sexuality, family life, and relationships over time. The study of women's sexuality has been particularly hindered by androcentric tendencies that position male as the norm. Recent data indicates that women are relational in their sexuality. Rather than being pathological, the variability and expression of same sex desire over the life cycle is normative. Peplau, Spaulding, Conley and Veniegas (2000) asserted that future models of sexuality will give credence to a wide range of sociocultural factors that influence sexual orientation, not just the traditional androcentric measure of sexual activity.

The positioning of women as either lesbian or heterosexual and as binary gendered opposites is seriously flawed. Research indicates that behavior, identity and desire are not congruent, and that women's sexuality is fluid over time. No single factor

reliably predicts whether a woman becomes lesbian or heterosexual; trajectories are multiply determined.

The assumption remains that women who make the transition to lesbianism were really lesbians all along, and denied or suppressed that knowledge. Prior heterosexual marriage is viewed as inauthentic. Research, infused with an essentialist perspective, has focused on the assignment into the categories of heterosexual/lesbian; there are but a few studies that have examined the process involved in this family transition.

Feminist postmodern theory provides the theoretical foundation for this research project. The deconstruction of Western knowledge, and the relationship between knowledge and power enable this researcher to expand beyond the binary discourses. Feminist postmodern theory opens the way to understand these categories as bodies of knowledge that permit or constrain certain behavior. This researcher is thus enabled to explore the sexual categories themselves, how they are created, and toward what end.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

Introduction

This researcher will undertake the study of a woman's transition from heterosexual marriage, with children, to partnering with a woman. In essence, it is the study of becoming a post divorce, binuclear (Ahrons, 1994) unplanned, lesbian family. Although this has been addressed in other fields, such as psychology, and the literature on gay/lesbian identity, it is a family transition that is neither documented nor systematically investigated in the field of marriage and family therapy. What is entailed in the process of moving from heterosexual marriage, with children, to partnering with a woman? How does a woman understand and negotiate this change herself, as well as with her children? The method that will best answer this question is autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). In this chapter, the methodology of autoethnography will be explicated. This will include a discussion of ethnography, the foundation of the method, key concepts and empirical works, and the general and specific steps to be undertaken when conducting this autoethnography. Critiques of this methodology and inherent risks will also be discussed.

Foundation of the Method: Qualitative Research and Ethnography

Whereas quantitative research is fundamentally based on an analysis of variance, or difference, qualitative research avails itself to a whole other set of questions, and shifts the role of the researcher from objective observer to subjective explorer. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) state:

Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible...they (researchers) turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations, photographs, recordings, and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that the qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meaning that people bring to them. (p. 3)

Exploratory in nature, qualitative methodology enhances the researcher's ability to focus on process, context, and detail. One of the best known qualitative methods is the ethnographic method. Ethnography focuses on the written description of a people or culture, through intimate engagement with the daily life of that culture (Newfield, Sells, Smith, Newfield & Newfield, 1996). Also labeled the fieldwork method, ethnographies are written accounts that emphasize descriptive detail. This method has been employed to study such phenomena as psychiatric hospitals (Goffman, 1961) and families with schizophrenic members (Henry, 1971).

Newfield, Sells, Smith, Newfield and Newfield. (1996) discussed some of the important assumptions of the ethnographic method. For example, culture is viewed as a system of knowledge that is utilized to both generate and interpret experiences of daily life. In this vein, culture is an explanatory mechanism: "Every culture classifies and sorts experiences into categories. A culture also has rules and maps that are used by its inhabitants to determine which behaviors are appropriate for them and to interpret the behavior of others in the culture." (p. 28) Thus, a culture dictates the limits of behavior,

and deems particular acts appropriate according to specific context and time. Language is also significant to the ethnographer in that a culture's experience is distinguished by the way it is talked about (Newfield, et al.). When viewed as the rules and maps for everyday life, culture gets communicated through language.

This approach to research focuses inquiry into the meaning making of daily family life. The underlying philosophical assumption is that knowledge is socially constructed through everyday interactions (Boss, Dahl, & Kaplan, 1996). Language serves to assign meaning to experience and interaction. Ethnography involves an ongoing attempt to describe specific events and place them in a broader, more meaningful context that is situated both historically and politically (Tedlock, 2000). Thus, the ethnographic research process is inductive, and the unit of analysis is social interaction (Newfield, et al., 1996). Hypotheses are developed, rather than tested. Sometimes even the questions are generated after the research begins. Data collection, which historically took the form of fieldwork, is guided by a particular question (Newfield, et al.).

The Crises of Legitimation and Representation in Qualitative Research

There has been ongoing debate in the fields of family therapy research and qualitative research about what constitutes a valid ethnography, and the application of quantitative research criteria to qualitative methods (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Newfield, et al., 1996). Originating in the postmodern critique by Lyotard (1979) and called the crisis of legitimation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), this debate has concentrated on the issues of reliability, validity, and generalizability. Since validity involves truthfulness this concept has been subject to intense debate in the feminist postmodern era. Hammersley (1992) argues for the application of a set of standards unique to qualitative

research. Others have argued that the primary criteria for evaluating qualitative research should be the importance of the topic and its contribution to the scholarly literature (Hammersley, 1992).

The debate regarding verification strategies has prompted some qualitative researchers to argue for different criteria when evaluating such projects: Richardson (2000) proposes:

1. *Substantive contribution.* Does this piece contribute to our *understanding* of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded (if embedded) social scientific perspective?
2. *Aesthetic merit.* Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text, invite interpretive responses?
3. *Reflexivity.* Is the author cognizant of the epistemology of postmodernism? How was the information gathered? How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of the text? Is there adequate self awareness and self exposure for the reader to make judgments about the point of view? (Although reflexivity is a postmodern practice it is also employed in methodologies grounded in other theory.)
4. *Impact.* Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Move me to write? Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action?
5. *Expression of reality.* Does this text embody a fleshed out embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem true – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual or communal sense of the 'real'? (p. 937)

The crisis of representation in qualitative research also deals with how others will be presented in the research text. The question is asked: Can we ever hope to speak authentically of the experience of the other? Traditional ethnographers sought to objectively record facts about a particular culture, and write their results according to the accepted scientific conventions. The researcher was detached, value neutral, and utilized an authoritative voice. The postmodern moment in qualitative research was shaped by a questioning of traditional methods and a refusal to privilege any method or theory over another (Aggers, 1990). This was represented by works such as *Writing Culture* (Clifford & Marcus, 1986). The essays in this edited text dealt with the political and epistemological crises that impacted the ethnographic method in a postmodern era. Western writers were no longer able to portray non Western people with unchallenged authority.

Edward Said's (1978) critique of the set of beliefs known as Orientalism challenged the way Western scholars portrayed the vast region of the Orient. Embodying a myriad of cultures and countries, the orient was depicted by Western scholars as a single unit which could be studied as a cohesive whole. Individuals from that region were depicted as inferior and in need of domination, which facilitated a colonizing mission on the part of the West. Said's critique underscored the notion of knowledge as power, and questioned paradigms of thought that created an arbitrary line between the West and the other. His work was influential in forcing Westerners to reexamine their perceptions of the Asian world, and more closely evaluate and critique a set of beliefs about the objective study of the other.

The visual anthropologist Barbara Myerhoff (1978) declared that the study of one's own culture was just as important as the traditional anthropological research on the other. Myerhoff's work focused on the ways in which people from diverse cultures used stories and ritual to imbue difficult lives with meaning. Her belief was that stories told to oneself or others were transformative, and her work shaped the anthropological study of both ritual and life histories.

As a result of this crisis of representation, claims to truth and authority came under suspicion, and new models of representation were sought. Interpretive theories became more common, and research and writing became more reflexive (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The change in conducting one's research as a detached onlooker to a position of instrumentality became central to a postmodern science (Shotter, 1992).

Indeed, representational issues are a vexing problem for the feminist researcher. Who is the other and how can the researcher authentically represent her? Attuned to hierarchies and imbalances of power, the feminist researcher is cognizant of the inherent structural imbalance of the subject/researcher dichotomy (Olesen, 2000).

Tedlock (2000) described what she termed a "sea change" in the history of ethnographic writing, at which time it became both "reflexive and political" (p. 461). That is, ethnographers began to combine the personal and political within one account. Thus began the narrative genre in ethnographic writing. For example, Lather and Smithies (1997) provided a running subtext of their personal reactions to studying women who live with HIV/AIDS within the research report itself. Some twenty years after her first ethnography, *All Our Kin* was published, Carol Stack (1972) returned to the field to study the African American migration south. She wrote about the impact of feminist

postmodern developments that allowed her to think about how to locate and include her own voice in the research text. Rather than describing and representing the other, Stack infused the writing with her subjective experience, situating her voice as one among many in this effort to explain and negotiate the meaning of home (Stack, 1997).

In addition to changes in the subject/researcher dichotomy, researchers have proposed new methodologies in the postmodern era. Richardson (2000) discusses writing as a method of inquiry, and describes the process as “‘a way of ‘knowing’ – a method of discovery and analysis.” (p. 923) This type of methodology departs from conventional science in that the method for acquiring data is not distinct from the research report. Writing as a method of inquiry provides a mechanism through which the researcher can investigate how she constructs herself and others in the world.

Autoethnography as a Method

Bruner (1990) argues that narration is the natural mode through which human beings make sense of the world, and situate their lives in time. It is through narration, the telling of stories, that lives become comprehensible. Narration emerges as a central and primary theme in feminist postmodern science. It is important in everyday life in the transmission of knowledge and pragmatic rules (Shotter, 1992). Narrative discourse produces stories concerned with human action; attempts are made to progress to a clarification or solution of a situation as yet incomplete (Polkinghorne, 1997).

Polkinghorne (1997) argues for experimentation with the use of narrative voice in writing research. This is the voice of the storyteller, spoken in the first person.

Gergen and Gergen (2000) discuss reflexivity as among the primary emergent innovations in qualitative methodology. Researchers intentionally insert themselves into

the text to elucidate their social location, politics, biases in the work, personal investments, and so on. Researchers describe in depth the ways in which their personal histories saturate the ethnographic project. This new genre of ethnographic writing is called Creative Analytical Practice (CAP) ethnographies (Richardson, 2000). CAP ethnographies include autoethnography, performance texts, and layered accounts, among others. Perhaps the best known reflexive methodology is that of the autoethnography.

At times subsumed under the rubric of other ethnographic forms, such as interpretive biography (Denzin, 1989) or narrative ethnography (Tedlock, 1991, 2000), the term autoethnography has come to represent procedures that link personal experience to the culture. This method enables the researcher to directly connect the personal to the cultural, placing the self in context, and emphasizes the way in which the ethnographer interacts with the culture being researched (Reed-Danahay, 1997). It connects the autobiographical and personal to the social, cultural and political (Ellis, 2004).

Autoethnography: Key Empirical Works

The word autoethnography has been used by literary critics and anthropologists for at least two decades (Reed-Danahay, 1997). Hayano (1979) defined autoethnography as a set of issues in anthropology relating to the researcher's study of their "own people" (p. 99). It is the status of the insider that distinguishes an autoethnography; a researcher studying a group distinctly different than her own would be excluded from the rubric of autoethnography. Van Maanen (1995) cites autoethnography as one of several alternatives to ethnographic realism. Similar to Hayano, Van Maanen defines autoethnography as a form of writing in which the researcher is a native, and the culture of one's own group is textualized. Denzin (1989) includes autoethnography in a category

of writing that he terms the “biographical method” (p. 27). Autoethnography does not use the objective outsider writing convention, and is distinguished by the incorporation of the researcher’s life experience. Most recent empirical works include two edited books by Ellis and Bochner, *Composing Ethnography: Alternative Forms of Qualitative Writing* (1996) and, *Ethnographically Speaking: Autoethnography, Literature, and Aesthetic*, (2002), the chapter *Autoethnography, Personal Narrative, Reflexivity: Researcher as Subject* (2000), and *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*, (2004) by Caroline Ellis. Most recently, the chapter entitled *Feminist Autoethnography* was written by Katherine Allen and Fred Piercy in the second edition of the textbook *Research Methods in Family Therapy* (2005).

Examples of autoethnography include Carolyn Ellis’s (1995) *Final Negotiations: A Story of Love, Loss, and Chronic Illness*, Laurel Richardson’s (1997) *Fields of Play: Constructing an Academic Life*, and Lisa Tillman-Healey’s (2001) *Between Gay and Straight: Understanding Friendship Across Sexual Orientation*. Each project focuses on a single case which is extended over time (Ellis, 2004). In *Auto/Ethnography: Rewriting the Self and the Social*, Reed-Danahay (1997) presents an edited collection of autoethnographies from around the world, dealing with issues such as cultural resistance, violence, identities, and exile. Each autoethnography reads as a biography or novel, and is imbued with emotional expression and dialogue. The reader is thus repositioned as a coparticipant in the dialogue (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). It is the intention of the researcher to allow the reader to enter into the story and experience the moral or ethical dilemma, and to evoke a response. The researcher resists the impulse to abstract and explain, offering instead alternative narratives as potential for future conversation, rather than

“undisputable conclusions” (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 745). Through the use of evocative narrative, the researcher wants the reader to be able to put him/herself in the place of the other, “within a culture of experience that enlarges their social awareness and empathy.” (Ellis, 2004, p. 30)

Autoethnography: Key Concepts

The key concept of an autoethnography is the researcher as subject.

Autoethnographies are written in the first person, and feature emotion, dialogue, and self consciousness (Ellis & Bochner, 2000). The emotional expression of the researcher is central to the autoethnographic project. Rather than distancing oneself from feelings related to the story, the emotional experience is highlighted and detailed. This is accomplished through dialogue with others, the dominant form of discourse (Ellis, 2004). Dialogue can set a scene or develop a character. Confusion, elation, uncertainty, vulnerability are all ingredients that the researcher shares in order to construct an authentic narrative that draws the reader into the dilemma. Self consciousness, referred to earlier as reflexivity, is about inserting the self into the text with an awareness of the multiple and simultaneous contextual influences that impact the construction of identity.

The researcher moves between personal narrative and the social structures that shape the story. Taking on a dual identity, as both subject and researcher, the autoethnographer depicts, through narrative, how daily human experience is endowed with meaning, and the choices and dilemmas faced in everyday life. Ellis and Bochner (2000) explain:

This type of narrative inquiry would be stories that create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle,

resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection, fragmentation, marginalization, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meaning and values into question. (p. 744)

Thus the goals of the autoethnographic researcher are: evoking emotional experience in others, giving voice to stories and groups of people traditionally left out of social scientific inquiry, producing writing of high literary and artistic quality, and improving the lives of the researcher, readers and participants, if any (Ellis, 2004).

Conducting an Autoethnography: General Steps

The autoethnographic researcher must document the moment-to-moment concrete details of a life, keeping field notes, recording thoughts and feelings, and the meanings attached to them. Details, dialogue, and responses to situations should be recorded. Besides written notes the researcher can utilize personal items that signify specific interactions or events, such as photographs, greeting cards, family videos. Interviews with significant friends and family members may also be incorporated into the text. Ellis (2004) notes that autoethnography does not proceed in a linear fashion; the researcher will write at the time of the experience, then revisit later. It is both of these processes, moving into the experience by recording it, and moving out, by distancing, that are necessary to create an effective autoethnography (Ellis, 2004).

Ellis (2004) suggests the researcher keep retrospective field notes on her life and utilize emotional recall. This entails imagining being back at a particular scene, both emotionally and physically. If the event was emotionally evocative, details can readily become available. She must include her vulnerable self in producing an evocative story

that creates the effect of reality, and examine how daily human experience is endowed with meaning (Ellis, 1997).

Systemic sociological introspection (Ellis, 1998b) is also used to connect story and theory. This entails layering the narrative with more traditional analysis, linking it to the literature in the social sciences. An example of this is found in an autoethnography by Vidal-Ortiz (2004) in which he contrasts personal experiences to racial and ethnic classificatory systems. Entitled *On Being a White Person of Color: Using Autoethnography to Understand Puerto Ricans' Racialization*, the personal narrative is used to make larger conceptual and theoretical points about racial identities, and ultimately to broaden the discussion about race and nationality. The author uses personal vignettes of everyday interactions that illustrate his experiences with race in the United States; he shares for example, conversations about the lightness of his skin, his personal feelings about it, and dialogue with others about racial issues. He interrogates his reactions to various conversations about racial classificatory systems. For example, when attending a gay pride event in 2002, Vidal-Ortiz was asked to fill out a survey assessing the needs of Latino gay men. The agency sponsoring the survey had taken the 2000 census questions on race and ethnicity and “without any critical challenges to the meaning of these questions” (p. 182) used them on the survey. Since the author spent the first twenty-five years of his life in Puerto Rico, his response did not match the categories available to him. Vidal-Ortiz deftly moves back and forth between personal dialogue and reflection to theory about Latinos, Puerto Ricans, and racialization discourse in the United States. This is achieved through the use of autoethnography which provided him the opportunity to explore through the narration of everyday experience as a white person

of color, current theory in racial and ethnic identities. Autoethnography as a methodology enables the researcher to activate “different types of identities, where a mixture of dominant and subordinate ideas coexist.” (p. 185) For Vidal-Ortiz this meant the complex interplay of his light skin and racial identity with the structural forces and classification systems in the United States.

Tenni, Smyth and Boucher (2003) offer suggestions for analyzing data. They suggest engaging in cycles of data analysis, early on in the research, and regularly. This is to identify emergent themes and initial concepts. They discuss the significance of the role of the supervisor, who could be a dissertation committee member or chair, and encourage engaging in external dialogue. Finally these researchers suggest using theory in a variety of ways to examine and sift through the data. For example, they suggest the biographer attempt to identify and step outside the theoretical constructs that supported the writing, and apply a range of theoretical constructs to the data. They note it is important to identify the level of analysis, and continue to shift that perspective. That is, if the unit of analysis is individual, a systemic perspective would broaden the interpretation. Likewise, if the lens of gender analysis is employed, the shift to a racial or sexual identity lens further complicates the investigation.

Conducting an Autoethnography: Specific Steps Data Collection

The specific steps to be taken in applying autoethnography to study this family transition include the processes of data collection as well as data analysis. Although each process will be described distinctly, the recursive nature of data collection and data analysis in an autoethnography should be noted. The standard assumption is that the research process is linear, and that once the data collection phase ends, the data analysis

phase will begin. Since in this type of research, hypotheses are developed rather than tested, data analysis will lead to further questions, which will require further data collection. The processes of data collection and analysis are recursive and ongoing, bracketed by the time frame of the story being told.

Data collection will consist of composing an autoethnographic story that takes place between June 2001, and July 2005. The story closes with my partner Sallie and I becoming registered as Domestic Partners, after moving into our home together and sharing custody of my children with their father. The story will be told in first person, and will include my partner Sallie, my children Lily and John, as well as a variety of friends, colleagues and neighbors.

The data collection phase will consist of chronicling the story. To begin, I must situate myself in time and reconstruct the vicissitudes of life that brought me there. My age, race, gender, family legacy, sexual orientation and economic class are all ingredients that will position me in a particular place and time. In keeping with the stated goal of examining and interrogating the institution of heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage, I will foreground my heterosexuality. This means in composing this text, I will examine the pervasiveness, compulsory nature, and implicit assumptions of heterosexuality. Some of the questions I will ask might be: What models were available to me for partnering? What did I understand to be the consequences, for myself and my children, of partnering with a woman? What privileges afforded by heterosexuality did I become aware of that were previously invisible? What did I assume about heterosexual coupling? Did I see options other than heterosexual marriage?

The data include an abundance of diaries and notes kept during the time, as well as photographs, cards, mementos from the children and Sallie, and poetry we shared that captured our experience. Dialogue will be used to reconstruct conversations between myself and a variety of others as we negotiated this change. In keeping with the goal of examining and deconstructing the dominant binary discourse in identities, I will pay particular attention to the use of language. I might ask questions such as: Did I come to identify myself as a lesbian? Why, why not, and under what circumstances? What was the set of assumptions associated with that term? How did those who had previously known me as heterosexual respond to me when I presented myself in partnership with a woman?

Data Analysis

The data will be analyzed in several specific ways. First, emergent themes and concepts will be examined. These would include thoughts feelings, actions and interactions that occurred with most frequency in the text. What were my overriding concerns? What questions were most frequently asked of me, by my children and others? How did I construct responses, and why? I will move back and forth between the personal narrative and the culture by analyzing conversations in terms of the existing theory in the psychology of sexual identities, specifically the binary classification discourse. What discourses did particular conversations expose? What discourses were silenced? The applicability as well as limitation of current theory will be examined.

I will also systematically go back into the story to find the cultural components of my own experience and the meanings attached to them. This would include the dominant discourses, as mentioned above, as well as the potential influence of historic, political,

economic, race and gender factors. I was negotiating this transition at a historic time, when gay and lesbian issues were prominent in the culture at large. How did this mediate the process between my children and me? What language did it give us? What possibilities for dialogue did it open? What were the constraints? In addition, the fact that my partner and I are white, educated, middle class women is integral to the options available in my cultural surround. How did racial and/or economic privilege influence my process?

The final unit of data analysis will be coding; this means keeping track of the ways decisions were made in the story. This entails locating critical decision points, such as pursuing the relationship with Sallie, telling my husband, conferring with an attorney, or timing my conversations with the children. The actions associated with these decisions will be examined in terms of rationale, influences, and mediating factors. Why I chose one course of action and not others will lend further analysis to the options and constraints of my cultural context. For example, what was my foremost consideration at these decision points? How did that shape and give meaning to my actions? This data will support the stated goal of constructing a counternarrative that would guide and support children and families through such a transition.

Critiques of Autoethnography

Autoethnography is not without critics. Two of the most common critiques have to do with verification strategies and the use of self as the only data source (Holt, 2003).

Regarding the use of self as the only data source, there is a long tradition of the case study method, which also has but one data source. In autoethnography, the subjectivity of the researcher is seen as a resource, something to capitalize on rather than expel (Holt,

2003). Several authors, (Gergen & Gergen, 2000; Holt, 2003) note that narrative ethnography is not limited to the self, since to write individual experience is to write social experience; people do not accumulate their experiences in a social vacuum. Mykhalovsky (1996) specifically challenges this dualistic, self/other distinction. In responding to charges of self indulgence in his autobiographical work, this researcher exposes the absurdity in the analysis that autobiographical writing is about the self of the writer and no one and nothing else. Mykhalovsky asserts that work on self is at the same time work on the other, and that the other is always about the self of the writer. Using postmodern feminist critiques, he turns the tables on his critics, and asserts that all work is autobiographical in that it is infused with the subjectivity of the researcher. Holt (2003) suggests that such criticisms function to preserve the very types of dominant structures that those utilizing this approach ultimately seek to question. Indeed, Denzin and Lincoln (2000) assert that such criteria “reproduce only a certain kind of science, a science that silences too many voices.” (p. 10)

In a similar vein, Tierney (2000) discusses the possibilities of autobiographical writing and life histories in the social sciences. He proposes that life histories have the ability to “refashion identities” (p. 546). The feminist postmodern critique is evident in his assertion that “a goal of life history work in the postmodern age is to break the stranglehold of metanarratives that establish rules of truth, legitimacy, and identity.” (p.546)

There are risks inherent in utilizing autoethnography as a method. Because it is relatively new, it is an unfamiliar method for researchers and academics. It can potentially be viewed as not academic at all, since autoethnography is antithetical to

traditional scientific, objective research. The use of personal narrative renders the researcher vulnerable to criticism on a number of fronts, not the least of which is the public critique and evaluation of her choices and decisions.

The autoethnographic researcher must also resist the temptation to consistently present herself in a positive light. Confusion, doubt, and error are an inevitable part of any personal story of transition.

Summary and Conclusions

In this chapter the rationale for autoethnography as a research method to study this transition has been presented. The theoretical foundation has been established through the application of feminist postmodern theory. The postmodern critique of knowledge and power compels an examination of the possibilities and constraints of current discourses. It further expands and necessitates modes of inquiry not bound by traditional scientific conventions. New definitions of legitimacy and criteria for evaluating qualitative research have been considered. Autoethnography emerges as postmodern feminist praxis: a methodological way to address the power imbalance inherent in the research practice. This methodology erases the entire set of problems that come from representing the other from one position within the hierarchy; it defies the regime that to be scholarly, our work must be impersonal.

Autoethnography affords this researcher the ability to study a *process* without resorting to the utilization of binary categories of sexual identity as static endpoints. The construction of meaning I had put together for myself as a heterosexual was seriously challenged when I fell in love with a woman. Through autoethnography, I document and study the process of self reconstruction, and interrogate the categories themselves.

Indeed, feminist scholars have called for this very kind of research narrative. Bohan and Russell (1999) assert:

If our goal is to understand human experiences without simple reliance on the categories imposed by the normative discourse of sexual orientation identity, our research must create space for experiential narratives not encumbered by such categories. . . . It may be possible to take one step toward broadening our understanding of the phenomena we have collected under the rubric of “sexual orientation” by employing methods that do not rely on/or that actively dismantle reified categories. (p. 91-92)

Chapter Four: “Opening” An Autoethnography

1 This is a story about the experience of a sudden, unexpected change in my life,
2 one that tested my values and altered my sense of self in the world. It is a narrative of
3 transition and change. These changes had ripples, as changes do, and touched the lives of
4 those close to me. Indeed, other voices could tell this story. If my daughter were to tell
5 it, it would be different, no doubt, but her own. It could be told from the point of view of
6 my former husband, my sister, or my partner. Those would be very different stories. But
7 this is mine. It is from a particular perspective, that of a middle-aged, European-
8 American woman, who is highly educated and middle class. It is from a particular
9 historical moment in time; one hundred years ago, or one hundred hence, it might not
10 need telling.

11

12 This could be read simply, as a love story: a love story between two women, and
13 between a mother and her children. This same narrative might be considered a story of
14 betrayal and selfishness, my acts cowardly. Some would read this as a “coming out”
15 story. To this author, it is a story about *family*. It is the story of one family’s journey
16 through an enormous transition and, ultimately, the meaning of family, and its abiding
17 nature. My hope is that some parts of it will inform the discourses of our day, and
18 contribute to the body of literature in the field of marriage and family therapy. I offer it
19 as one family narrative among many; but this particular kind of narrative, of a woman
20 leaving heterosexual marriage to partner with a woman, has been largely invisible to the
21 field of marriage and family therapy. My hope is to put it on the map.

22

Part I: Forty-three

23

I did not anticipate my forty-third year would herald such enormous change.

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It was a beautiful Berkshire spring morning, June 12, 2001. I sat in the circle with the group I had become so intimate with over the past days. Through the large windows I could see the sun splashing across the mountaintops. The room was empty and spare save for the group of people seated in a circle. The windowed walls gave a sense of openness, expansion. We had been practicing yoga together, eight hours a day, for almost a week. We had become friends. This was the first professional training I had attended in many years in which I did not know a single person at the outset. Strangers, all, when we began. We had come to this yoga center to find another way to heal from the particular tragedies that compelled us here. Mine was professional, problems with the licensing board, that prohibited my ability to work as I did as a family therapist.

I knew early on that that day I needed to tell the group. For some reason it was difficult, but I pushed my way through and raised my hand when the leader, Todd Norian, asked if there was anything anyone wanted to share.

“Today I want to honor my mother,” I was surprised to hear myself say. “It is my forty-third birthday today, and my mother was that age when she had me. And it’s a big part of my life story. . . the age thing, the fact that she had me ‘late in life’”.

44 “I was unplanned, and as she would later tell me, a ‘cross to bear’. My mother
45 already had two daughters, ages 13 and 11 when she became pregnant with me, her
46 ‘change of life’ baby. I want to acknowledge the freedom I have that she did not, and
47 honor her by committing to use these years fully. As you guys know I start my Ph.D.
48 program in September. So I just wanted to let you know today was special for me, to say
49 her name, and to honor my mother, Agnes.”

50

51 Several people responded with kind, generous words. Then Todd said, “OK I
52 want everyone to rub your hands together, gathering your energy to send to Jackie.” The
53 room hummed with the sound and intensity of this energy building. “Think about all of
54 the good energy you want to send Jackie for this next part of her journey, and open your
55 hands and send it her way.”

56

57 I watched the faces of these new friends as they followed Todd’s direction. Eyes
58 closed, some smiling, some serious, all focused on me. With great warmth and
59 enthusiasm, twenty pairs of hands opened to me. I won’t soon forget those pink, rubbed
60 palms of all sizes and colors opening to me in that endless moment.

61

62 I leaned back in my sit-upon, and opened my arms wide. I was basking in the
63 earnest heat and energy coming my way. As I sat still I felt the waves of heat and light
64 surround me and penetrate. I did nothing but take it all in. I was receptive to all this
65 goodness coming my way, and my heart was completely open.

66 For the rest of that week at Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy I practiced many poses
67 and asanas. But my favorite was the camel pose. In it, I practiced going forward,
68 opening my heart, and seeing the world in a different way.
69
70 This is the story of that opening.

71 I returned home to my husband and two children, Lily, age 10, and John, age 7.
72 We lived in Monmouth County, New Jersey, close to beaches and an hour ferry ride into
73 Manhattan. Lily and John were my world, and I had missed them terribly when I was
74 away at Phoenix Rising Yoga. I especially missed all the tactile pleasures of having
75 young children, the physicality of it. The bounding wet kisses and hugs throughout the
76 day. The incredible sweet delights of tucking them in at night, the safety and constancy
77 of it all. The weather was warm, the beach was nearby and school was almost out. I
78 returned to my work, my yoga practice and to the loves of my life. I threw myself into it,
79 knowing that in a few weeks I would be away again, this time to the family therapy
80 conference I attended annually. That particular year, 2001, it was in Miami, and I looked
81 forward to seeing colleagues and friends I had been gathering with for the past seven
82 years.

83

84 The annual American Family Therapy Academy conference was a mix of
85 intellectual stimulation and camaraderie. There were friends from all over that I looked
86 forward to seeing – my mentor from graduate school, friends from New England and the
87 west coast. I always looked forward to seeing one woman in particular. Her name was
88 Sallie, and she lived on the west coast. She was active in the same kind of social justice
89 work as I. We met very briefly each year, sometimes facilitating a group or workshop
90 together. Sallie was always unavailable for any social conversation. In response to my
91 invitations she was distracted or hurried. But I looked forward to seeing her nonetheless.
92 There was something about her that I was drawn to: her demeanor, her intellect.

93 That year in Miami I was surprised as Sallie joined my friends and me on the
94 beach one afternoon. We ended up swimming together in the warm waters, and talking
95 and relaxing on the sand. Sallie and I ended up sharing an elevator ride back to our hotel
96 rooms. I recall telling her how nice it was to have the time together that afternoon, and
97 that it had been my impression that she just never liked me.

98

99 “Not like you? I don’t even *know* you,” she said.

100

101 At that awkward moment the elevator arrived at Sallie’s floor. “Well, goodbye,”
102 we said to each other. “See you next year.”

103

104 Then she stepped out of the elevator and the doors closed behind her.

105 That fall, I started the Ph.D. program, and although I loved it, it entailed driving
106 almost two hours each way, three times a week. September 11th happened. Our
107 proximity to New York City made it all the more devastating. I frantically called to see if
108 my friends, Donna and Jack, were safe. As the drama unfolded, I called other parents to
109 see if they were leaving their children in school or picking them up. I recall sitting Lily
110 and John on the couch that afternoon and telling them what had happened. John would
111 have nightmares about airplanes flying in his bedroom window.

112

113 In late September I was on my way to a friend’s house after school in
114 Philadelphia. My husband called on the cell phone and I could tell immediately that
115 something was wrong. “My boss called me in and explained that they could no longer

116 afford to keep me on,” he said. “I pleaded with him to keep me on in any way he could.
117 But he said no. It’s effective immediately.”

118

119 This was not good. My husband of eleven years, Peter, had lost his job twice
120 since John was born. It put incredible strain on each of us, and on the marriage. I was
121 almost speechless. How could I handle this and go to graduate school at the same time?
122 I walked into my friend Judy’s house, and collapsed on the couch.

123

124 I continued. I used my yoga practice to gain strength and perspective, and hold
125 on to gratitude. Even though we had difficulties, my children were healthy, and for that I
126 would always be grateful. My career as a family therapist afforded me that perspective; I
127 was often intimately close to the tragedies that are a mother’s greatest fear. I considered
128 myself blessed with Lily and John.

129

130 Peter, though, was becoming increasingly bitter about his job prospects. I tried to
131 have conversations with him about a variety of things, but especially about spirituality. I
132 asked him to do something with me: attend a yoga class, or church. I was a member of
133 the local Unitarian Universalist Congregation, and the children were enrolled in religious
134 education classes. I was drawn to this congregation for a number of reasons: the respect
135 for all religious traditions, the diversity of the congregation in terms of race and sexual
136 orientation. Even though we lived in a suburb in close proximity to New York City, our
137 community was largely white and exclusively heterosexual. It was important to me to

138 expose Lily and John to diverse people and families. Peter didn't actively resist attending
139 with us, he just did nothing.

Part II: New York City

140

141

142 The year 2001 came to an end, and I continued to wait and hope that things would
143 get better for Peter. In June of 2002, the annual family therapy conference was in New
144 York City. Originally planned for the west coast, the venue was moved after 9/11. My
145 daughter Lily came with me for the first evening. Lily and I played in the city, and had
146 dinner with my dear friend and mentor, Rachel. The day of the conference Lily and I
147 were returning to the hotel. I remember laughing and running into the lobby because it
148 was pouring rain outside. Rushing to get out of our wet clothes and barely able to see
149 where we were going, we ran to the elevator and literally bumped into my friend Sallie
150 from the west coast. “Hello” I said, giving her a brief, awkward hug, and introduced her
151 to my daughter.

152

153 At that moment in June of 2002, neither Sallie nor I could know what was to
154 happen in our time together over the next few days. But what was about to happen was
155 to change each of our lives in ways we could not have imagined.

156

157 It was customary at conferences to organize a group of people on particular nights
158 to go out to dinner. The following evening a group that included several friends of mine
159 and Sallie and her friend went out to a small Italian restaurant. I ended up sitting next to
160 Sallie, and remember feeling incredibly nervous. I kept losing track of my cell phone, or
161 appointment book. I was completely affected in some way I could not understand just
162 sitting next to her. After the dinner, we piled into a taxi and, unable to fit, several jumped

163 out. I turned to see Sallie on the street behind me, also in need of a ride. Playfully I said,
164 “Come on, let’s go out!” She declined, of course, saying that she had to prepare for
165 something the next day. But we did agree to meet the following evening.

166

167 I sat through the conference program the next day, looking forward to the dinner I
168 had planned with my friend Donna. Our relationship dated back over twenty-five years
169 to our college days. We were waitresses together, roommates and best pals. We shared
170 the fact that our dads were deceased, and eagerly awaited the arrival of our social security
171 checks on the third of each month. We didn’t have the financial security so many of the
172 kids at Boston University had. So we lived on SSI death benefits and waitressing tips.

173

174 Donna was my most trusted friend, and was a constant in my life. She was even-
175 tempered, steady, and very successful. We shared a history that included my mother and
176 her grandmother, each deceased long ago. Through the years our relationship contained
177 all the rituals of family: we celebrated birthdays, holidays. We built careers together,
178 became mothers together, endured child care crises. Now our daughters were best pals.

179

180 We were to meet that night at The Bryant Park Café, to dine outside before she
181 headed home to Westchester. After dinner I was going to meet Sallie in the theater
182 district.

183

184 My time with Donna was of course, wonderful. The familiarity and ease of time
185 spent with an old friend was a soothing balm. We would joke that we needed at least 24

186 hours to be together so we could relax and really catch up. So, by our standards, this was
187 a short visit. Admittedly I was distracted by the later plan with Sallie. At the end of the
188 meal I said, “By the way, Donna, do you know of any women’s bars in the city?”

189

190 “You mean lesbian bars?”

191

192 “Yeah,” I said, “I’m meeting a friend after this and told her I would find a good
193 place to go.”

194

195 “No, but I bet you could find the name of one in one of those New York tourist
196 guide books. Walk with me to Grand Central and just look in the bookstore there.”

197

198 So Donna and I walked the few blocks to the station. We didn’t have a lot of time
199 before her train, so we hugged goodbye. My heart always broke a little every time I said
200 goodbye to her. But tonight I did have other things on my mind. I walked over to the
201 bookstore.

202

203 I found the “tourist” section and grabbed a few books. I squatted down and began
204 to peruse. “Let’s see,” I thought, “L . . . for lesbian. . .” There it was, a whole section on
205 gay and lesbian nightlife in New York. I checked out several books and all seemed to
206 agree: It was Rubyfruit’s in the east village.

207 Growing up in such proximity to New York, having cut days of high school to
208 hang out in Central Park, I still believed I could walk anywhere in the city. So I set off,
209 walking further into the theater district; I knew the name of the play Sallie was seeing but
210 not the address. Who needed that? I would just walk until I saw it.

211

212 It was a beautiful, warm June night. The streets of Times Square were teeming;
213 the stores were open onto the streets. I stopped to look at flowers which I contemplated
214 buying for Sallie. Later I was glad I did not, as it might have seemed strange to Sallie's
215 companions. After all, she and I were barely just casual friends.

216

217 I was headstrong in making my way to the theater, and kept walking. But now I
218 was beginning to get tired and couldn't find this show. I'm on 49th street and finally stop
219 to ask a doorman who kindly directs me one block over. Found it. This was finally
220 going to happen.

221

222 There was really nowhere to sit and wait for the theater to let out, so I found a
223 comfortable street sign to lean against. (We would later have some disagreement about
224 whether this was a street sign or lamppost. Sallie felt certain it was the latter). Sallie
225 would be surprised to see me there, since the plan was for her to call when she was
226 through. I hoped she would be happy to see me.

227

228 Crowds began to flow from the theater. I saw several others from the conference
229 and finally, Sallie and her friend Jane. Sallie smiled and I noted a touch of delight on her

230 face when she saw me. Sallie, Jane and I talked briefly about the show, and I told them of
231 my research at the Grand Central bookstore. They laughed as I described sitting on the
232 floor of the bookstore and looking up “L for lesbian.”

233

234 “It’s the east village,” I said, “That’s the place to go.” We grabbed a taxi and
235 directed the driver to the east village. It just so happened that we drove directly past the
236 conference hotel. To my surprise, Jane said “You know, I’m feeling pretty tired, so I
237 think I’m just going back to the hotel. I’ll do this again another time.” In a state of
238 disbelief, I realized Sallie and I were now alone, in a taxi, speeding downtown toward
239 Rubyfruit’s.

240

241 The bar was crowded, loud, and seemed to be filled with drunk people.

242

243 “I don’t think I can stay here,” I said. “My policy is I’m too old to wait in a line
244 to get a drink or go to the bathroom.”

245

246 We idled for a moment and asked if we could go downstairs to the quiet
247 restaurant. At first we were told no, but someone finally took pity on us and led us to a
248 table downstairs. It was almost empty, quiet and thankfully away from the chaos
249 upstairs. We ordered and began to talk. After knowing Sallie for seven or so years it was
250 strange to finally be alone without some professional agenda.

251 She began to talk, about her family, the death of her father. She was so open,
252 *intimate* about these details of her life, I was shocked. I was in a state of total
253 disequilibrium. I was reeling, glad my back was to the wall for support. Once again I
254 found myself fumbling. “Excuse me,” I said, “but I need to smoke a cigarette.” Why
255 was I having this intense reaction?

256

257 It was about 2:30 am when we made our way from Rubyfruits. We walked arm in
258 arm like old friends down the street, and hailed a taxi. We had been teasing each other
259 about who was the better pool player; I promised to find a place for us to play the
260 following night after the presidential dinner dance. I hailed a taxi. As we got in and
261 began the drive back to the hotel, Sallie casually leaned back, resting her head on the seat
262 as she spoke. I gazed at her and thought “My God this is the most beautiful woman I
263 have ever seen.”

264

265 The following day I could barely contain myself. I had to get outside, so I left for
266 a while and just walked. I spoke to a friend who knew I had feelings for Sallie. “Should
267 I tell her?” I asked. “No, just work on being her friend.” That sounded so simple and
268 sane. But what was happening was so much more *intense*. I had many deep friendships
269 with women, but none made me feel this way. It was electrifying.

270

271 At some point that afternoon, Sallie left a timid message on my phone: “Hi, I’ve
272 been looking for you but I guess you’re outside enjoying the sunshine.” She was looking
273 for *me*?

274 It was time to dress for the dinner dance. My roommate had already left, so I was
275 alone in my hotel room. I met some friends, and walked into the cocktail party. Sallie
276 was there, hanging up her phone from again trying to call me. We were very pleased to
277 see each other, and sat together at dinner. My friends eyed me cautiously as I sat close to
278 her while Sallie put her arm around my chair. I couldn't wait to leave. Several friends
279 asked if they could join us. Unequivocally, I said "No."

280

281 On the dance floor, Sallie mentioned that one of her friends also asked to come
282 along on our pool playing adventure that night. "I said no." "Good. Let's get out of
283 here," I said.

284

285 We accompanied each other to our respective hotel rooms and changed into jeans.
286 We caught a taxi, this time to Slates, a pool hall in Chelsea. We joked about my superb
287 concierge skills, and signed up for a table. We were happy to be alone again, and
288 playing. I can't quite recall how I shot that night, but I think we each won a few games.
289 We were clearly competitive with each other. But what we enjoyed most was coming so
290 close to each other as we walked around the pool table, teasing and laughing.

291

292 When we arrived back at the hotel this night I said "My roommate's not here, just
293 come up and hang out for a while." Sallie did. We each lay on a bed, facing each other,
294 again talking for hours. I don't remember what we even talked about. It was 4:30 am
295 when Sallie said, "I have to go." I walked her to the door and we hugged goodbye. The
296 conference was over; we would both be leaving tomorrow.

297 I went to bed but could not sleep. I was too hyper from the events of the past
298 nights with Sallie. My mind was racing, and I couldn't stop it. I tossed and turned for an
299 hour or so and decided to just get up and pack. At around 7, I called Sallie's room to say
300 goodbye. She was not there, and I recalled her saying something about meeting her
301 sisters that morning for coffee. I packed up and left the room.

302

303 With my suitcase by my side I sat in the lobby, trying to get my bearings. I
304 couldn't believe I was leaving and wouldn't see Sallie again. I took out my Palm Pilot
305 and was entering her information when I looked up, and there she was.

306

307 "I was going to go straight up to your room," she said.

308

309 "I've already checked out."

310

311 "I just wish we had had some quiet time for a cup of coffee," Sallie said. I
312 thought about how odd this sounded in the context of all the time we had just spent
313 together. "OK, let's get some coffee," I replied. We went to Sallie's room and I waited
314 while she packed. I called Lily and John; there was a sweetness to talking with them
315 while in Sallie's presence. Something was going on between us, but what could it be?

316

317 Suitcases in hand, Sallie and I walked the several blocks to Penn Station. Once
318 inside we found some space in a coffee shop. I was unable to eat or drink anything, and
319 was in somewhat of a fugue state. Sallie kept asking: "Are you alright?" "Yes, I'm just

320 tired,” I said. But I was dazed, overwhelmed by the emotions I had while in Sallie’s
321 presence. I think we tried to talk about what this was between us: “What do you think is
322 happening?”

323

324 “It’s like a furnace,” said Sallie quietly.

325

326 “I know. I feel it too.”

327

328 Time passed. One train left, then another. I couldn’t get myself up to get on the
329 train. Finally, around noon, it was time for Sallie to board her train back to Northampton.
330 I walked her to the track and we hugged goodbye again. I watched her go down the
331 escalator, and stood there, feeling and looking completely lost.

332

333 I boarded the next train back to New Jersey. I took out a paper and tried to write
334 down some words and memories from this time with her so I could know it was real, that
335 it had happened.

336 When I arrived home the kids were waiting for me. So was my husband. There
337 was no time to settle in, to transition. Pete wanted to hit golf balls after being alone with
338 the kids for several days. The kids wanted to go O-U-T. So out we went, to find my
339 friend Wendy.

340

341 Wendy lived a few towns away with her husband and three sons. We had been
342 close for several years, since before John was born; She was really one of the only
343 women I had become friendly with since returning to New Jersey in 1989. Wendy was a
344 homeopath in practice in our community, and she and I shared many cases together. We
345 had a lot in common when it came to having kids and busy practices. I also thought she
346 was one of the smartest women I had ever known. A former dancer who lived and
347 performed throughout Europe, Wendy was very tall, with long jet black hair. You could
348 see the remnants of the hippie in her.

349

350 “I have to talk to you!” I said urgently. “Meet me downtown at the diner.”

351

352 Wendy met me with her son; we gave the kids some money and sent them to the
353 ice cream store. “I have to talk to you. You won’t believe what happened to me in New
354 York.”

355

356 I related as best I could the details of my time with Sallie. I continued to offer, “I
357 didn’t do anything! I swear, I didn’t touch her!” I guess this was because all I wanted to

358 do was to be closer to Sallie, and I knew our friends at the conference suspected that
359 something more physical had gone on.

360

361 My friend looked at me, speechless. Then she said “I can’t believe how you’re
362 feeling about all of this.” My emotions were all over the place. I was rocked. But I was
363 happy about what I was feeling. Giddy, in a way. The kids came back and our
364 conversation had to end. But I had to tell someone. Obviously at that point it could not
365 be my husband.

Part III: Home and Family

366

367

368 So now I was home.

369

370 I had been married since 1990 to a first generation Italian/German man who is an
371 only child. He grew up in a small town in upstate New York, populated with extended
372 family from his Italian side. He had a bachelor's degree in biology and worked over the
373 years in pharmaceuticals. He was one of the very few in his family who left that area of
374 upstate New York. He was a kind and gentle man, a great cook, a lover of golf, hockey
375 and football. I loved him deeply when we married. I very consciously decided to have
376 my second child based on the fact that I thought he was such a good dad to Lily and
377 partner to me. Of course we had some differences and struggles, but they were handled
378 lovingly. Our home was a peaceful place. This was of great significance to me, since my
379 home as a child was often chaotic and violent. It was important to me that my children
380 did not experience what I did as a child. I wanted them to know their home and family
381 life as a place of peace and security.

382

383 Looking back, our troubles began after the birth of our second child. Peter's
384 company was sold, and he was out of work for almost a year and a half. When he
385 returned to work it was with a company he had been previously employed by, and he was
386 quite unhappy. Peter and I seemed to have very different ways of coping with hardship.
387 I want to be able to talk about our differences in a descriptive way, without positioning
388 one way as better than the other. Perhaps that is naïve. But there is a way that hardship

389 and struggle makes me push myself harder, and become more determined to succeed. It
390 is the resilience built into me from childhood. It is the loss I suffered at a young age.

391

392 That part of the story needs to be told.

393

394 I have told this story time and time again, and in each telling there is something I

395 have not said before. The first time I wrote about it was as a graduate student in family

396 therapy, when I was in my twenties. The graduate assistant commented that it was an

397 achievement just to *write* the story. That was twenty- five years ago. Since then, I have

398 become more compassionate to the players in my family drama, particularly my father.

399 But this narrative never loses its raw edge – the memory of my childhood terror is distinct

400 and clear. I have had to find ways to live with that as a constant companion; it is more

401 present at some times than others. When Lily was two I felt a fresh surge of the trauma.

402 Every day with Lily I could see myself as the little girl. In mothering her I experienced

403 what it was like as a two-year old, what she needed, what had in fact happened to me.

404 There was a terrible split in the family at that time; my father and his family became cut

405 off from each other, and that began his descent. Always overbearing and prone to drink,

406 he became violent and cruel. Despite medical and psychiatric hospitalizations his

407 alcoholism went undiagnosed. I never knew him not to drink. After particularly violent

408 episodes, there were moves out of the home. I stayed with family friends, cousins, and

409 aunts. I was very young when this happened, five, eight years old. We would return

410 home, with no explanation. My mother was completely dependent upon my father

411 financially. I endeavored to become not-her.

412 I tell this part of the story to place it beside my life with Peter and the children.
413 Our home was, as I said, peaceful. We were focused on the children, and did not fight,
414 yell or curse at each other. Imagine how important that was to me – how soothed I was by
415 the calm. I had two beautiful children and a partner that supported my professional life.
416 That too was of utmost importance. Because the way to be NOT my mother was to never
417 be in a place of financial dependence. I even had difficulty taking time off when I had
418 the children. My own career and financial security were insurance that I would be able to
419 be in a heterosexual marriage and not suffer the oppression of my mother. So I would
420 attend conferences and write for publication: This was an accepted part of my
421 relationship with Peter, even when it took time from him and the children.

422

423 I left my friend Wendy and came home. It was routine: Fix the dinner, get the
424 kids to bed. The following day was a Monday, my longest day of work. For years I had
425 been running groups on Monday evenings, so I would work late. I had resolved at least
426 for that day not to contact Sallie. I would just give it some time, and see what happened.
427 But sometime that Monday afternoon I received a message from her. In her distinct,
428 somewhat timid voice she said, "After having had so much contact it felt pretty strange
429 not to talk to you. So I just wanted to see how your re-entry was going." Sallie was still
430 on the east coast, as a summer faculty member at a women's college.

431

432 I returned the phone call and left the message that I would stay in the office after
433 work that evening and call her back.

434 That Monday evening, after clients and colleagues left I sat at the desk in what
435 was known as the “team room” and called Sallie. It was good to hear her voice and we
436 talked easily about our work that day. We somehow got to the point in the conversation
437 concerning what was happening between us. I had decided before the call that I would
438 just take a deep breath and tell the truth. So I began:

439

440 “I have had energy on you since the day we met. I don’t know what it is, but I
441 know at least I’d like to be your friend.”

442

443 I could hear Sallie’s shock on the other end of the phone. After a moment she
444 asked. “Do you have an open marriage?”

445

446 “A what? Open marriage? Why, no, I’ve never had the need to. . .”

447

448 “Well, I will *not* have an affair.”

449

450 “OK, OK, look, we’ll just work on being friends, that’s all,” I said, and noticed
451 my felt disappointment. “And if I want something more, I’ll do whatever I need to do on
452 my end.”

453

454 Was I really serious? All I knew was that I was swimming in feelings so large
455 that I could not contain them. But putting words to those feelings was a different matter.
456 Affair? No, for now I just wanted to stay open to these feelings.

457 We continued to talk, about all kinds of things. What I remember most about
458 these early conversations were their ease, the feeling of being really listened to, heard.
459 And my heart and chest being wide open and burning hot. Sallie was curious about me
460 and asked question after question until we were in this unending deep intimate
461 conversation that always left me feeling like I wanted more. That was the predominant
462 feeling: I want more of this. No matter how long we talked, and later, how much time we
463 had together, I was left with wanting more.

464

465 I don't remember whether or not we agreed that night to talk the next day, but we
466 did, and everyday thereafter.

467 Since my return home from the conference in June, I had just about stopped
468 eating. I had a ton of energy, and was always nauseous. I became full after a few bites of
469 food. But I felt good. I was doing Bikram yoga three to four times a week. In a room
470 heated to 104 degrees, we went through twenty-six postures of the spine. I was losing
471 weight and in incredible physical condition.

472

473 But I was walking around with this dilemma: what did it mean that I kept longing
474 for more contact with Sallie? Why did I feel that I could never get enough? I told her
475 that I respected what she said about not having an affair, and that if I wanted to pursue
476 something with her I would do what was necessary on my end. What did that mean? I
477 couldn't even say the word "divorce" or begin to think about the anguish that would
478 cause Peter, or the disruption for my children.

479

480 I am not good at hiding my feelings. I have been told that I could never play
481 poker because my feelings show on my face. So this was a terrible dilemma. I was
482 married to a man, and my heart was open wide to Sallie. She was on my mind
483 constantly. We agreed to try to build a friendship, but I knew I wanted more, and who
484 builds a friendship by talking several times a day? But she was in another state, and soon
485 to be on the west coast again. I did not want to stop our conversations and the incredible
486 surge of feeling I was having.

487

488 Sallie had dinner with an old friend in Northampton and related the story of my
489 long term, long distance crush on her. The friend offered that she experienced Sallie as

490 “the absent minded professor” type, not good at picking up cues. That seemed to really
491 fit. I could not imagine how Sallie was without a partner. She had beautiful piercing
492 blue eyes, was smart, soft spoken and well respected. So that initially became a way for
493 me to think about what was happening: At least Sallie could take this gift of knowing
494 about herself from our time together. I wrote something to that effect in my first card to
495 her. I wanted her to have it when she arrived home in Berkeley from her six weeks away
496 back east.

497

498 Sallie called from the airport the day she was flying back to California. I wasn’t
499 available, so she left a message: “I just wanted to talk one last time while I was on the
500 same coast . . .” I listened to the message, noted that her flight had left, and felt a huge
501 loss, like a gaping hole in my chest.

502

503 Among many other things, Sallie and I talked about music. We decided to
504 exchange some of our favorites. On July 9th I sent her a card with the John Meyer “Room
505 for Squares” CD. My note said:

506

507 Dear Sallie: I’ve been listening to this CD nonstop since I’ve been home (from the
508 conference). You’re getting my “gently used” copy because I’m not sure when I can get
509 back to the music store – and I wanted to share it with you.

510 Many of the songs speak to me, but I’m sure you’ll guess which one is my favorite. It’s
511 very beautiful. Enjoy! Love Jackie

512

513 Sallie emails me on the 12th of July:

514 Amazing...I'm not making this up.....Today, I came across a short list of CDs that I had

515 flagged to consider getting. #1 on the list was "Room for Squares". Then I came home

516 to your present. Thanks for sharing. So, I'm listening and feeling dense about your

517 favorite...please tell me or do I need to guess....

518

519 I picked up the phone and called her. "You can't guess my favorite?"

520

521 "No", she said, "I can't."

522

523 "Track #4, "Your Body is a Wonderland"

524

525 "Ohhhhh...." was all she could say.

526

527 I had not one bit of reserve or shyness about telling her this. There was an

528 unmistakable sense of strength and urgency in my desire for her. And I *liked* feeling like

529 that.

530

531 Sallie sent me a CD as well, Norah Jones, *Come Away with Me*. The card read:

532

533 Jackie, I thought this CD might fit the mood we have created...Perhaps, for your birthday,

534 which I didn't even know to celebrate...Or for your generosity and kindness...for creating

535 such surprising joy...or just because good music should be shared. Thank you, Love,
536 Sallie.

537

538 The photo on the accompanying card was of a tornado touching down.

539

540 And it was, just like that, I found myself in the midst of a tornado. Over the
541 course of a few weeks my life had changed drastically. I thought about Sallie every
542 possible moment, talked to her at every opportunity: All while I was living with Peter
543 and my two children. And for that I felt tremendous guilt. Guilt, and pending doom. For
544 brief, fleeting moments I could understand the consequences of my feelings. Hurting
545 Peter in a way I could never have imagined, ever. Disrupting the lives of Lily and John.
546 Maybe, I thought, maybe I could do something in six years. Lily will be out of high
547 school and John would just be entering. Maybe then.

548

549 And so began my private schizophrenic experience. In the course of a single day,
550 or hour for that matter, I felt unadulterated joy, a sense of openness and excitement,
551 followed by panic and confusion. I had to use every ounce of my yoga training to breathe
552 deeply, try to stay in the moment, and not feel as if I would be swallowed by it all. But I
553 did have a very centered core that stood strong. I practiced tree pose over and over again.
554 Standing tall and centered, rooted to the earth. Stillness, focus. Focus on where I want to
555 be. Where was that? With Sallie. But I had no idea yet how to get there.

556 It has been a tradition since Lily's birth that each summer I travel back to
557 Massachusetts to visit with friends, and play at Good Harbor Beach in Gloucester. I
558 loved taking the kids there and watching them play on that beautiful, expansive beach.
559 This was something I usually did on my own, alone with the kids. I recall my trip when
560 John was just five months old; there was something about doing this by myself that was
561 of importance to me – a rite of passage – a way to show independence after having my
562 second child. Never mind that I came home exhausted and crippled. I liked this time
563 alone. The space that Peter and I afforded each other was something I thought worked
564 about our marriage.

565

566 My annual trip to Massachusetts took on special meaning that summer of 2002. I
567 would be able to talk with Sallie, and really spend time with her without being at the
568 office or worrying about what Peter thought. I was very close to my friends, and one
569 sister in particular. It was typical for me to have daily conversations with Wendy, Donna,
570 or my sister. So I could be on the phone with Sallie. But the trip to Massachusetts
571 afforded me the ability to linger after the kids were in bed, to call at all different times to
572 tell her of our adventures. I even invited her to go along with us. She thought I was nuts
573 for even considering it. I was still not allowing myself to see the whole picture,
574 consequences and all, all at once. Just glimpses for now. Just keep checking this out.

575

576 Sallie did ask me when we were in New York, "Do you think you would ever be
577 free to come into the city and have lunch? I'm usually here over Labor Day weekend."

578 “Labor Day weekend? Who comes into the city then? That’s when people *leave* the city,
579 go to the beach,” I said. “No one comes into the city then.”

580

581 “Well, I’m usually here for the US Open, and a visit with my mom. She’s out on Fire
582 Island in August.”

583

584 “Yeah, I’m sure I could meet you for lunch if you were here.”

585

586 So we did have these little conversations about seeing each other again sometime.
587 That’s why I put it out to her that she could join me and the kids. But she was right, it
588 was a pretty crazy idea.

589

590 Sallie and I agreed that we would make compilation tapes for each other. All of
591 our favorite music. I was delighted, and wanted to get hers made before I left for
592 Massachusetts. So boldly, I took out all of my most romantic favorites: Chaka Khan,
593 “Ain’t Nobody”, Luther Vandross, “Never Too Much”, and of course, John Meyer, track
594 #4, “Your Body is a Wonderland.” I sang, danced and smiled my way through making
595 that tape. I sent along this note:

596

597 “I send this off wishing I had time to wrap it in ribbons and bows, but I am certain that
598 you’ll hear all the heart and soul that went into making it for you, Sallie.

599 I haven't had time for a final listen so I'm sure there are bad transitions and volume
600 differences as well. No matter. I wanted you to have this as you drive down the freeway.
601 I hope it delights you as much as it did me in thinking of you this way. Love, Jackie"

602

603 On 7/25, I awoke to this email from Sallie:

604

605 "I could not fall asleep last night....jazzed, I guess, or rocked (and rolled)....

606 I will look forward to the many listenings ahead that, in true postmodernist fashion, will
607 reveal all the deepest layers of message and meaning..or simply, great enjoyment. I have
608 this long day to get through before I get my R & R at "summer camp"....I guess the same
609 is true for you. I hope it passes with ease. I will look forward to talking tonight.

610 Thank you also for the conversation yesterday...for me, it was another wonderful
611 connection and deepening. Love, Sallie"

612

613 I was to receive my tape when I was in Massachusetts. I set out with the kids.

614 We had quite an itinerary planned. First stop: Aunt Donna's.

615 Aunt Donna, Uncle Rich and the kids live in a big house on over an acre of land
616 in Chappaqua, New York. Some of the rooms are still furnished with worn treasures
617 from our college years. The house was built for lavish meals and entertaining. I have
618 “my own room” in the finished basement, a space to myself with a private bath. I usually
619 never saw the kids after I arrived. Lily would be with Sammi, Donna’s daughter nine
620 months younger than she. John would be with the twins, Alli and Robert. I would see
621 my kids at dinner and bedtime. Otherwise they ran around gleefully unsupervised. *This*
622 was our kind of visit – an overnight.

623

624 Donna and Rich (ok, typically Rich) spend hours preparing and cooking a meal.
625 We open wine, hang out, and talk. I have described my time with Donna as “like being
626 at a banquet.” That’s how it feels. Our time together is magical. We are each other’s
627 best cheerleaders. I think no one is as smart and fabulous as she, and vice versa. Not to
628 mention we are both redheads, an essential quality that seals our relationship and binds us
629 together for all time.

630

631 Yet I was uncertain whether I was going to tell her about Sallie. It was all so new,
632 uncharted. But sometime that afternoon my cell phone rang, and with great delight I
633 excused myself to take this obviously very important call. I clearly had energy around
634 this call, and when Donna and I were out walking later, I told her the story. I wanted my
635 friend to know what was going on with me. “I am just over the moon about this woman.
636 And I think I really want to check this out – to be with her.”

637

638 Donna said: “I have *never* seen you like this. Unbelievable. You seem so sure,
639 and so incredibly clear - and happy. Anything I can do for you hon, anything.”

640

641 I knew she meant it. I knew I could count on her in so many ways, and in the year to
642 come, I did.

643

644 We packed up after a big, leisurely breakfast the next morning. The kids had only
645 recently gotten to the point of no tantrums at goodbye. We hugged and hugged, and
646 drove away, promising another visit soon.

647

648 Now it was only a matter of three or so more hours before our second stop at
649 another very special place. There we would see two more of our favorite people: Aunt
650 Pants and Aunt Mo.

651

652 Aunt Pants and Aunt Mo were friends that I had worked with in the mid-to-late
653 1980s. Aunt Pants (real name, Nancy) lived with her partner, Alice, and their two
654 children in Lakeville, Massachusetts. Auntie Mo Mo, as the children called her, (real
655 name, Mo) lived in Boston, and would come to Aunt Pants' house to visit with us.
656 Sometimes we would stay in her fabulous "apartment" in Boston. That would be later in
657 our trip. For now she'd be coming to Lakeville.

658

659 We arrived, the kids went off to play, and I grabbed Pants and told her what was
660 going on. She had an infectious laugh and a heavy Boston accent. "Oh my Gawd" she
661 said, "You're in deep trouble." She had a big smile on her face. I could really joke with
662 her: "Come on, Pants, did you know this would happen to me? Fess up! Why didn't you
663 tell me?" Pants just laughed and laughed. Later on in the visit I would say "Come on,
664 Pants, give me some hints! Can't you give me some pointers about being with a woman?"
665 Pants just laughed still, saying "Get outa here!" or "You're in b-i-g trouble!" Always the
666 Irishwoman, she was NOT going to talk about sex with me.

667

668 My package from Sallie was due to arrive the next day. I had given her the
669 address in Lakeville. I waited eagerly for the UPS truck. When it arrived, I set the kids
670 up with a movie and took the tape and tape player upstairs for privacy. I had as long as
671 the movie lasted.

672

673 I opened the package to find a card along with the cassette tape. The card had a
674 black background, with a silver blue snake, bathed in light emerging from a lotus flower.
675 And a Rumi poem:
676
677 But what
678 Can stay hidden?
679
680 Love's secret is always lifting
681 It's head
682 Out from under
683 The covers.
684
685 'Here I am!'
686
687 Inside, Sallie wrote:
688
689 Jackie:
690 I like smiling so much.
691 My heart is full.
692 Hopefully, this "outpouring" will fill yours.
693 I will imagine you listening, with a smile.
694 S.

695 I held the card and slowly passed my hand over it. I could tell that she had taken
696 care, with the card and note. I liked the implication that there was more to this: But what
697 can stay hidden? Love's secret is always lifting its head out from under the covers....

698

699 I relaxed on the bed and turned on the music. I smiled at the similarities in taste,
700 the hidden messages in lyric and song. I wept with joy and longing, and for the
701 connection I felt with her through this music. I ached to be close to her, to touch her face,
702 to hold her hair in my hands. That is what I remember most clearly: I wanted to touch her
703 face and run my hands through her hair. I wanted to get lost in the softness of her. Time
704 was suspended as song after song washed over me. I knew she was thinking of me with
705 each selection – a sweet intimacy in her every choice. Then, reality:

706

707 “Mom, the movie's over!! Let's go to the lake and swim!!”

708

709 Moms are used to switching gears like this. Abruptly I do so for the millionth
710 time, but the delicious memories stay with me like a welcome companion. Sallie is with
711 me, and I too am smiling a lot.

712

713 That week in Massachusetts I experienced the freedom of being able to talk with
714 Sallie at any time without being concerned what Peter would think. The kids are used to
715 me talking daily to Wendy and Donna, so they just knew Mom had a new friend. When
716 the children were asleep, Sallie and I would settle in for long conversations that felt
717 luxurious in the expanse of time we had and deep connection we felt. I didn't have to

718 worry about getting up early for work. Wonderful as they were, these early conversations
719 were not without challenge. I'm not sure what Sallie was checking out: my courage?
720 Resolve? Tenacity? Maybe, just my level of homophobia. Her questions were not from a
721 place of challenge; gently, she would ask if I thought I could kiss her in public. I resisted
722 my urge to scream YES!! because those questions touched the fire inside of me that
723 burned from those days in New York. But I stayed with her quiet and gentle tone –
724 “Yes,” I said, “I would be very delighted to kiss you in public.” I was thinking in public,
725 in private, anywhere, just please give me the chance to kiss you....

726

727 I guess since I kept meeting her in my response to such questions, Sallie got a
728 little more bold. A few nights later while at Mo's apartment in Boston, and after the kids
729 were asleep, Sallie asked, “And just what would you do in bed?”

730

731 OK – my head was swimming!! How do I answer *that* one? Sallie knew I had not
732 been with a woman sexually as an adult. How could I meet her here? I'm sure there was
733 a long pause. I remembered my mantra: Breathe deeply and tell the truth. So I slowly
734 began:

735

736 “Well, I have been thinking a lot about touching your face. I would stand and face you,
737 and take such pleasure in just looking at you. Looking into your eyes. Very slowly I
738 would take you in. My hands would gently touch your face. The front of my hands and
739 the back too. I would move my hands down your cheeks, again and again. Then I would
740 move one hand to your hair. I've wanted to feel your hair, too.”

741 I could hear her breathing on the other end of the phone as I again met her.

742

743 “I’ve thought about kissing your knees, too.” Sallie had told me about her history of

744 playing tennis. She had had several surgeries and was in almost constant pain.

745

746 “You talk about how much they hurt you. So I would gently kiss all around each knee so

747 that you could feel some pleasure there.”

748

749 “Uh, huh,” I heard softly.

750

751 And then, I told her the rest.

752

753 “Well, ok then,” Sallie said slowly. There was just a hint of surprise in her voice.

754

755 I gave a *really good* answer.

756 And so began the tender negotiations between Sallie and me. Sallie, seven years
757 my senior, and out as a lesbian for over twenty-five years, and me, a heterosexually
758 married woman with two children who had never been in an intimate sexual relationship
759 with a woman before. I felt at a distinct disadvantage. What did I know about being a
760 lesbian?

761

762 I mean, I must have known *something*.

763

764 Lesbians were different from me somehow, or I from them. Different, distinct,
765 separate. They had their own communities, with boundaries that excluded me. I was able
766 to have close friendships with lesbian women, but I remained outside of a particular
767 experience.

768

769 I knew that being a lesbian was certainly more acceptable, even viewed as “way
770 cool” by my daughter’s generation. Ellen DeGeneres had been out for several years, and
771 Rosie O’Donnell made the cover of People magazine. “Lesbian chic” had been coined by
772 Esquire magazine eight years prior, and in 1996 Melissa Ethridge was featured with her
773 pregnant partner on the cover of Newsweek.

774

775 It seemed that everywhere I turned in that time, gay and lesbian issues were in
776 the news – quite literally. In 2002, The New York Times began to publish same-sex
777 union announcements in my favorite section of the Sunday Times – the Style section. I
778 devoured these public narratives of commitment and love between women. While all of

779 this churning is going on in my heart and my head about Sallie, it seemed my world was

780 giving me the message that it could be safe to love her.

781

782 I saw an opening.

783 I was sad that my trip to Massachusetts was coming to an end. I would miss
784 these leisurely, off the clock talks with Sallie. We were growing so close. So many
785 times in the coming months I would experience this duality of feeling: undaunted joy and
786 excruciating pain. So even though I was sad, I knew it was getting closer to the time we
787 would finally meet again in New York. Friday, August 30th.

788

789 Sallie and I furiously made plans, attending to all the details . We wanted a hotel
790 room with a view of the park. We agreed to bring our favorite poetry to read to each
791 other, and photos of ourselves as girls. We were hungry for every last detail of each
792 other's lives. I scheduled a private yoga lesson for Saturday afternoon, and made dinner
793 reservations for that night. Donna helped out by consulting on the hotel issue. We
794 decided to bring our compilation tapes so we could listen to them together. I was to pick
795 Sallie up at the airport that Friday evening around 7pm. I had arranged a car service to
796 take me there, and then take us into the city.

797

798 At no point in this planning did I have any ambivalence about meeting her. I was
799 certain, and clear. This was something I wanted to check out. I had to. My feeling of
800 connection with her was like nothing I had known, and I knew I wanted this in my life.

801

802 Friday the 30th of August, 2002, finally, mercifully arrived. I kissed the children
803 goodbye, letting them know exactly when mom would be back and promising to call. I
804 had said that I was going to a yoga weekend in New York, and would be back on Sunday
805 afternoon. After the months of talking on the phone, and imagining what it would be like
806 to kiss and hold her, my heart was just about to jump out of my chest.

807

808 We arrived at the airport. I left the car waiting and walked to the gate. Feeling
809 shy, I stood behind a crowd and waited. Finally I saw Sallie. She was wearing a green
810 blouse. She was so beautiful to me; I noticed the way her shoulder length hair moved as
811 she walked and thought how soft she looked. We saw each other and smiled. She came
812 into my arms and we hugged like old friends. There was a commonality in our feelings
813 for each other. I knew she felt the same way as me, the way we were somehow,
814 inexplicably drawn to each other. I tentatively kissed her on the lips (ok to prove once
815 and for all I could do it in public) and we set off to the waiting car.

816

817 One more part of the journey left, the ride to Manhattan. I prayed for no traffic on
818 this Friday night of a holiday weekend. I just wanted to be alone with her, finally.
819 Miraculously, we were in the city at our hotel on the park in a half hour. The check in
820 felt interminable, but finally, we were in our room alone.

821

822 We closed the door behind us, and kissed. Her lips were soft, exploring. I ran to
823 the window to move the lamp out of the way of our park view and jumped on the bed. I

824 wanted to feel her body against mine, and hold her, as I had imagined so many times.
825 Finally to touch her face and hair, to feel her breath.

826

827 As we made love that night Sallie said “Just stay with me.” I thought “Are you
828 kidding? I am so with you it is ripping me apart inside.” I was right with her, clear and
829 present in my wanting, and receptive. Receptive, and helplessly open.

830

831 We slept on and off during that first night. Upon each awakening we reached out
832 to the other and began to kiss, touch and make love again. In the morning we celebrated
833 our love of good coffee and The New York Times. We read poetry to each other and
834 laughed at the photos of ourselves as little girls. We played the tapes over and over and
835 confessed what we had been thinking when we listened alone.

836

837 We left the hotel and walked hand in hand in the streets of New York. Sallie
838 decided to find what she swore was the light I was standing under the night we met
839 outside the theatre in June. I said it was a street sign – but she insisted there was a light
840 all around me when she finally “saw” me that night. (It was a street sign.)

841

842 We talked for hours, each so curious about the other. We took our yoga lesson.
843 When we left I said, “I could really go for some oysters now!” Like magic, there before
844 us was “Lundy’s Famous Oysters.” So in we went, feeling decadent and lucky. We had
845 all the time in the world this weekend. Face to face, bodies curled together, we explored
846 each other. Over dinner, oysters, yoga, The New York Times, we pieced our lives

847 together and had a sense of finding something we each had lost long ago. It was pure
848 visceral intuition that I was recognizing something I had no words for. Did I know her in
849 another lifetime? Our connection was so clear, yet crazy, considering I was married and
850 she lived 3000 miles away.

851

852 On Sunday morning Sallie was going out to get coffee. I quietly asked, "Please,
853 don't go yet." I wasn't sure why, but knew I didn't want to experience the feeling of her
854 leaving me at that moment. We made love again and I fell into a sleep while Sallie went
855 out. But I would come to be familiar with this terrible feeling of losing her, of being left
856 alone, like someone had cut off a limb. Raw, bleak emptiness. Losing her. I had known
857 this feeling before.

858

859 On Sunday I went home to my family and kids. Sallie was spending another day
860 in New York and we were meeting for a few hours on Tuesday before she flew back to
861 California.

862

863 I went home feeling as though I had crossed this huge boundary and liked what I
864 found on the other side. I was the same person, I did not feel different. It was more like I
865 grew, that I added a dimension to myself. That more aptly described it. It was not as if I
866 was a heterosexual before I went to New York and a lesbian when I came home. In fact I
867 rarely used that term, lesbian, except to describe *the relationship* with Sallie. I did not
868 feel that I had been a lesbian all along and suppressed or denied it. I just had given
869 myself permission to be open to an experience and to explore.

870 I met Sallie on Tuesday and brought a picnic for us in yet another hotel room. I
871 stayed as long as I could, having had to again make up an excuse to leave Peter and the
872 kids. I hated the lying and duplicity, but knew that I had only this opportunity to see her
873 before we were separated by 3000 miles again.

874

875 We were getting ready to say goodbye. Sallie walked outside with me, and stood
876 beside my car. I started the engine. I found it hard to look at her. The feelings were so
877 intense. "I love you," she said. "I love you too, Sallie." And I drove away without
878 looking back.

Part IV: The Tornado

879

880

881 It was only several days later that I realized I desperately needed someone to talk
882 to. I was on the phone with Sallie and in telling her this, I began to cry. I thought of
883 someone I knew, a well known and well respected colleague who I worked closely with
884 over ten years ago. Sallie knew her too from our professional organization. Since this
885 therapist knew both of us I needed to check it out with her. When Sallie said, “Of course,
886 Jack, go ahead and call her,” the tears began to flow. I was so full of emotion. I had
887 been practicing opening my heart, and my chest was wide open. I needed some help.

888

889 Cassie was a therapist who was now living in New England. I knew her quite
890 well. She was known for her work with gay and lesbian issues, and most importantly, I
891 trusted and felt safe with her. I called later that day and left a message wondering if we
892 could do some phone work. She called back and we set up a time.

893

894 That Saturday, September 7, 2002, I had my first session with Cassie. In only a
895 little over two months my world had changed dramatically. The story came pouring out:
896 about New York in June, our summer phone calls and finally, our meeting. Everything
897 good, everything I hoped and imagined about being with Sallie came true. The pure joy
898 and clarity of that sat side by side with the excruciating consequences of those feelings. I
899 could not imagine hurting Peter, initiating divorce, telling the kids. He would be
900 devastated. I could barely utter the word “divorce.” Yet I knew that I was living a lie: I

901 was in love with Sallie. How I hated lying, what this meant, how I would hurt him and
902 my children.

903

904 Sometime during that first conversation I read to Cassie a poem that Sallie had
905 given to me in New York. I sobbed as I read it, remembering Sallie's voice in our hotel
906 that morning:

907

908 Variation on the Word Sleep

909 By Margaret Atwood

910

911 I would like to watch you sleeping,
912 which may not happen.

913 I would like to watch you,

914 sleeping. I would like to sleep

915 with you, to enter

916 your sleep as its smooth dark wave

917 slides over my head

918

919 and walk with you through that lucent

920 wavering forest of bluegreen leaves

921 with its watery sun & three moons

922 towards the cave where you must descend,

923 towards your worst fear

924

925 I would like to give you the silver

926 branch, the small white flower, the one

927 word that will protect you

928 from the grief at the center

929 of your dream, from the grief

930 at the center. I would like to follow

931 you up the long stairway

932 again & become

933 the boat that would row you back

934 carefully, a flame

935 in two cupped hands

936 to where your body lies

937 beside me, as you enter

938 it as easily as breathing in

939

940 I would like to be the air that inhabits you for a moment
941 only. I would like to be that unnoticed
942 & that necessary. 1
943

944 “Wow,” said Cassie as I finished. “She really gets what you have to go through.”

945 “Yeah” I said through my tears, “she really does.”

946

947 I began to have regular appointments with Cassie; they were like a life-line. In
948 these conversations I found a space to explore the complete schizophrenia of my feelings:
949 on the one hand, the panic and dread about telling Peter, initiating divorce, and the impact
950 on the children; and on the other, the pure joy I felt about the possibility of a life with
951 Sallie. Cassie responded very directly to me. For example, it was crucial that she tell me
952 that Peter would eventually recover from this devastating loss. She understood the depth
953 and clarity of my feeling for Sallie, and over time helped me to formulate a plan. One of
954 the most painful aspects of this experience was keeping the secret from Peter. It went
955 against my core. I tried to practice patience, but I was anxious to tell the truth. I lived in a
956 context where I was perceived as his partner, when my heart was with someone else. He
957 expected me to continue to be his partner; after all, he was unaware. So he expected me
958 to hold his hand, make love, snuggle in bed. All the things I did, until June. I made
959 excuses about medical problems that prohibited me from being sexual with him. I hated
960 the deception, but I needed to have more time with Sallie to be certain.

961

962 So I traveled to see her whenever I could, and planned to tell Peter right after the
963 holidays. We were planning a 50th wedding anniversary party for his parents the
964 weekend of Thanksgiving, and I did not want to tell him before that. So I decided to get

965 through the holidays and tell him the first of the year. But I did begin to use this time to
966 prepare.

967

968 Later in that month of September I met with my minister, Kathleen. We had
969 become friends, so she knew Peter and the kids as well, and I trusted her.

970

971 I walked into her light-filled office that day and began to unload everything from
972 my purse that I came to carry around with me lest they be found: music tapes, cards,
973 printed emails. I used to keep them in a zippered middle pocket in my purse, and it was
974 bulging. I took everything out and put it on the coffee table between us. I was unloading
975 all the baggage I carried around. Then I told her the story about Sallie.

976

977 Kathleen's response was crucial in that once again I was reassured that I could do
978 this, and my children would be alright. "You have very strong relationships with the
979 kids. I know it will be hard for a while, but I'm sure they'll be fine."

980

981 A few months later, sometime in November, I visited my attorney. Wendy came
982 with me. I needed to understand the law, and whether or not my being in a lesbian
983 relationship would affect my ability to have custody of Lily and John. I came to learn
984 that I was protected, that New Jersey had some of the strongest legal precedent
985 concerning gay and lesbian parents.

986 The consistency of these messages about my role as a mother had tremendous
987 impact upon my ability to continue my relationship with Sallie and plan with certainty the
988 eventuality of telling Peter and initiating divorce. If I was not reassured by those who
989 knew me and the children as well as the laws of the state, I could not have moved
990 forward. As much as I loved Sallie, I could not risk losing my children, either physically
991 or emotionally. I was, it seemed, first and foremost a mother, and it was this part of me
992 that was most prominent in those early months. I remember thinking “Maybe I can do
993 this in six years – Lily will be on her way to college and John will be starting high
994 school.” As my feelings grew for Sallie it became abundantly clear that I could not live
995 this way for six years.

996

997 The times I had with Sallie were precious in that fall of 2002. We met at a hotel
998 in Connecticut in late September for a night, and had five days together in Niagra Falls in
999 October. These visits were combined with professional conferences, so I had legitimate
1000 excuses to attend. But I was acutely aware of having to leave the children in order to see
1001 Sallie. I longed for the day when I could have them both – together. Seeing Sallie at that
1002 time meant that I had to say goodbye to the children.

1003

1004 With each visit I grew closer and more in love, if that was possible. Friends kept
1005 expecting to hear me say “I had a great time....BUT.....” That never happened. I was
1006 unwavering in my certainty that I wanted to be with her; each visit only validated that.

1007 It now seems hard to believe, but that December I traveled to California to see
1008 Sallie. I wanted to be with her in her home, to know that part of her. This was the last
1009 piece I needed before I told Peter: I wanted to have a fuller sense of Sallie and her life by
1010 seeing her home and community. I was acutely aware that I was stepping into a new
1011 community myself; not just a large group of closely knit friends, but a community of
1012 lesbians. I knew that had particular meaning, but I wasn't quite sure what it was. I was a
1013 little nervous at the first dinner party; unaccustomed to being in the room with my
1014 partner's ex lovers. This was one of the first differences I noticed between the
1015 heterosexual world and the lesbian community: the continued relating to previous
1016 partners and lovers. In the heterosexual community when you divorce or break up, you
1017 disappear, sever all ties. There is rarely the "remaining good friends". Yet this was ever
1018 present in the lesbian community.

1019

1020 This was also the first time I knew that I was being seen as a lesbian. It felt
1021 strange, because I felt the same, but knew there was a difference in the language others
1022 would use to describe me. I recall an instance in which several of us were moving a
1023 piece of furniture at Sallie's house; we had more people than necessary. One of her
1024 friends jokingly said "How many lesbians does it take to screw in a lightbulb?" We all
1025 laughed, and I was aware that now I was one of the lesbians – that this was how people
1026 would describe me now. It felt unfamiliar, but good; at least I wasn't being perceived as
1027 someone who couldn't possibly be in relationship with a woman. Sallie's friends were
1028 genuinely happy for her, and I felt welcomed.

1029

1030 We had a wonderful visit that December of 2002. The fact that we were in
1031 Sallie's home instead of a hotel room added a sense of comfort, ease, and intimacy. I met
1032 her friends, we traveled to the wine country. We ate at her favorite restaurants. The trip
1033 was magical and fortifying, for we knew that the next time we saw each other I would be
1034 in a different part of the journey: telling Peter and dealing with the fallout.
1035

1036 Isn't there a saying about "The best laid plans...."?

1037

1038 The plan was for my sister to pick me up at the airport upon my arrival back in
1039 New Jersey, since she worked close by. I called her when I got off of the plane and was
1040 surprised to hear that she was at home with the kids; Peter wanted to pick me up. I was
1041 by the baggage claim when I turned to see him walk towards me. I gave him a short,
1042 awkward hug, and we walked to the car. We drove a few minutes before he said, "Listen,
1043 something is going on, and I want you to tell me about it. I found an email from your
1044 friend Jack and it said something like 'whatever you decide, we'll be behind you'.
1045 You've been traveling a lot and I need to know what's happening. Is there someone
1046 else?" There was no anger in his voice, just fear, and pleading.

1047

1048 I was stunned, and totally unprepared for this. For a while I said nothing, and we
1049 drove in silence. Then Peter pulled into a store parking lot a few miles from our home. I
1050 looked straight ahead and said, "I've been struggling for a while. I've been struggling...."

1051

1052 "I've been struggling with wanting to be with a woman."

1053

1054 He looked at me, in total shock and disbelief. "Just think about what you're
1055 doing. Think about what's at stake here."

1056

1057 As if I hadn't?

1058 We drove the rest of the way home in silence. The kids and I were thrilled to see
1059 each other and the rest of the evening was absorbed with their needs and my reconnecting
1060 with them. We had dinner together, and their Dad and I listened to their stories of the
1061 day, as if nothing was wrong.

1062

1063 I walked into the master bedroom, and said to Peter, “I’m moving my things
1064 upstairs and sleeping on the daybed.” “You don’t have to,” he said. “No, I need to. I
1065 need to take responsibility for this and separate myself.” I began to have a sense that I
1066 would need to be the one to make any major move, and I anticipated relief at this
1067 separation.

1068

1069 So upstairs I moved. The room at the top of the stairs was large and open with a
1070 bathroom and the children’s rooms adjacent to it. We had used it as a playroom, and now
1071 it had the desk and computer and was filled with overflowing bookcases. I used the
1072 computer and did much of my schoolwork there, so, beside the fact that the bed was a
1073 single, it was comfortable. Oh, yes, and it lacked privacy. But the kids were usually in
1074 bed before me, so I settled in and created a livable space for myself. We told the kids
1075 that Mommy was sleeping there because Dad had a snoring problem. They asked no
1076 questions. John, who was not a good sleeper, was thrilled to have Mommy so close by. I
1077 could close the door at the top of the stairs and call Sallie each night. That night I phoned
1078 her and began the conversation: “It’s started....”

1079

1080 I could hear the shock in her voice.

1081 I am not sure how I made it through those weeks. Peter relented and agreed to get
1082 a puppy for the kids for Christmas, so effort was put toward that. I was busy with the
1083 shopping and preparations, and of course my practice.

1084

1085 My sister Margaret and her family were coming east for the first time in many
1086 years for Christmas. My other sister, Ann, had planned a large family open house. I
1087 think that was one of the most difficult of days. The family's perception of me as happily
1088 married to Peter, the taking of family pictures, was unbearable. I was no longer his
1089 partner and it was only a matter of time before I could tell him, and everyone else. The
1090 façade was eating away at me; literally, by that time I had lost almost 30 pounds. But
1091 everyone told me how wonderful I looked. There was a part of me that was glowing,
1092 happy, in love. But not with whom they thought. I had a constant ache inside, a longing
1093 to move on, get through the day so I could be closer to being with Sallie.

1094

1095 A few days after Christmas I managed to get away and meet Sallie in Boston.
1096 We stayed alone at Mo's apartment. We had our own Christmas and New Years
1097 celebrations. Every time we were together, we connected more deeply, fell even more in
1098 love. That parting was particularly hard, because we were unsure when we would see
1099 each other again, and we knew it would be after Peter was told. A whole new phase.

1100 It turned out that after all the thought and planning, my telling Peter was rather
1101 uneventful. The day after New Years I told him that I was ready to give him more
1102 information about what was happening for me. After dinner the children were in the next
1103 room watching a movie. I told Peter I was ready to talk.

1104

1105 “OK, go ahead” he said.

1106

1107 “Here? With the kids in the next room?”

1108

1109 “Sure”.

1110

1111 So I lowered my voice. “Well, you know how I told you I was struggling with feelings of
1112 wanting to be with a woman,” I began. “Well, it is a particular person, Sallie, from the
1113 west coast. I’ve developed very deep feelings for her, and I want to be with her.”

1114

1115 “OK”, Peter said, “I’m not surprised.”

1116

1117 “That’s it? Do you have any questions?” I said.

1118

1119 “No, not really.”

1120

1121 So that was it. No yelling or tears; it was like I said we needed bread from the
1122 store. This became a pattern throughout the ensuing process of separation and divorce:

1123 Peter would only rarely ask a question or seek information; it was up to me to weigh what
1124 and how much information to impart. I knew he was not ready to divorce; I think he just
1125 did not believe me, or perhaps thought it was a “phase” I was going through. Surely, I
1126 believe he thought, surely Jackie will change her mind and come to her senses. He did not
1127 believe I was a lesbian. After all, he was my husband, and we had had a fairly good
1128 marriage with a satisfying physical relationship. He did not believe I would follow
1129 through with my plan to be with Sallie.

1130

1131 That night, after telling Peter, I joined the kids in front of the television, and was
1132 glad when it was time to put them to bed. I would be able to close the door upstairs and
1133 feel whatever small sense of peace I could.

1134

1135 Telling my sisters turned out to be another matter indeed. Ann, my eldest sister
1136 and thirteen years my senior, was first. She lived about twenty minutes away with her
1137 second husband, Frank. I made arrangements to come over with Lily and leave Lily with
1138 her uncle while Ann and I went out for coffee. Lily and I had plans to go to the mall after
1139 that.

1140

1141 Ann had a sense that something was wrong in my marriage, noticed my traveling,
1142 and had asked me about it. As a matter of fact, she had asked me if I was having an affair
1143 a few months earlier. I was as honest as I felt I could be at that time, and replied “I don’t
1144 think I could be with another man.” But I felt strongly about Peter being the first to

1145 know, out of respect to him. Unfortunately she experienced this as a personal betrayal, a
1146 lie. It only added to the brutality of her response to me.

1147

1148 We sat with our coffee and I began the conversation. It was a strategic beginning.

1149

1150 “I need your help.”

1151

1152 “I have fallen in love with someone else, and it happens to be a woman. It’s my
1153 friend Sallie from the west coast. It is the most wonderful partnership I have ever
1154 known.”

1155

1156 “I have told Peter. I want to be with Sallie. I know this means we’ll need to get a
1157 divorce. We’ll share custody of the children. Sallie will eventually move here, and we’ll
1158 have a home together and share custody with Peter.”

1159

1160 Ann’s voice was sharp and angry. “*Why don’t you just move to Berkeley?*”

1161

1162 I was shocked. How could she think I would leave the children? “I’m not
1163 moving to Berkeley. I’m their *mother!*”

1164

1165 “Listen, Jackie, this is crazy! If you do anything to hurt those children I will go to
1166 court and get custody. I will not let them get hurt! And I will ruin you professionally.”

1167

1168 My anger rose. I was a good mother, and had strong relationships with Lily and
1169 John. I would *not* buy into this narrative that I was damaging them beyond repair.
1170 Through gritted teeth I said, “Don’t mess with my mothering. I am a damn good mother
1171 and they have been my first concern.”

1172

1173 I think the awful conversation ended shortly after that. We got up to leave. I
1174 don’t recall the words as much as the feeling of being numbed by the shock of my sister
1175 threatening me. Threatening to take my children away!

1176

1177 I was left alone with Lily. I drove to the mall, in a fugue state. I tried to pay
1178 attention to her, to engage. I was in some state of post traumatic stress. Obviously Ann
1179 did not realize that being so cruel to me could have impact on Lily. We made our way
1180 through the afternoon of shopping, and went home. I was clearly in for the battle of my
1181 life.

1182

1183 Telling my sister Margaret was equally surreal. Neither sister asked questions
1184 about my falling in love with a woman. It was as is it was of no consequence. No
1185 questions were asked about how, or why. Nothing was asked about Sallie. During a
1186 conversation some months later with Margaret, she did assume that Sallie was a gym
1187 teacher! I recall saying, “What? Where did you get that idea? She’s a psychologist.”

1188

1189 “Oh, I thought you told me she was a gym teacher.”

1190 Thankfully, though, Margaret was much less reactive and threatening.

1191

1192 As a Christmas gift, I had bought tickets for Sallie and me to see a Broadway
1193 show that January 18th. I needed to have dates on the calendar, and know I was going to
1194 see her. But now I was overwhelmed with how I would arrange all of this. In tears I
1195 called Donna. I explained the situation and she said, “No problem, hon, you’ll just come
1196 here.” And so I did. For the first time I told Peter I was going to be in New York with
1197 Sallie. He was very upset about the fact that my friends were actually *helping* me see and
1198 be with Sallie. The children and I drove to Donna’s that Friday after school. We spent
1199 the night there and I took a 7am train into the city the next day. Sallie was arriving at
1200 6am and we were meeting at a midtown hotel.

1201

1202 Sallie opened the door of the hotel room and we fell into each other. All the pain
1203 of the past months, in the telling of my love for her, and hearing the threats about the
1204 children came to a crescendo and melted away. With her, in this sparse hotel room, I
1205 could have several hours of respite, to touch and feel the deep love between us. To gain
1206 strength for this terrible fight ahead. I gave Sallie two calendars, of which I had copies.
1207 One was a yoga calendar and one was a lunar calendar. It was so we could look at the
1208 same images, and together, count the days. Each painful day going by meant that I was a
1209 day further along in this process, a day closer to being with her.

1210 I knew that Peter and I needed some help, and discussed it in a session with
1211 Cassie. I settled on the names of a few therapists I knew in the area. I made an
1212 appointment with Josh, a man I knew who had been a colleague of Cassie's and had been
1213 in practice for some time.

1214

1215 In that first session, with Peter there, I told the story of my relationship with
1216 Sallie. I looked at Josh and said through tears, "So you see, my family needs some help."
1217 He was very clear from the beginning: "Are we here to fix the marriage or end the
1218 marriage?" Once again, I took a deep breath and told the truth: "We are here to end the
1219 marriage." Saying these words was surreal, as if I was disconnected from the person
1220 whose mouth was moving. But I knew I needed to say them, and not give Peter any false
1221 hope.

1222

1223 Peter and I began meeting with Josh every two weeks. It became a critical place
1224 for us to talk, to negotiate the next steps, and try to find ways to minimize the impact on
1225 the children. I witnessed Peter's shock and devastation, his disbelief that his life too had
1226 changed so drastically and so quickly. "So this is it? The end?" he would ask, in an effort
1227 to take in this terrible truth about his marriage. I apologized again and again: "I am so
1228 sorry. I never meant to hurt you like this." The air in the therapy room hung dark and
1229 heavy with our sorrow. We were each grieving, for the loss of our marriage, and of our
1230 family as we knew it, as we had created it. For this deep, unforeseen rupture between us.
1231 Peter and I, who together made Lily and John and together loved them, nursed them,

1232 became awed by them. And now were going to hurt them in a previously unimaginable
1233 way.

1234

1235 On rare occasions, Peter would ask a question. During a session with Josh he
1236 asked, “Was it ever real?” Tears streamed down my face as I assured him. “Yes. I was
1237 very much in love with you when we married. And our children were born out of that
1238 love. It was all very very real to me.”

1239

1240 Peter seemed to really try to take this in, but if our history together was “real”
1241 how could I now love a woman? There seemed to be no way to make sense of it.
1242 Months later, Peter told me that he had come to accept that I was just “different” and that
1243 I “couldn’t help it.” A friend of his, a golf buddy, had shared that he had a gay or lesbian
1244 sibling. Peter said, “So they just can’t help it. That’s the way they are. And I just have
1245 to accept this about you Jackie.” I am unclear about whether or not, for Peter, that
1246 narrative voided the reality of our past together. While my hope was that it didn’t, I also
1247 sensed the acceptance, or surrender, that it enabled him to have.

1248

1249 I told some of my professors at school. Their response was genuine happiness for
1250 me and Sallie. No one was surprised. I wondered what this lack of surprise was about.
1251 Did they know something that I didn’t? Because, truthfully, no one was more surprised
1252 by my falling in love with Sallie than I. I knew I liked her, was drawn to her even, but
1253 never thought I would feel so strongly that I would end my marriage to be with her. In

1254 fact, much later on, when I began to tell casual friends, their most common response was,
1255 “Did you always know?”

1256

1257 “Know what?” I would think.

1258

1259 Then I would answer truthfully, “No, I was shocked myself. Completely
1260 surprised.”

1261

1262 This was the case even though I lived with the knowledge that I could love a
1263 woman. It was not always at the fore of my thinking, particularly in the days of
1264 mothering young children. I had feelings for a woman with whom I worked long ago, in
1265 the mid 1980’s. I never told her or acted on the feelings. When I discussed this with
1266 Cassie, and she asked me why, I told her that the woman was “straight” and I thought it
1267 would ruin the friendship. But if I had had any inclination that this friend felt the same
1268 way, I would have acted on it. Did I think that made me a lesbian? No. Lesbian women
1269 and heterosexual women were so very different. I was just me. If I had to pick a
1270 category at the time, I guess I would have said bisexual, because from time to time I had
1271 feelings for women. But none of the categories seemed to fit, not even heterosexual. I
1272 would joke about the irony of my leftist politics and traditional heterosexual family
1273 structure. In fact, Peter used to say that I was “left of left.” From the outside I looked
1274 “traditional”, yet inside, there were so many possibilities.

1275

1276 But I did not anticipate at this particular phase of the life cycle, with young
1277 children, that I would be so thrown off course by falling in love with a woman. That these
1278 feelings would be so strong they would take my breath away – and so impact my ability
1279 to relate to Peter. It was not that he was a man and she a woman. Or was it? I still felt
1280 love for him, and deep sorrow, compassion and guilt for what I was doing to his heart. I
1281 was very much in love with him when we were married; our children were conceived out
1282 of that love. The difficulties we faced in our marriage, ultimately about his career and
1283 job losses, took a toll on the relationship. Our connection was to the children, and loving
1284 them together was a strong bond. Yet I longed for emotional and spiritual connection
1285 with an adult partner, the connection that I found with Sallie. It was not that Peter did not
1286 love me, I know he did. Perhaps it was something about the expression of that love.

1287

1288 Together with Sallie and my support community - Cassie, Josh, my attorney,
1289 Wendy and Donna - I formulated a PLAN. It began with telling Peter that January of
1290 2003, and entering therapy with him. The next step would be telling the children about
1291 the divorce, and separating into two households. Sallie would be moving to New Jersey,
1292 and would have her own place. She would be introduced to the children as my friend,
1293 and when the time was right, I would tell them of my love for her. Eventually, we would
1294 have a home together. The plan was carefully constructed, with every effort to minimize
1295 the inevitable trauma for the kids.

1296

1297 With Peter now knowing, and a plan in place, Sallie and I could be “out” together
1298 just a bit more. But I was terribly awkward, unschooled in being a lesbian. In public I

1299 would reach for her hand, or move to kiss her, and she would not respond, or give me the
1300 look that said “watch out”. I had no experience in this guardedness. I was used to being
1301 able to express affection, however, whenever. To articulate my lack of experience I
1302 would joke that I was just the “little lesbian” and Sallie was the “big lesbian”. She would
1303 laugh along, but to be fair, she never did really like that depiction.

1304

1305 In anticipation of seeing friends and colleagues at The American Family Therapy
1306 conference that year, I made the decision to tell a few people personally. I called my
1307 mentor, Rachel, and told her about my relationship with Sallie. This was going to be
1308 interesting, because I knew that Rachel knew Sallie, at least knew who she was. When I
1309 finished the story, Rachel said, “Oh, Jackie that’s wonderful! I couldn’t think of anyone
1310 more lovely to fall in love with!”

1311

1312 That year at the conference, word got around that Sallie and I were a couple. We
1313 were happy and proud that we were together, and would discuss the fact that we would
1314 become known to some as another “AFTA couple”. Reactions were positive, but, well,
1315 strange. One male colleague was happy, but for this reason: “Now I can *really* fantasize
1316 about you, Jackie!” I would feel raw and exposed when Sallie and I were in the crowd
1317 together, and found myself wanting the safety and privacy of our hotel room. I walked
1318 around feeling exposed and would then find a table of female colleagues from school
1319 who knew, and relax with them, and feel safe for a while. But there was this
1320 vulnerability, as if I was always on the verge of tears, fragile. I was happy to be seen as
1321 Sallie’s partner, but apparently unprepared for the consequences of being a lesbian.

1322 Telling the children about the divorce was a gut wrenching experience. There are
1323 no other words for it. Peter and I sat them down in the living room July 25, 2003- a year
1324 after Sallie and I spent time together at the AFTA conference in New York, nine months
1325 after we first met, six months after I told Peter. It was a Tuesday, around lunch time, and
1326 I was taking them to the beach club for the rest of the afternoon. With Josh's coaching,
1327 Peter and I had been preparing for this by taking turns spending separate time with them,
1328 particularly on weekends. But they had never heard us so much as exchange a negative
1329 word to each other. So I knew this would come as a complete shock.

1330

1331 Peter began, "How have things been going for you guys? Have you been happy?"
1332 The kids playfully touched him as he spoke, wondering what this was about. "Well,
1333 Mom and I have been having some conversations, and things have been different. But
1334 you've still been happy, right?"

1335

1336 I knew the words would have to come from me.

1337

1338 "Daddy and I are going to get a divorce."

1339

1340 Lily was across the room, leaning against the wall. She sunk to the ground and
1341 cried, screaming "No, no!" John began to cry, and his was a mournful wail that
1342 continued with no end. I hadn't heard it since he was much younger. "You promised me,
1343 you promised me!" Lily shouted. I knew what she meant. I had told her some years
1344 before that she did not have to worry, that her dad and I would never get a divorce. "I

1345 know,” I responded, “I was wrong. I better not quit my day job as a therapist, because I
1346 stink at predicting the future.” I told them that they would have two houses, that I would
1347 be moving out and finding somewhere to live nearby. That they would spend time with
1348 each of us. Peter and I tried to reassure them, but they didn’t understand how this could
1349 be happening. I practiced my breathing as the children cried and wailed. I reminded
1350 myself that it was only a moment, that I needed to breathe through it, and that it would be
1351 over. Eventually Peter had to leave for work, and after a walk around the block and some
1352 phone calls to friends, Lily was ready to leave for the beach. Off we went, the three of us,
1353 to a familiar place, undergoing the most drastic change of our lives.

1354

1355 And so began a time of extreme tension and tenderness in the family. No one
1356 knew when the other would be especially sad or sensitive. It was a defining event, and
1357 time has become measured in ‘before’ and ‘after’ increments. I knew I needed to act
1358 quickly to find another home; I did not want it hanging over their heads. I found a realtor
1359 and began to look. Miraculously, a house came on the market that was literally around
1360 the block and down the street. The kids could ride their bicycles back and forth. I took
1361 the kids to see it, and decided, despite its prohibitive monthly rental price, to take it. The
1362 move was set for the first weekend in September, 2003. I signed a ten-month lease.

1363

1364 As I write this I am acutely aware of the privileges, mostly racial and financial,
1365 that enabled me to make this move. I liquidated part of an annuity that I began shortly
1366 after John’s birth in my ever growing concern about our finances. I did this so as to be
1367 able to furnish the house. I bought bedroom furniture for the children, and a desk and

1368 bed for myself. I had nothing for the kitchen, and needed things like kitchen utensils, and
1369 a blender. Donna, who was an investment professional, was active in coaching me about
1370 financial matters. I trusted her implicitly and if she said “Just do it, and don’t worry.
1371 You’ll make the money back after you finish school,” I just did it. So, the kids and I
1372 shopped and furnished this new rented house. They left for school one day in September,
1373 and walked home to my house after school. We were all moved in. It was traumatic and
1374 difficult to do by myself, but the new space offered me a sense of peace.

1375

1376 Peter and I shared residential custody, with the kids being with him on Monday
1377 and Tuesday, me on Wednesday and Thursday, and switching every other weekend.
1378 Initially we were ambitious and optimistic about the time we would spend together: every
1379 Sunday, we would, the four of us, have family dinner. Peter and I had been in mediation
1380 and had constructed this schedule as well as the beginning of a property settlement
1381 agreement. That turned ugly on and off in the coming months.

1382

1383 Lily had friends over to the new house almost constantly. They were very
1384 helpful, in fact. I found myself reassuring them that much would remain the same: No
1385 one was moving away, Peter and I would be at their sporting events together, Peter would
1386 still coach soccer. The narrative of divorce held by most of these then seventh graders
1387 was of great loss and change: Someone would move away, and they wouldn’t get to see
1388 them. So I continued to ask them all how they were doing and answer questions and
1389 offer reassurance.

1390

1391 I can't believe that I have not mentioned that Sallie was moving to New Jersey
1392 that very next month. We found two rentals that summer: my house and Sallie's shore
1393 bungalow. Through contacts at my yoga studio, we found a tiny, one bedroom cottage, a
1394 short walk from the ocean. So, while I was going through all of this on the east coast,
1395 Sallie was ending twenty-three years of private practice in Berkeley and San Francisco.
1396 She had already driven her car back east that May, and was to finally move in October.
1397 Such huge, huge changes for each of us. All so we could be together.

1398

1399 So now I took on the status of a separated woman. I sensed that people began to
1400 see me differently when not connected to a man. I knew neighbors and my children's
1401 friends parents wondered how I did it, how I afforded the house and managed the move.
1402 Couples, usually not particularly affectionate, seemed to touch or kiss more while in my
1403 presence. Was I imagining this? In this new home, and often by myself, I experienced a
1404 sense of peace and freedom, but a sense of great loss as well. Loss of familiarity, of
1405 consistency and sameness. Even the mundane: tattered but familiar bath towels, soft
1406 robes hanging on the back of a door, my favorite old coffee mug, all gone, or lost in
1407 unpacked boxes. In my reading somewhere I came across the terms "autobiographical
1408 rupture." The words practically jumped off the page as they so aptly described my
1409 experience at the time. The word "rupture" is defined as "a state of being torn or burst
1410 open"; indeed the trajectory of my life was torn, my heart burst open to let in all the good,
1411 but now all the pain and loss of this enormous change. To not have my children daily is
1412 something I have never gotten used to.

1413 I did not change my last name when I married Peter, nor did I use the “Mrs.”
1414 That my name remained the same was of importance to me. Interestingly, my father
1415 encouraged me to become a doctor and keep my name when I married. I’m not sure why,
1416 other than to carry on his legacy in some way. But it did assuage my concern about
1417 getting subsumed beneath the identity of a man. I wanted to be seen as me, not as
1418 someone’s wife.

1419

1420 I had all of these concerns walking into the marriage. Years ago, as a women’s
1421 studies major, I read with great enthusiasm the early works of Adrienne Rich and Mary
1422 Daly, and grappled with whether a woman could be whole in relationship with a man. I
1423 was young, it was heady intellectual stuff, and it stayed with me; that, and my mother’s
1424 legacy of dependency and sadness. Funny, I now recall that on the day I was to buy my
1425 wedding dress, a traditional sparkly gown with a long flowing train, I was compelled to
1426 create balance by attending a rally that same morning at a local abortion clinic. It seemed
1427 for each step I took in the traditional world, I needed a counter move. Marry, but keep
1428 my name, marry but have financial independence.

1429

1430 Looking back I clearly feared heterosexual marriage. I entered into it with great
1431 caution. But I had not many words to describe the fear. And there was really nowhere to
1432 have that conversation. After all, it would be viewed as “normal” to be scared on the cusp
1433 of that kind of commitment. Chalked up to some neurosis, or intimacy issue. Admittedly
1434 I would have that very conversation with a client who was about to marry. I would not
1435 have thought to ask questions about the heterosexuality of the coupling. Heterosexual

1436 marriage, for me, was still the one and only viable option, particularly for having
1437 children. I grew up in the 70s. There were no gay and lesbian characters on television,
1438 on the cover of People or Newsweek, no such neighbors on my block. It was unseen.

1439

1440 As my racial consciousness grew, I began to describe myself as a white, European
1441 American woman, keeping the unearned privileges it afforded me in view. And now, I
1442 looked at my heterosexuality. Is that what I was all this time? I know that it was the only
1443 narrative available. And in the absence of any alternatives, and despite my fears, I
1444 participated in it, as fully as I could.

1445

1446 In a heterosexual relationship, we can be physical opposites – my soft to his hard
1447 and strong, his tall, broad shoulders to my smaller frame. In being with a woman I could
1448 not get over the softness of it, the familiarity. Yet although I experienced this similarity,
1449 others related to us as gendered opposites. Take for example, the male acquaintance who
1450 began to converse with Sallie about how attractive I was. He related to her as a man –
1451 two men bonding together by objectifying a woman.

1452

1453 I could tell that others looked at me differently knowing I was in relationship with
1454 a woman. At extended family gatherings, a cousin might stare at me just a bit longer,
1455 looking, I can only guess, for some ‘difference.’ There were no explicit questions, no
1456 conversations to be had, and yet I felt from those around me this uneasy querying: *How*
1457 *will Jackie be as a lesbian? How will she become different?* In the absence of knowing
1458 Sallie, they studied me for signs that I would be more masculine. At the edge of my

1459 knowing I could hear a collective sigh of relief when I walked into my niece's graduation
1460 party wearing my typical dress and heels.

1461

1462 I recall an early conversation with Sallie in which she asked, "How will you
1463 identify?" I didn't know what she was talking about. "What do you mean?" I asked. Of
1464 course I had the privilege of never having had to face this question. "I don't know" was
1465 my response. I did not resonate with the sexual orientation discourses that dictated as a
1466 lesbian "I have found my true self" or, for the children, that "Mom is just different, she
1467 can't help it." My children were already going through enormous change – I didn't want
1468 to tell them *I'd* changed too. I simply fell in love, and while I would describe my
1469 relationship with Sallie as a lesbian relationship, I did not take on the label of the
1470 category myself. Perhaps in time I would. I was not adverse to the word. I was adverse
1471 to the implications that I had not known myself, that my sense of self was untrue, or
1472 underdeveloped. It was precisely my strong sense of self, along with financial privilege
1473 (and a good yoga practice) that carried me through the traumatic changes of those days. I
1474 lost much, including relationships with my sisters. In divorcing Peter I was breaking
1475 many of the gender rules in my family: don't disappoint the man, cater to him, keep him
1476 happy. And, I was hurting a very good and kind man. For my sisters this lent validation
1477 to the family narrative that I was "spoiled" and "selfish." I had too much agency for a
1478 woman, and I became unpalatable to them. For we were allowed to be strong women, but
1479 only in service of family and husband, not in service of oneself. I was seen as destroying
1480 my children and family, all in my selfish and trivial pursuit of a relationship with a
1481 woman.

1482 **Part V: “Mommy has Something to Tell You”**

1483

1484 Although some knew of my relationship with Sallie, the children did not, and they
1485 were next to tell. Again, I did not want too many people to know without the children
1486 knowing first.

1487

1488 Now that Sallie was in New Jersey, she was around more, and would be with me
1489 and the kids for a day, or for dinner. Friends began to urge me to tell them. The
1490 prediction was that Lily, who was twelve at the time, would somehow sense it, and know.
1491 I was very anxious about telling them. Cassie had prepared me for an intense reaction
1492 from Lily, saying that often female family and friends can become more threatened by a
1493 relationship with a woman. “Think about it,” said Cassie, “Lily was never threatened by
1494 the closeness you had with Peter. But the closeness and intimacy with a woman is
1495 different and may in fact be more threatening to your daughter.”

1496

1497 I chose to tell the kids that February of 2004. We had been in the new house for
1498 almost six months, and Sallie was pretty consistently spending time with us. She was
1499 there on Christmas and New Year’s and was obviously an important person in my life.

1500

1501 So, one Friday night, while folding laundry, I began the conversation with Lily.

1502

1503 “So, I have some news. I’m in a relationship with someone and I wanted to tell
1504 you about it. I think I’ve really fallen in love.”

1505 “That’s great, mom.”

1506

1507 “Well, I wanted to tell you about it, and as a matter of fact you know this person
1508 that I’m in love with. It’s Sallie.”

1509

1510 My daughter looked at me in shock. She said nothing and turned away. She had
1511 the oddest blank look on her face. She stared ahead at nothing. Lily was clearly angry
1512 and upset. And I think most of all, completely and utterly shocked. “I want to leave. I
1513 want to go over Kate’s house.”

1514

1515 “OK, honey, but let’s just try to talk about this a bit.”

1516

1517 “I want to be left alone.”

1518

1519 Lily went down the hall into her room. I couldn’t stand to leave her there. She
1520 and I had never had this kind of disconnection between us. “Please,” I said, “come talk to
1521 mommy.” She was crying now. So was I.

1522

1523 I didn’t know what to do. I walked away. I went back to her room. I couldn’t
1524 stand feeling this. “Please honey” I said as she walked past me, “We have to work this
1525 out.”

1526 Then, like a little child, Lily collapsed on my lap. We cried and held each other.

1527 I told her that nothing would change my love for her, that she was my one and only,

1528 always. No one could ever take her place. We held onto each other as if for dear life.

1529

1530 John had been playing alone in his room, and I knew he could tell there was one

1531 intense conversation going on. I told Lily that I would be right back, but that I needed to

1532 tend to John as well. I walked into his room and sat down on the floor with him. I was

1533 emotionally spent from the interaction with Lily, so I tried to lighten it up a bit.

1534

1535 “Mommy has something to tell you honey.”

1536

1537 “OK!”

1538

1539 “You know my friend, Sallie, right? Well, I just wanted you to know that I love

1540 her a lot, a real lot, and she’s my girlfriend.”

1541

1542 “I know, Mommy, you’re gay!!”

1543

1544 *Now* who was in shock?!

1545

1546 “*And* I don’t mean that it the bad way, I mean that in the good way.”

1547

1548 “Does Daddy know?”

1549 “Yes, he does.”

1550

1551 “Does Aunt Annie know?”

1552

1553 “Aunt Annie knows.”

1554

1555 “OK, good. So, Mommy, can Sallie teach me how to play tennis now?”

1556

1557 “Yes, honey,” I said, as I grabbed that beautiful, loving little boy of mine and held
1558 him tight. We rocked together on the floor as I kissed him and stroked his hair. Lily
1559 came to join us. The three of us sat on the floor.

1560

1561 “So, Mom, what’s it like?” Lily asked.

1562

1563 “It’s pretty wonderful. It’s a wonderful relationship. I’m very happy.”

1564

1565 “My friends and I talk about it, about what it might be like.”

1566

1567 ”That’s great, honey.”

1568

1569 ”I want to call Katie and tell her. But just her, OK?”

1570

1571 “Sure. But I’ll probably talk to her mom too.”

1572 Lily bounds into her room and calls Kate. After a few moments, she said,

1573

1574 “Katie, what do you think of gay people?”

1575

1576 Katie replies, “I think they’re really cool. Look at Ellen deGeneres and Rosie

1577 O’Donnell. Why, are you gay?”

1578

1579 “No, but my Mom is.”

1580

1581 “Oh, that’s really cool.”

1582

1583 And so there it was: Coming out to your kids, oh, and their friends, and their

1584 friend’s parents, and did I mention the school guidance counselor? For when you tell a

1585 child, I thought, the responsible thing to do is to also inform an adult in their life. Thus

1586 began the process of telling, and retelling, and of wondering: should I tell? For now that

1587 I was in a relationship deemed “other” I was compelled to engage in this “telling” or as

1588 some would say “coming out.”

1589

1590 “*Now*”, I thought, “I am out”.

1591

1592 There was something about telling the children that propelled me into this new

1593 place.

1594 One of the most helpful conversations I had about this process was with a friend,
1595 who suggested that rather than “come” out, I should just “be” out. I liked the feeling of
1596 that; I did not have to stop the moment and make a pronouncement. I could just “be”.
1597 But the fact that this news was received by others as linked to my sex life was another
1598 source of discomfort. I don’t think when a heterosexual couple is seen they are defined
1599 by what they do in bed, or that they are in bed together. Never mind the deep personal
1600 connection I felt for Sallie, the intimacy of our conversations, the totality of our lives
1601 together. People’s minds went to the fact that we were sexual together: I must like sex
1602 better with women than men. It was, coming from a heterosexual relationship, absurd.
1603

1604 So last year I was on the baseball field for my kids’ games a heterosexual and this
1605 year I was a lesbian. Same crowd, different me. At that time, my difference was not the
1606 result of something on the inside – I felt very much the same person. I still had all the
1607 character traits as before: impatience, intensity, sense of humor, loyalty. I was still
1608 incredibly gullible at times. I still hated to cook, loved good food, had red hair turning
1609 white. I still loved fiercely. And, perhaps most importantly, I was still Lily and John’s
1610 Mom.

1611

1612 No, at that time the difference was in how the world now defined me because I
1613 loved a woman. I was different in my vulnerability. I felt exposed. I would wonder,
1614 “Would they let their kids play with mine if they knew?” I was acutely aware that my
1615 children and I could now be the object of hate and disgust because of who I loved.

1616 On the ballfield, for the most part, Sallie was not with us. But she was present at
1617 the beach club that we had belonged to for many years. Peter and I had been members,
1618 and were casual friends with a group of ten or so other couples who had beach cabanas
1619 close by. As the transition happened, and at the childrens' pace, I began to tell them
1620 about the divorce and then about my relationship with Sallie. Although everyone was
1621 kind and wished me well, they did not relate to Sallie and me. We were not invited to be
1622 a part of the pot luck dinners, and the spontaneous visits and casual conversation ceased.
1623 It seemed they were at a loss for how to relate to Sallie and me as a couple. Although I
1624 still felt connected to them through our years of summering at the shore, their connection
1625 to me became lost. They asked no questions about any aspect of our lives together. The
1626 silence was deafening, much as it was in the relationship with my sisters. I thought of all
1627 the lesbian women I had known or worked with over the years who described this same
1628 thing: the silence and invisibility, particularly about their relationships.

1629

1630 Sometimes it felt that Sallie and I were isolated, and swallowed by all of the
1631 losses our coming together had wrought. I knew how much she missed her community in
1632 the Bay area, and it soon became clear that we needed to find community at home in New
1633 Jersey. Although we remained very close to my friends Donna and Wendy, I knew we
1634 needed to be with other gay and lesbian couples and families – to be in community. How
1635 did I come to know this? I began to feel a desire to be with other women who loved as
1636 we did, who were, dare I say, *like me*. I wanted to be seen as a lesbian, without having to
1637 say or do anything. I wanted it to be assumed. What would it mean to me if I were seen
1638 as a lesbian? I think it was the anticipated commraderie, the instant understanding. I

1639 longed to be in places where Sallie and I were not the only lesbian couple, this minority
1640 status I now occupied. I wanted to be *seen* with her, seen and assumed to be a couple. I
1641 experienced the fatigue of telling, explaining, and confirming in my heterosexual world.
1642 This immense curtain had been drawn back, and I now walked in two worlds: the
1643 heterosexual and the lesbian. At times I felt very much the stranger in each. I no longer
1644 ‘belonged’ to the straight world, and, as I often joked, had only been a lesbian for about
1645 ten minutes.

1646

1647 Luckily, we lived near the shore in New Jersey, and Asbury Park and Ocean
1648 Grove were nearby and well known as gay friendly. Sallie and I ventured there when we
1649 could and found a warm and familiar place that recognized us, that related to us as a
1650 couple. Although we tried, and try still, the community making process is slow. And
1651 nothing has replaced the longstanding friendships and community of the Bay area for
1652 Sallie. This process takes time, time which is often consumed first and foremost by the
1653 parenting of two young children.

1654

1655 During these early months when the children knew, I became even more keenly
1656 aware that if anything was wrong with either John or Lily, if they had school problems,
1657 problems with grades, looked unhappy, or God forbid, depressed, that I would not only
1658 be to blame, I would be again the object of rage and accusation, particularly from my
1659 sister and former husband. I did not want to pressure them to be happy and well adjusted,
1660 but admittedly, I was vigilant, not only about that, but for signs of their rejection of me.
1661 While a part of me knew that that fear was unwarranted, I harbored it nonetheless. I knew

1662 this fear was partially about being in relationship with a woman. It was also about the
1663 impact of all the many difficult changes I initiated in our family.

1664

1665 It gave me great solace when, in her Mother's Day card that year, Lily wrote the
1666 following note:

1667 “If I had to pick my mom, I would pick you (and so would all my friends). You
1668 are always there for me through the good and the bad. You know me better than most
1669 people will ever know me. I love you, Lily”

1670

1671 I sometimes wonder what it might have been like if I “came out” to be alone, or
1672 dating, away from my children. As it was, I came out already partnered. The kids
1673 couldn't weigh in, “Hey, I liked *her* better!” No, it was a done deal. Lily and John had to
1674 adjust to the separation and divorce of parents they never heard argue or fight. Then,
1675 they learned not only that I was in a new relationship, but that it was with a woman, it
1676 was serious, and she would live with us eventually.

1677

1678 After telling the children I felt a major shift, an openness in my ability to relate
1679 to them and to the world. I came out at a time when it seemed there was a constant flow
1680 of news and debate about any issue pertaining to being gay or lesbian. It was difficult to
1681 pick up a newspaper and *not* find a prominent headline about some facet of the cultural
1682 debate being played out in legislatures, courtrooms, churches. Against this backdrop, the
1683 children and I had conversation after conversation about what this all meant for us. For
1684 example, in late 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Court had ruled that gay and lesbian

1685 couples had the legal right to marry. The children were aware that this was not the case in
1686 New Jersey, and made their feelings known; John would ask, “Mom, why don’t they just
1687 let gay people marry?’ It came to be a complicated reality for John and Lily, who were
1688 sensitive to this injustice, and still needing to protect themselves by keeping the secret
1689 about my relationship with Sallie. Lily was clear that this was a generational issue: “In
1690 ten years or so, it will be legal. No one will care.” Indeed, Lily would express her
1691 opinion that the cultural climate would change in the not too distant future: “I’ll be in
1692 college, and someone will be telling me that their Mom had just come out, and I’ll say,
1693 well, my Mom came out ten years ago!”

1694

1695 There was much to negotiate in those early months of 2004; my divorce was
1696 almost final, and we awaited the court date in May. Since my rental was up in June, Sallie
1697 and I needed to make a decision about buying a home. Together with the children, we
1698 began to look at houses, and to think about what it would mean for us to live together as a
1699 family.

1700

1701 Sallie and I found a beautiful home that the children loved, and made plans to
1702 move in July of 2004. We celebrated with our friend Wendy and her children, who lived
1703 in the same small town. It was critical that both Wendy and Donna’s spouses and
1704 children knew about and affirmed my relationship with Sallie; thus, in the context of Lily
1705 and John’s familiar, inner circle of friends-as-extended family, there was no secret
1706 keeping. Our new home was decorated with a rainbow peace flag, and a wisteria bush I
1707 gave to Sallie to replace the one she had left in Berkeley. Amid the packing, painting and

1708 moving, the news about gay and lesbian issues continued to pour into our home, a home
1709 now so intimately affected by it all: the weddings in San Francisco, the approval of the
1710 first openly gay bishop in the Anglican church amongst strong dissent, the Vatican
1711 calling same-sex marriage “highly immoral”, the president saying that marriage should be
1712 between a man and a woman.

1713

1714 Here’s a great example. In August of 2004, I was sitting in the living room of
1715 Sallie’s family home in Fire Island. I sat between Sallie’s then 82-year-old mother and
1716 my son John, who was nine. We were casually watching the evening news, when a story
1717 came on about the governor of New Jersey. “My truth is that I’m a gay American,” said
1718 Govenor Jim McGreevy, who then admitted to having an extramarital affair with a man.
1719 His wife stood behind him in support, as he announced his intention to resign from office.

1720

1721 “Uh oh, I probably should say something here,” I thought. But what?

1722

1723 I could find no words, and sat feeling incredibly awkward. A story like this now
1724 had such relevance for me, unlike before, when I was immersed in the heterosexual
1725 world. The curtain had been drawn, the boundary between lesbian and heterosexual
1726 crossed, and certain things took on relevance as never before. Here was a story
1727 somewhat like mine – married and coming out as gay. I felt embarrassed at the
1728 confession of an affair, the reference to sexual harassment. The story line was similar to
1729 mine, but laced with a public confession and humiliation. I felt sad that the other part of
1730 the story went untold: the fear and heartache of the person, the trauma for the couple and

1731 family. In the days to come, the news seemed to present just the tawdry details, fodder
1732 for the homophobes lying in wait for a story like this.

1733

1734 So I sat in silence.

1735

1736 But my mind was full of questions: What does John think? How does this story
1737 remind Sallie's mother of ours? Do they think I lied to Peter? I knew I was a lesbian but
1738 didn't tell him? Ah, there it was, the now familiar, ever present voice in my head,
1739 questioning, always questioning what I did. These questions were largely born of my
1740 experience of Peter being viewed as "the victim" and me the selfish perpetrator of great
1741 sorrow. This was particularly true with my sisters, and my sisters were my family.
1742 "Family" was the three of us. Their expression of empathy and compassion was
1743 exclusively for the kid's father: "Poor Peter." I don't recall a single conversation with
1744 them in which they expressed compassion or concern for *my* struggle. They never once
1745 said, "This must be so hard for you." I wondered why they were so unable to do that.

1746

1747 Perhaps, as I said earlier, I was just breaking too many rules: family rules,
1748 certainly, but cultural rules as well. I was not the self-sacrificing mother. I did not put
1749 aside my own needs and desires; I pursued them. It was as if my needs and the needs of
1750 the children were juxtaposed; I had to choose one or the other. If I chose myself, it
1751 rendered them uncared for. This was far from my truth. But, "for the sake of the kids" is
1752 such a familiar cultural refrain, it embeds deeply into the daily minutia of mothering.
1753 Sacrifice.

1754 My truth was that I had great conviction that my partnering with Sallie would
1755 enhance my life and the lives of my children. It was about demonstrating courage and
1756 strength, exposing them to a mutual, collaborative partnership and opening up worlds of
1757 opportunity. I believed this in my heart but was reticent to utter it to the world. Who
1758 would believe that?

1759

1760 Would it have been more palatable if I had been with a man again? To the
1761 extent that that scenario was a more familiar cultural narrative, I believe so. I mean,
1762 falling in love with another man at least had a script. But a *woman? And in your mid*
1763 *forties?* It was an incredulous story, totally out of bounds for my family and community.

1764

1765 The children started school from our home that fall. The four of us understood that we
1766 now shared a responsibility for secret keeping about my partnership with Sallie. By that
1767 time, Lily had told several other friends, all of whom were very positive. I guess being a
1768 lesbian *was* kind of hip! We learned that one of Lily's friends had a gay teenage brother;
1769 one of the other Moms actually asked her daughter if Sallie and I were partners. But it
1770 was very important to Lily that she remain in charge of the dissemination of that
1771 information. Lily would playfully test out stories she could tell her friends about who
1772 Sallie was, if need be. "I could just say she's my long lost aunt. Or a good friend of
1773 yours who you took in to help recover from knee surgery." While I don't think Lily ever
1774 used either of these stories, Sallie's and my ability to allow her this freedom and
1775 exploration was crucial.

1776

1777 Lily loved our new home and enjoyed giving "the tour" to first time guests. She
1778 would move from room to room, describing whose it was, or what it was used for. When
1779 she came to the master bedroom she would simply say, "And this is my Mom's room."
1780 Where Sallie slept remained unsaid.

1781

1782 I am tempted to say, "That was fine with Sallie and me." That would be my
1783 eternally optimistic way of telling the story. I am ever pulled toward wanting to make
1784 things "nice." The more complicated truth is that Sallie and I knew we had little choice
1785 but to tolerate the silence and invisibility that defined our partnership in our home at that
1786 time. It was difficult and painful. And strange, to feel this hurt from my child. What she
1787 was doing *hurt*, and yet, I understood it was a necessary part of her own process.

1788 One day while driving together, Lily related a conversation between her and her

1789 Dad:

1790

1791 “So he says, ‘Listen, I have to talk to you about something.’ And my first

1792 response is, ‘NO! Dad!... Please don’t tell me *you’re* gay too! Please, I can only tolerate

1793 one gay parent!’”

1794

1795 “Dad laughs and says ‘No, Lily, no, don’t worry about *that!* You never have to

1796 worry about *that* with me!’”

1797

1798 “Thank goodness, because one gay parent is *enough!*”

1799

1800 Lightheartedly my daughter relates this story of banter and intimacy between her

1801 and her father. I laugh along, but inside I feel the stinging hurt.

1802

1803 I have now become someone for her to “tolerate.”

1804 Our living together provided the opportunity for all of us to just ‘be out’. Friends
1805 of the children and their parents eventually came to know that Sallie lived with us. I
1806 suppose after numerous sleepovers, each child came to their own conclusion about where
1807 in fact Sallie did sleep. Sallie was involved with car pools and driving to school. To our
1808 knowledge, no one refused to let their children come to our home; slowly, other parents
1809 came to include Sallie. After her difficult knee surgery I was often asked about Sallie’s
1810 recuperation. Other moms would tell John, “You better call Sallie and tell her we’ll be
1811 late.” In these small increments, over time, Sallie began to be perceived as a permanent
1812 part of our household, and someone in a parental position. Whether or not she is
1813 perceived as my partner is uncertain.

1814

1815 Because I had made the decision to tell only a few parents personally, I
1816 anticipated that, at some point, someone would ask me about my relationship with Sallie.
1817 Any time another parent said, “I have to ask you something” or “I have to talk to you,”
1818 away from the children, I thought “Uh oh, here it comes.”

1819

1820 So when picking John up from a play date, his friend’s Mom said “If you have a
1821 minute, I need to talk with you after John gets to the car,” I went into vigilance mode.

1822

1823 What did I anticipate? I felt myself tense at the suggestion of this more private
1824 conversation. Tense, and prepare to defend myself, the kids and Sallie, and yes, to fight
1825 if need be. Apparently, I was prepared to be accused of something.

1826 With John safely in the car, I wait.

1827

1828 “I just wanted to let you know John seemed upset when he was here. I breastfeed
1829 my youngest quite openly, and when John saw us, he seemed embarrassed and upset, so I
1830 just wanted you to know.”

1831

1832 “OK, thanks!! He’s just a bit shy...”

1833

1834 Relief. A very different conversation than the one I was anticipating.

1835

1836 But this has come to be a part of my life; it is part of being in heterosexual
1837 suburbia. I know only one other “out” lesbian mother in my children’s school district.
1838 So most of the time, we just live our lives; we just “be.” But with each new friend my
1839 child makes, each new school he or she attends, I face it again. I am reminded of a quote
1840 by Kenji Yoshino from his 2006 book, *Covering*: “It was impossible to come out and be
1841 done with it as each new person erected a new closet around me.”

1842

1843 That fall and spring I was teaching graduate students in Couple and Family
1844 Therapy as part of my academic internship. I began to think about how to introduce
1845 myself to the class. I wanted tell them who I was, but still felt that saying I was a lesbian
1846 was, in some sense, not saying *enough*. I anticipated that students could assume I had
1847 been a lesbian far longer than my ten minutes. Perhaps that language could also
1848 obliterate my years of marriage; it just did not capture my history. I found that this single

1849 word – lesbian - could communicate much that was untrue about me, and, at the same
1850 time, much that *was* true. There was no “transitional narrative” in the dominant discourse
1851 from which to borrow. I wasn’t coming up with any succinct, catchy words. So I played
1852 with some ideas, and settled on this: “I live in a post-divorce, bi-nuclear family. My
1853 partner Sallie and I co-parent my two children, ages 10 and 14, and share residential
1854 custody with their father.” This use of language captured who I was in time. I was
1855 beginning to find a way to tell my story that held all the threads, the totality of my lived
1856 experiences, neither silencing nor privileging any one.

1857 **Part VI: New Jersey: The State that Doesn't Hate**

1858

1859

1860 I did not make that up.

1861

1862 "New Jersey: The State that Doesn't Hate" is the slogan for Garden State
1863 Equality, the marriage equity organization begun in 2004. It was founded after the
1864 legislature passed the Domestic Partnership Law that summer. Sallie and I are active
1865 members, and together with this community, await the decision of The New Jersey
1866 Supreme Court about our right to marry. As of this writing, it is due any day.

1867

1868 In the summer of 2005 Sallie was preparing to have a second total knee
1869 replacement surgery. Although we had drawn wills with an attorney, we felt the need to
1870 solidify our rights to each other further, and decided to register as Domestic Partners. We
1871 agreed to do it, and time went by, until one day Sallie said "I think with our vacation
1872 plans this is the last week we have to register. Where do you want to go?"

1873

1874 Our attorney had told us we could register in any town in New Jersey with the
1875 proper ID.

1876

1877 "I think we should go to Asbury. Show our support for the town. Go out to a
1878 restaurant after to celebrate."

1879 We told the children and carefully explained what this would mean.

1880

1881 “We can’t get married yet, so this is the best we have in New Jersey for now. It
1882 means that if either of us got sick, we could take care of each other, and make decisions
1883 for each other,” I said.

1884

1885 “We’re going down to Asbury Park. We would love to have you come with us,
1886 but if you don’t want to, or don’t feel comfortable, please, you don’t have to.”

1887

1888 I, of course, *really* wanted the children by our side, celebrating with us. But, I
1889 tried hard to curb that enthusiasm.

1890

1891 John said he would like to go.

1892

1893 Lily said she didn’t.

1894

1895 A few days later, we called the Town Hall in Asbury, and found that the clerk was
1896 preparing to leave for the day. If we left immediately, she would wait. I told the kids, and
1897 gave them a few moments to decide.

1898

1899 Lily remained unequivocal: “No thanks, I’m staying home”.

1900

1901 I walked outside and found John sitting on the stairs, alone, head in hands.

1902 “Honey, what is it?”

1903

1904 “I think I want to change my mind and stay home with Lily. But I don’t want to
1905 hurt your feelings,” he said, without looking at me.

1906

1907 “John, it’s OK. Sallie and I both understand. We know you’re happy for us, and
1908 that’s what matters. It’s really OK if you stay home.”

1909

1910 Ouch.

1911

1912 What did I understand about the children’s reactions? I understood the difficult
1913 position they were in regarding loyalties. Their father remained unable to call our home
1914 or to be in Sallie’s presence. He simply did not recognize my relationship with Sallie in
1915 any fashion. In attempting to describe what this felt like, I would say I felt “shunned” by
1916 him; most of the time it was as if I simply no longer existed. For long periods of time, I
1917 was dealt with only when utterly necessary.

1918

1919 I also understood that the children were still.....ambivalent about their Mom
1920 being a lesbian. Lily and John experienced the complexity of it all: the “coolness” of
1921 being a gay person, the danger of being teased, of being seen as gay or lesbian themselves
1922 because of me. Lily had told me of this concern. So while they were happy for Sallie and
1923 me, their happiness was tempered by the complex realities of their lives.

1924

1925 So Sallie and I jumped in the car and headed down to Asbury Park. It was a
1926 beautiful summer day, and I felt the joy of my connection to her, and taking this next step
1927 together along with the sadness that Lily and John couldn't be with us.

1928

1929 We were greeted by a jubilant town clerk, who told us this was her favorite part of
1930 the job: "I love seeing people so happy!" We signed the forms, and when it was all said
1931 and done, our new friend, Asbury's Town Clerk Kiki, took pictures of us smiling with
1932 our new Domestic Partnership certificate in hand.

1933

1934 Sallie and I walked across the street for a celebratory lunch. Along the way we
1935 saw a friend, who offered joyful congratulations. As we approached the restaurant, the
1936 host ran out to greet Sallie with open arms, saying "Come and give me some *pride!*"
1937 Sallie was a bit stunned at first, but, after all, we were in Asbury Park. Then she realized
1938 she was wearing her "Pride Sports" tee shirt.

1939

1940 Sallie and I returned home a short time later. The house was quiet, and as I threw
1941 my keys onto the kitchen table, I saw some kind of note.

1942

1943 It was computer made, decorated with a big, pink lipsticked kiss. It read:

1944

1945 "CONGRATULATIONS! Mom and Sallie, on becoming domesticated partners!

1946 Love always, Lily and John."

1947

1948 My loving children, negotiating their own way.

1949

1950 We hurt and ache from time to time, and bump up against each other as we move
1951 through this uncharted terrain of being an unplanned lesbian stepfamily. But this ever
1952 optimistic lesbian mother is buoyed by the tiny miracles that seem to happen daily:
1953 waking each day with Sallie, catching her and the children laughing as I walk into the
1954 room. Playing Monopoly for hours. Having birthday dinners together with Donna,
1955 Wendy, and all the kids.

1956

1957 Talking about our wedding.

1958

1959 So, there is my story. Of course, it doesn't end there. It goes on, and changes
1960 still, even as I write. I am on to living other stories now, like becoming an even bigger
1961 lesbian, and dealing with the unending grief of divorce.

1962

1963 But I want to leave you with this poem that Sallie and I shared. It seems to capture
1964 so much of our story, as well as much that has been left unsaid.

1965

1966

1967 The Place Where Everything Changed

1968 By Marge Piercy

1969

1970 Great love is an abrupt switching
1971 in a life bearing along at express speeds
1972 expecting to reach the designated stations
1973 at the minute listed in the timetable.

1974

1975 Great love can cause derailment,
1976 coaches upended, people screaming,

1977 luggage strewn over the mountainside,
1978 blood and paper on the grass.
1979
1980 It's months before the repairs are done,
1981 everyone discharged from the hospital,
1982 all the lawsuits settled, damage
1983 paid for, the scandal subsided.
1984
1985 Then we get on with the journey
1986 in some new direction, hiking overland
1987 with camels, mules, via helicopter
1988 by barge through canals.
1989
1990 The maps are all redrawn and what
1991 was north is east of south
1992 and there be dragons in those mountains
1993 and the sun shines warmer and hairier
1994
1995 and the moon has a cat's face.
1996 There is more sunshine. More rain.
1997 The seasons are marked and intense.
1998 We seldom catch colds.
1999
2000 There is always you at my back
2001 ready to fight when I must fight;
2002 there is always you at my side
2003 the words flashing light and shadow.
2004
2005 What was grey ripples scarlet and golden;
2006 what was bland reeks of ginger and brandy;
2007 what was empty roars like a packed stadium;
2008 what slept gallops for miles.
2009
2010 Even our bones are reformed in the close
2011 night when we hold each other's dreams.
2012 Memories uncoil backward and are remade.
2013 Now the first egg itself is freshly twinned.
2014
2015 We build daily houses brick by brick.
2016 We put each other up at night like tents.
2017 This story tells itself as it grows.
2018 Each morning we give birth to one another 2

CHAPTER 5: FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Introduction

...we make ourselves up as we go along from remembered fragments...

Identity making...the construction of a self story, is always a retrospective process, a restorying, reconstructing, reweaving of experiences as they have been assigned language in the larger cultural discourse and by us. (Laird, 1999, p. 63)

This researcher employed the method of autoethnography to explore the transition of leaving heterosexual marriage with children and partnering with a woman. It is a personal narrative set in a particular place and time. The story is told in first person; the voices of my partner, former husband and children enter from time to time to elucidate my experience. In narrating the transition from heterosexual marriage, this ethnographer attempted to capture how daily familial experience becomes endowed with meaning. The context for this meaning-making has to do with the historical moment in time, the sociopolitical climate, the culture in which the family is embedded, and the language assigned to particular experiences and transactions.

Analysis of the data was guided by specific questions that related to the stated goals of the research:

1. What was the context in which this transition became possible?
2. What was the impact of the institutions of heterosexuality and heterosexual marriage? Specifically, what about the pervasiveness and compulsory nature of heterosexuality?
3. How did the dominant binary discourse in identities impact the transition from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman?

The findings indicate that the cultural context is of utmost importance in making the transition from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman. The historical

time, geographic location, legal precedent, and racial and economic privilege all contributed to facilitate this process. This cultural context was necessary to mediate the simultaneous and pervasive homonegating processes that were encountered and enacted. Heterosexuality was the dominant and preferred mode of relating; this was evident in the ubiquitous climate of heteronormativity. Sexual orientation issues were often conflated with gender; non-heterosexuality was linked to masculinity. The coming out process engaged the entire family and necessitated keeping the mother's partnership a secret for reasons of protection. The essentialist nature of the binary discourse of sexuality was ever present and contributed to the subject not using the categorical self-label lesbian. Motherhood emerged as the most salient feature of identity throughout the transition.

Self in Context: Time, Location and Privilege

My experience of coming out was closely related to telling my children; even though I had begun the process of telling others, it was after the conversations with my children that I felt 'really' out. The year was 2004. To borrow a question posed by Herdt (1992) and Laird (1999): What was it that as a lesbian I came out *to*? What was the context in which this transition became possible?

I began to tell people that I was partnered with a woman in 2004, thirty-five years after Stonewall, thirty-one years after homosexuality was declassified as a mental illness. In the 1990s, mainstream media had begun to explicitly create and promote lesbianism as chic and fashionable:

EXEMPLAR 1 (lines 769-773). I knew that being a lesbian was certainly more acceptable, even viewed as "way cool" by my daughter's generation. Ellen DeGeneres had been out for several years, and Rosie O'Donnell made the cover

of People magazine. “Lesbian chic” had been coined by Esquire magazine eight years prior, and in 1996 Melissa Ethridge was featured with her pregnant partner on the cover of Newsweek.

Not only did the image of lesbians become more common in popular culture (Van Gelder & Brandt, 1996) but the image of what a lesbian could look like was broadened by the notions of ‘lesbian chic’ and ‘lipstick lesbians’ (Butler, 2005). Butler points out that sexual behavior is partially dependent upon the cultural norms and structural constraints of a particular point in time. These changes in what Butler termed “normative climate” (2005, p. 426) combined with economic and legal changes in the United States have made it more likely for female American adults to select a partner of their own sex. This cohort effect implies that those who came of age in the 1950s and early 1960s would have had very different experiences than those who come of age today (Bohan, 1996).

I lived in New Jersey, about an hours drive from New York City. As Hartman (1996, 1999) pointed out, location is critical; had I lived in another state, I might not have had certain entitlements. The state of New Jersey had laws that protected gay parents as well as a Domestic Partnership Law. The fact that my family and I resided in close proximity to several large cities in the northeast, New York and Philadelphia, made us less likely to be the target of negative attitudes and stereotypes toward non-heterosexuals than had we resided in the Midwest or southern United States (Herek, 1984, 1990, 1995). My liberal religious community at The Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Monmouth County provided a spiritual context that welcomed, celebrated and married same-sex couples.

One of the first things I did before I met Sallie New York City was to find a lesbian bar:

EXEMPLAR 2 (lines 187-206). At the end of the meal I said, “By the way, Donna, do you know of any women’s bars in the city?”

“You mean lesbian bars?”

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m meeting a friend after this and told her I would find a good place to go.”

“No, but I bet you could find the name of one in one of those New York tourist guide books. Walk with me to Grand Central and just look in the bookstore there.”

EXEMPLAR 3 (lines 203-206). I found the ‘tourist’ section and grabbed a few books. I squatted down and began to peruse. “Let’s see,” I thought, “L . . . for lesbian. . . ” There it was, a whole section on gay and lesbian nightlife in New York. I checked out several books and all seemed to agree: It was Rubyfruit’s in the east village.

The fact that there was an entire community available in that city, and my friend Donna thought nothing of my question regarding lesbian bars facilitated that first meeting with Sallie. During those initial months:

EXEMPLAR 4 (lines 775-782). It seemed that everywhere I turned in that time, gay and lesbian issues were in the news – quite literally. In 2002, The New York Times began to publish same-sex union announcements in my favorite section of the Sunday Times – the Style section. I devoured these public narratives of commitment and love between women. While

all of this churning is going on in my heart and my head about Sallie, it seemed my world was giving me the message that it could be safe to love her.

I saw an opening.

My cultural context thus indicated the possibility of a life with Sallie. The internal feelings were matched by a historical and cultural landscape ever increasingly gay and lesbian-friendly. My physical location in close proximity to New York City and Asbury Park assured that I had a community to *come out to*.

My family of origin positioned me in a social context as well. As a second generation European-American woman, I continued to benefit from inherited, unearned racial privilege in every facet of this transition. Each move that myself, my partner or children made was influenced by the absence of racism and presumptions about all of us because we are white. These included assumptions of economic stability, physical safety and the ability to rent or buy in particular neighborhoods. These privileges facilitated the ability to minimize the trauma of change for the children. My core place of oppressed identity had to do with gender, for which I could compensate with education and economic power. My racial privilege facilitated all of those compensatory moves. I would hypothesize that this transition would be vastly different for a woman of color, and thus not generalize any of these findings to her experience. Women of color would have a different and perhaps more complex experience in the management of stigma. They may need to form a triple identity to include gender, cultural and sexual orientation, each of which is a potential site of oppression (Garnets & Kimmel, 2003). Also, the increasing

tolerance for same-sex partnering during the 1990s occurred primarily among white Americans (Loftus, 2001).

The fact that I was a highly educated woman, on the cusp of completing a Ph.D. also impacted the transition from heterosexual marriage. Baumeister (2000) found that highly educated women are two times as likely as uneducated women to hold liberal values regarding sex. My education did provide economic power and access to professional organizations, which afforded me a particular status as a professional.

Heterosexuality: Heteronormativity

Although certain facets of the cultural context operated to facilitate this transition, the dominant cultural climate was one of heteronormativity. Heterosexuality was preeminent: everyone was presumed to be heterosexual, and that form of relating was viewed as normal. Despite the increased visibility of non-heterosexuality, and the changes in normative climate, there remains no definition of family in the public consciousness that refers to same-sex couples with children.

I will now examine how was my heterosexuality was expressed in the autoethnography. Like the research findings of Colucci-Coritt (2004), Jensen (1999) and Kitlinger and Wilkinson (1995), heterosexual marriage was viewed as inevitable, and there was a lack of role models to help navigate the transition:

EXEMPLAR 5 (lines 1441-1444). And now, I looked at my heterosexuality. Is that what I was all this time? I know that it was the only narrative available. And in the absence of any alternatives, and despite my fears, I participated in it, as fully as I could.

EXEMPLAR 6 (lines 1437-1438). I grew up in the 70's. There were no gay and lesbian characters on television, no such neighbors on my block.

It was unseen.

The invisibility of gays and lesbians in my world growing up positioned heterosexuality as the only option available for partnering. Rich (1980) described compulsory heterosexuality as a powerful cluster of forces within which women have been convinced of the inevitability of both marriage and heterosexual orientation toward men; its imposition can be forcible, as in the history of lesbian women losing custody of their children, as well as subliminal. Heterosexuality was the only model available to me for adult partnering. As a child I had no gay or lesbian couples in my family or community; it was also completely absent in the media. All of the markers of adulthood had to do with heterosexual coupling. Dating, marriage and child rearing were all portrayed solely as heterosexual endeavors. No other event, such as the attainment of an advanced degree or buying a home brought the status that heterosexual marriage did. In this culture, adult competencies are defined as the ability to perform the specific tasks associated with heterosexuality (Spaulding 1999). Failure to attain this status can result in one being regarded as immature and unsuccessful.

The pervasiveness of heterosexuality is expressed through heteronormativity. Heteronormativity was a ubiquitous part of the cultural environment in which my family and I were embedded and within which we interacted. Heteronormativity has been described as the culture in which heterosexuality and all heterosexual forms of relating are the norm (Gamson, 2000). It is viewed as 'natural' (Warner, 1993) and is the default position in dominant culture in that, for example, *marriage* infers *heterosexual* marriage.

Heterosexuality is omnipresent, yet invisible. There are numerous examples of the manifestation of heteronormativity in the results of the present study.

There appeared to be a lack of language, indicated by the absence of conversation and general silence regarding my relationship with Sallie. In instances both with my sisters and casual friends, there appeared to be no social script to inquire about our relationship:

EXEMPLAR 7 (lines 1183-1185). Telling my sister Margaret was equally surreal. Neither sister asked questions about my falling in love with a woman. It was as if it was of no consequence. No questions were asked about how, or why. Nothing was asked about Sallie.

EXEMPLAR 8 (lines 1620-1628). Although everyone was kind and wished me well, they did not relate to Sallie and me. We were not invited to be a part of the pot luck dinners, and the spontaneous visits and casual conversation ceased. It seemed they were at a loss for how to relate to Sallie and me as a couple. Although I still felt connected to them through our years of summering at the shore, their connection to me became lost. They asked no questions about any aspect of our lives together. The silence was deafening, much as it was in the relationship with my sisters. I thought of all the lesbian women I had known or worked with over the years who described this same thing: the silence and invisibility, particularly about their relationships.

Culture gets communicated through language; silence, and the deficit of language have consequences, one of which is to render a relationship invisible, nonexistent in dominant

discourses. A relationship that is deemed 'other' does not have access to the language and social discourses in the same ways as relationships in the dominant group. For example, what descriptive word is given to Sallie, and to her relationship to the children? Or, how do the children relate to Sallie's mother? Do they address her as grandmother? This concept of language as an institutionalizing element echoes Hall and Kitson's (2000) work that noted most knowledge about stepfamilies is limited to heterosexual partnering. There is a lack of agreement by families, researchers and clinicians alike about what to even call the partner/stepparent in lesbian stepfamilies. The absence of language and conversation is both a consequence and a sustaining factor of heterosexual dominance. Non-dominant forms of relating remain marginalized by the limitations of language and social discourses that render them invisible and forbidden. Adrienne Rich (1979) best described this phenomenon and its consequences:

Whatever is unnamed, undepicted in images, whatever is omitted from biography, censored in collection of letters, whatever is misnamed as something else, made difficult-to-come-by, whatever is buried in the memory by the collapse of meaning under an inadequate or lying language – this will become, not merely unspoken, but *unspeakable*. (p. 199)

This illustrates the power of language and social discourse to shape ideas about self and the options available for partnering in the culture.

Heteronormativity also impacted the conversations available in the culture about heterosexual marriage. I had concerns going into heterosexual marriage, that in retrospect, I could not discuss in a heteronormative climate:

EXEMPLAR 9 (lines 1430- 1435). Looking back I clearly feared heterosexual marriage. I entered into it with great caution. But I had not many words to describe the fear. And there was really nowhere to have that conversation. After all, it would be viewed as 'normal' to be scared on the cusp of that kind of commitment. Chalked up to some neurosis, or intimacy issue. Admittedly I would have that very conversation with a client who was about to marry. I would not have thought to ask questions about the heterosexuality of the coupling.

The heterosexual part of marriage remains largely detached from any analysis of relationship in the marriage and family therapy literature. In the marriage and family therapy literature, marriage has been analyzed as an institution, but not a *heterosexual* institution. Even without incorporating the notion of heterosexuality, the institution of marriage was found to be oppressive to women. As early as 1972, in *The Future of Marriage*, sociologist Jessie Bernard posited that marriage damaged women's emotional well-being. Arlie Hochschild's 1989 book, *The Second Shift* documented the fact that women worked an average of fifteen hours more per week than their husbands. Although these books had enormous impact on the field, the link between heterosexuality and female oppression remained imperceptible. This is because implicit in our understanding of marriage is that *marriage is assumed to be heterosexual*. Feminist family therapists have deconstructed marriage and family from a gendered standpoint (Goldner, 1985, 1988; Goodrich, 1991; Hare-Mustin, 1978, 1986; McGoldrick, Anderson & Walsh, 1989; Walters, Carter, Papp & Silverstein, 1988). The concepts of oppression and power have been analyzed, but solely from a perspective of gender. This has obfuscated the fact that

this gender oppression coexists with heterosexual privilege. Although women may experience gender oppression within the context of heterosexual marriage, they are simultaneously conferred significant social status and a variety of economic and legal rights and protections. Heterosexual privilege operates on numerous systemic and interpersonal levels that reinforce the dominance of heterosexuality. The relationship between heterosexuality and female oppression remains relegated to the lesbian feminist literature (Daly, 1973, 1978; Dworkin, 1987; Kitzinger, 1987; Millet, 1970; Rich, 1980) and has not become integrated with any analyses of marriage in the marriage and family therapy literature over time.

Heteronormativity was also evident in that I was compelled to take action previously unnecessary in a heterosexual relationship. In the data, this process was expressed by numerous conversations that entailed not only telling that I was in a new relationship, but that it was *with a woman*. I was acutely aware of the real and potential dangers of this, and began by consulting an attorney. Because people made the assumption that if I was in relationship it was a heterosexual one, under certain circumstances, I now needed to tell that I was with a woman. Sometimes this would be to make Sallie *visible*, to have her be known, because without the telling her existence would not have even been entertained. This is the heterosexual assumption: “everyone is and should be heterosexual.” (Bohan, 1996, p. 33) I am indoctrinated into this way of being, offered only this category of knowledge. Janis Bohan (1996) states:

For any life other than a heterosexually defined one is thoroughly impeded by our daily experiences; any other life is made invisible and devalued where it appears;

and both social norms and formal institutions are structured so as to compel individuals to embrace the heterosexual manner of living. (p. 34)

The heteronormative climate of my culture *compelled me to define myself as something other* when in relationship with Sallie.

The process of now being viewed and viewing oneself as other was underway. Despite the fact that I experienced my sense of self as consistent and unchanging, I moved from a socially privileged position, heterosexuality, to a marginalized position, lesbian. My racial, economic, and educational privilege were critical in my ability to tolerate what might come my way; I could attempt to protect and insulate myself.

The heterosexual narrative was very powerful; even I seem shocked by my own story:

EXEMPLAR 10 (lines 1760-1763). Would it have been more palatable if I had been with a man again? To the extent that that scenario was a more familiar cultural narrative, I believe so. I mean, falling in love with another man at least had a script. But a *woman? And in your mid forties?* It was an incredulous story, totally out of bounds for my family and community.

Gender – The anchor of heterosexuality

The autoethnography exposed the cultural discourses that conflate sexual orientation and gender. The adult competencies associated with heterosexuality are distributed on the basis of gender (Spaulding, 1999). Heterosexuality can be viewed as a compulsory form of sexuality that regulates gender as a binary system (Butler, 1990). This regulation codifies and sustains what is understood as appropriate masculine and feminine behavior. Bohan (1996) has described gender role compliance as “the anchor of

heterosexuality.” (p. 35) In the autoethnography, gender repeatedly emerged, in specific messages given by my family of origin, and in the common cultural narratives about the nature of heterosexual as well as lesbian relationships. The discourses about gender reify masculinity and femininity as inherent opposites. Although the meanings of masculinity and femininity can vary across time and place as well as within individuals, they will be referred to here as they are represented in the dominant discourses – as binary, opposite constructs that rigidly apply to the male and female sex. Gender is a construct that identifies particular transactions understood to be appropriate to one’s sex (Bohan, 1993).

In my family of origin there was considerable weight given to being feminine. This meant spending time on one’s appearance, which included clothes, hair and makeup. My father was the only male in the house, and I grew up watching the daily rituals of my older sisters as they spent time styling their hair and applying makeup. Although I was encouraged to be feminine, I was also to have power, via a successful career:

EXEMPLAR 11 (lines 1413-1418). I did not change my last name when I married, nor did I use the ‘Mrs.’ That my name remained the same was of importance to me. Interestingly, my father encouraged me to become a doctor and keep my name when I married. I’m not sure why, other than to carry on his legacy in some way. But it did assuage my concern about getting subsumed beneath the identity of a man. I wanted to be seen as me, not as someone’s wife.

I could be powerful and feminine at the same time. It was not, however, in my repertoire to imagine being *lesbian and feminine*. My earlier stated perception of the mutual exclusivity of these categories had to do with gender: lesbians were not necessarily

overtly masculine, but certainly less feminine, and that was not perceived by me as positive. They did not engage in the rituals of femininity that had to do with appearance that were of such import in both my family and culture.

Lesbianism has been viewed in the psychoanalytic discourse as a disturbance in gender identity (Burch, 1995). Lesbian does not signify feminine to feminine connection. The inversion model of homosexuality stipulated that lesbian women were masculine in their personality, in their attractions to women and even in their physiology (Krafft-Ebing, 1950). This very influential theory maintained the link between gender identity and sexual desire, because the masculine woman, also known as the butch, still desired the feminine woman. This assumed link between gender identity and sexual desire is steeped in heteronormativity. This discourse cannot contain a feminine woman loving a feminine woman. The butch-femme narrative is still the most common cultural narrative for the gendered nature of lesbian relationships (Laird, 1999). The feminine desiring the feminine shatters the dominance of heteronormative presumptions about gender identity and desire. This would be true as well for the woman who rejects a stereotypically feminine appearance and identity, whether lesbian or heterosexual.

I recall telling a beloved aunt and uncle about my relationship with Sallie. I had been close to these relatives since early childhood. They were open and loving to me and Sallie, without reservation. My uncle did share a part of his reaction with his daughter, my cousin, when they were discussing my transition: He said, "I never noticed that about Jackie." What was it that my uncle was supposed to notice? I think it was about gender, about a more masculine presence associated with lesbianism. Since I was, and remained,

feminine, it created dissonance in his mind. I as well as others grappled with this gender component:

EXEMPLAR 12 (lines 1453-1460). I could tell that others looked at me differently knowing I was in relationship with a woman. At extended family gatherings, a cousin might stare at me just a bit longer, looking, I can only guess, for some ‘difference.’ There were no explicit questions, no conversations to be had, and yet I felt from those around me this uneasy querying: *How will Jackie be as a lesbian? How will she become different?* In the absence of knowing Sallie, they studied me for signs that I would be more masculine. At the edge of my knowing I could hear a collective sigh of relief when I walked into my niece’s graduation party wearing my typical dress and heels.

The feminine, or lipstick lesbian upsets the cultural notion that a lesbian woman is obvious. For this reason, some have described the lipstick lesbian as a transgressive identity (Bell, Binnie, Cream & Valentine, 1994); she disregards the heteronormative prescriptions about how a non-heterosexual woman is to appear. The feminine lesbian is troublesome because she is less able to be detected.

I did not experience my relationship with Sallie in this polarized way; in fact I liked the fact that I was a woman with another woman:

EXEMPLAR 13 (lines 1477-1480). In being with a woman I could not get over the softness of it, the familiarity. Yet although I experienced this similarity others related to us as gendered opposites. Take for example,

the male acquaintance who began to converse with Sallie about how attractive I was.

That conversation was comparable to two men discussing the physical attributes of a woman, the familiar male bonding by objectification. Perhaps we were related to in this way because Sallie was older, did not wear makeup, or had been identified as a lesbian considerably longer than me. And, even if Sallie herself identified as butch, she was by far the most feminine partner I had ever been with.

Green, Bettinger and Zacks (1996) coined the term “gender straightjacketing” to illustrate the set of assumptions under which heterosexual male/female couple stereotypes are projected onto gay and lesbian couple relationships. In their research, Green, et al found that gay and lesbian couples were, compared to heterosexual couples, more cohesive and more flexible in terms of the enactment of gender norms. This is consistent with the ethnographic research of Weston (1991) who also found enormous flexibility in the way lesbian couples enact gender within their relationships.

In my family of origin we were allowed to stray from traditional feminine gender roles by having power, but only so much, and in certain situations:

EXEMPLAR 14 (lines 1474-1481). In divorcing Peter I was breaking many of the gender rules in my family: don't disappoint the man, cater to him, keep him happy. And, I was hurting a very good and kind man. For my sisters this lent validation to the family narrative that I was “spoiled” and “selfish.” I had too much agency for a woman, and I became unpalatable to them. For we were allowed to be strong women, but only in service of family and husband, not in service of oneself. I was seen as destroying my

children and family, all in my selfish and trivial pursuit of a relationship with a woman.

Even women with some power ultimately remained subjugated to men in this familial and cultural narrative.

Homonegating Processes

The autoethnography elucidated the fact that my partnering with a woman could be perceived as deviant, and inferior to my heterosexual marriage. This researcher's understanding of the processes associated with living in a heteronormative culture as a non-heterosexual grew and developed in the analysis of the data. In structuring the next section of results, it is my wish to demonstrate this trajectory by applying language and concepts *as they were acquired* in mining the data. Language came to have a whole new utility as I engaged with the data, extracted themes and generated more questions; the connection between personal and systemic processes became increasingly clear.

Biculturalism

In the transition from heterosexual marriage, I began to use words such as 'boundaries' and 'curtain' to describe my budding awareness of the different experiences of being in the world:

EXEMPLAR 15 (lines 764-765). Lesbians were different from me somehow, or I from them. Different, distinct, separate. They had their own communities, with boundaries that excluded me.

EXEMPLAR 16 (lines 863-864). I went home feeling as though I had crossed this huge boundary and liked what I found on the other side.

EXEMPLAR 17 (lines 1642-1643). This immense curtain had been drawn back, and I now walked in two worlds: the heterosexual and the lesbian.

EXEMPLAR 18 (lines 1725-1726). The curtain had been drawn, the boundary between lesbian and heterosexual crossed, and certain things took on relevance as never before.

I clearly began to experience and describe two distinct experiences of being in the world. Brown (1989) labels this as biculturalism and suggests that this is a defining element of the gay/lesbian reality. This concept is both useful and applicable to my transition as I clearly began to describe what felt like two distinct realities. Lesbians are simultaneously participants in both heterosexual and lesbian experiences. As a mother I was steeped in the heterosexual world via my children and their activities. Biculturalism facilitates an understanding of the rules of mainstream culture while at the same time enabling the individual to envision new and perhaps more fulfilling ways of being in the world (Brown, 1989).

The rules of mainstream culture became more apparent to me as I experienced the loss of heterosexual privilege:

EXEMPLAR 19 (lines 1399-1400). So now I took on the status of a separated woman. I sensed that people began to see me differently when not connected to a man.

EXEMPLAR 20 (lines 1314-1316). Reactions were positive, but, well, strange. One male colleague was happy, but for this reason: “Now I can *really* fantasize about you, Jackie!”

EXEMPLAR 21 (lines 1289-1301). But I was terribly awkward, unschooled in being a lesbian. In public I would reach for her hand, or move to kiss her, and she would not respond, or give me the look that said ‘watch out.’ I had no experience in this guardedness. I was used to being able to express affection, however, whenever.

The simple act of reaching for my lover’s hand in public was now imbued with new meaning; it was associated with danger, with being perceived as deviant. In the right context such as on the streets of New York City or Berkeley, California, it felt more like a defiant act of revolution that was simply, exhilarating.

Internalized Homophobia and Heterosexism

I used the words ‘raw’ and ‘exposed’ to describe my sense of self walking around in the world as a lesbian:

EXEMPLAR 22 (lines 1316-1317). I would feel raw and exposed when Sallie and I were in the crowd together, and found myself wanting the safety and privacy of our hotel room.

EXEMPLAR 23 (lines 1612-1613). No, at that time the difference was in how the world now defined me because I loved a woman. I was different in my vulnerability. I felt exposed.

What was that raw, exposed, vulnerable feeling that I had in public? As a heterosexual, for the most part I walked with confidence and self assurance. Was the fragility associated with taking on an identity that was vilified? Losing the privileges associated with heterosexuality meant more than the obvious access to marriage and the ensuing status. Perhaps this was what it felt like to be ‘out,’ to not pass as heterosexual. In the

right social context, I could feel celebratory as a lesbian. Although I did not know it at the time, I was gradually beginning to understand the meaning of community.

Early on in the transition, I became acutely aware of homophobia:

EXEMPLAR 24 (lines 1613-1615). I would wonder, “Would they let their kids play with mine if they knew?” I was acutely aware that my children and I could now be the object of hate and disgust because of who I loved.

EXEMPLAR 25 (lines 1655-1662). During these early months when the children knew, I became even more keenly aware that if anything was wrong with either John or Lily, if they had school problems, problems with grades, looked unhappy, or God forbid, depressed, that I would not only be to blame, I would be again the object of rage and accusation, particularly from my sister and former husband. I did not want to pressure them to be happy and well adjusted, but admittedly, I was vigilant, not only about that, but for signs of their rejection of me. While a part of me knew that that fear was unwarranted, I harbored it nonetheless. I knew this fear was partially about being in relationship with a woman.

Unlike my earlier forays in public when I would unconsciously reach for Sallie’s hand, I began to have a more acute awareness of the dangers associated with being a lesbian; I became more guarded and vigilant:

EXEMPLAR 26 (lines 1815-1825). Because I had made the decision to tell only a few parents personally, I anticipated that, at some point, someone would ask me about my relationship with Sallie. Any time another parent

said, “I have to ask you something” or “I have to talk to you,” away from the children, I thought “Uh oh, here it comes.”

So when picking John up from a play date, his friend’s Mom said “If you have a minute, I need to talk with you after John gets to the car,” I went into vigilance mode.

What did I anticipate? I felt myself tense at the suggestion of this more private conversation. Tense, and prepare to defend myself, the kids and Sallie, and yes, to fight if need be. Apparently, I was prepared to be accused of something.

I came to be prepared for a negative response about my relationship with Sallie. Even when none were overtly forthcoming from our suburban community, I remained cautious and guarded.

My own thinking about being a lesbian was infused with homonegating discourses. For example, when I thought about my former husband’s reaction to telling him about my relationship with Sallie, I had these thoughts:

EXEMPLAR 27 (lines 1124-1126). I think he just did not believe me, or perhaps thought it was a “phase” I was going through. Surely, I believe he thought, surely Jackie will change her mind and come to her senses.

This view of lesbianism as a ‘phase’ means that it is immature, incomplete and transitory. It is a homophobic depiction. The term homophobia, first used in 1972 (Weinberg, 1972) refers to negative attitudes and prejudice toward non-heterosexual people. Also known as heterosexism, (Herek, 1990) it can exist in many forms such as personal, interpersonal and institutional. Herek (1990) defines heterosexism as “an ideological system that

denies, denigrates, and stigmatizes any nonheterosexual form of behavior, identity, relationship, or community.” (p. 316) Like heteronormativity, heterosexism is omnipresent. It is reflected institutionally in social policy, culturally in social customs and norms and psychologically in feelings of disgust or condemnation (Herek, 1995). Psychological heterosexism is also expressed behaviorally in physical assault, verbal abuse or harassment. Heterosexism operates via a dual process of rendering gays and lesbians invisible and then attacking them in some way when they become visible (Herek, 1995).

Most children learn to internalize the culture’s ideology about what is considered normal or deviant. As a result, the non-heterosexual individual learns to despise parts of him or herself before ever even applying the categories of gay/lesbian (Bohan, 1996). These negative feelings toward themselves, known as internalized homophobia (Maylon, 1982) are inevitable in a heterosexist culture, and can be manifested in a variety of ways.

My internalized homophobia was expressed in the ‘it’s just a phase’ discourse. Whether or not I believed this about myself, the discourse was available to me in thinking about Peter’s reaction. This discourse implies that lesbianism is temporary, and will be outgrown with maturity. It is thus an immature identity, unformed, and undesirable on a permanent basis. This discourse fails to acknowledge the authenticity of lesbianism, and avoids defining the lesbian woman altogether (Spaulding, 1999).

My internalized homophobia was also manifested in my fear that the children would reject me because I was a lesbian. I internalized the discourse that being a lesbian was so vile and disgusting as to make my own child reject me. That was a powerful

discourse, and an odd dance between reason and emotion as intellectually *I thought I knew* that they would not reject me:

EXEMPLAR 28 (lines 1659-1662). I did not want to pressure them to be happy and well adjusted, but admittedly I was vigilant, not only about that, but for signs of their rejection of me. While a part of me knew that that fear was unwarranted, I harbored it nonetheless. I knew this fear was partially about being in relationship with a woman.

The language I use, of rejection, is interesting. To reject is to turn away, spurn, refuse to accept or acknowledge. I came to use similar language in describing what it felt like in relationship with my former husband: I felt ‘shunned’ by him, completely unacknowledged, and invisible. Although all of this was unstated, the feelings now associated with being in relationship with others had to do with my own internalized understandings of the category lesbian. Bohan’s (1996) point about gay identity formation is salient here. She writes that the task at hand is to reevaluate the label (lesbian) as it applies to oneself and “forge an identity that incorporates the label but with a transformed meaning.” (p. 104)

The distinction I made between lesbian women and heterosexual women regarded gender. I clearly valued femininity and viewed lesbians as more masculine. According to Herek (1995) one of the most widespread stereotypes is that a non-heterosexual orientation is inherently related to gender role non-compliance. So I believed that lesbians were more masculine, devalued that, and believed I could not be a lesbian because I was feminine. In my transition to becoming a lesbian, I maintained gender appropriate behaviors such as participation in the rituals of femininity that had to do with

appearance. I was thus able to 'pass' because I still looked heterosexual. How important was this to me? While I was not acutely conscious of needing to maintain a particular appearance, I was aware of the discourse of being different, which I rejected. I very much wanted to be a lesbian, *and be the same*. The desire to be viewed as unchanged I believed at first to be about minimizing all of the changes we were going through as a family: separation, divorce, two moves, the introduction of a new partner. This was all true. But I began to look more closely at the enormous value I placed on femininity, which I have come to see as gender role compliance; I had internalized the cultural norms that valued feminine women and marginalized those who did not adhere to these norms. This had less to do with sexual orientation and much more to do with gender.

Theorists such as Herek (1986) Pharr (1988) and Kimmel (2000) have examined the relationship between gender and homophobia; specifically, homophobia can be viewed as an organizing principle of masculinity. Heterosexual males tended to manifest higher levels of prejudice than heterosexual females, particularly toward gay men (Herek, 1984, 1988, 1995; Herek & Glunt, 1993). Gender role non-compliance thus carries the risk of being accused of non-heterosexuality.

Passing

The issue of passing is complex. Pharr (1988) discussed two kinds of passing. The first is completely hiding the lesbian identity, marrying and living in a heterosexual family. The second kind of passing is being more public as a lesbian but assuming "heterosexual dress and behavior' in order to be socially acceptable or good lesbians." (p. 72) Pharr points out the negative consequences of passing behavior, such as isolation. But passing is also protective. Bohan (1996) defines passing as a midlevel stage of

stigma management. In passing I am protected by my heterosexual dress and behavior, and this could become even more important if I feel my children, Sallie or I the potential victims of homonegativity. There were times when my children requested that I pass, and I did so to protect them.

Yoshino (2006) discussed passing as a second phase of gay identity formation; passing follows conversion, and precedes covering. He makes a connection to the cultural context by describing it as “a set of performances on my part, but also a set of demands society had made of me to minimize my gayness.” (p. 19) Yoshino also linked conversion and passing to phases of gay history: through the twentieth century it was demanded that gays convert to heterosexuality through psychoanalysis, lobotomies, and electroshock therapy. An example of the passing phase is the US military’s ‘Don’t ask, don’t tell’ policy. Gay men and women are allowed to serve so long as they agree to pass as heterosexual. This policy is “swaddled in a story of progress.” (2006, p. 70) Generally viewed as a more accepting and tolerant policy, implicit in ‘don’t ask, don’t tell’ is a denial of the basic right to say who one is.

Some of the early conversations between Sallie and me were part of our negotiations around heterosexism and internalized homophobia. Since Sallie had been out for twenty-five years, and I was heterosexually married, she had legitimate concerns:

EXEMPLAR 29 (lines 718-721). Wonderful as they were, these early conversations were not without challenge. I’m not sure what Sallie was checking out: my courage? Resolve? Tenacity? Maybe, just my level of homophobia. Her questions were not from a place of challenge; gently, she would ask if I thought I could kiss her in public.

There are many questions embedded in “could you kiss me in public?” Foremost is Sallie’s concern that I could not, that I would be unable to be ‘out.’ She might also wonder if my level of heterosexism was such that I would be compelled to hide this behavior even if I took on the self-label of lesbian. Sallie perhaps wondered if I would insist on passing. She had much more knowledge about the meaning attached to being a lesbian, and knew of the difficulties I would face in ways that I could not anticipate.

Russell (2006) pointed to the false distinction made and pathology implied in the use of the terms (external) homophobia and internalized homophobia. Like the Mobius strip in mathematics, she asserts, homophobia and internalized homophobia exist in relationship to each other; they are not distinct entities, or traits that reside within the individual. One cannot be separated or distinguished from the other; they are not discrete. Russell suggests using the language of homonegating processes to incorporate the social nature of homophobia and to avoid the negative intrapsychic connotation that internalized homophobia has come to bear. “The cycle of taking in and promulgating homophobic narratives is as easy and as automatic as inhaling and exhaling; homophobia, like the air, is simultaneously within and without.” (p. 14) I find Russell’s reframing of homophobia as processes – “enactments - rather than traits” (p. 16) compelling. In the analysis of the data, it is particularly helpful in thinking about the ways in which Sallie, the children and I negotiated our home life.

Like the air, homonegating processes were all around us: inside and outside:

EXEMPLAR 30 (lines 1707-1712). Amid the packing, painting and moving, the news about gay and lesbian issues continued to pour into our home, a home now so intimately affected by it all: the weddings in San

Francisco, the approval of the first openly gay bishop in the Anglican church amongst strong dissent, the Vatican calling same-sex marriage “highly immoral,” the president saying that marriage should be between a man and a woman.

EXEMPLAR 31 (lines 1679-1693). I came out at a time when it seemed there was a constant flow of news and debate about any issue pertaining to being gay or lesbian. It was difficult to pick up a newspaper and *not* find a prominent headline about some facet of the cultural debate being played out in legislatures, courtrooms, churches. Against this backdrop, the children and I had conversation after conversation about what this all meant for us. For example, in late 2003, the Massachusetts Supreme Court had ruled that gay and lesbian couples had the legal right to marry. The children were aware that this was not the case in New Jersey, and made their feelings known; John would ask, “Mom, why don’t they just let gay people marry?”... Lily was clear that this was a generational issue: “In ten years or so, it will be legal. No one will care.” Indeed, Lily would express her opinion that the cultural climate would change in the not too distant future: “I’ll be in college, and someone will be telling me that their Mom had just come out, and I’ll say, well, my Mom came out ten years ago!”

For Lily it may not be safe now, but it will get safer as her cohort group comes into adulthood. Her sense of optimism is supported by research that indicates that youth are disclosing their non-heterosexuality at a younger age and with unprecedented regularity (Savin-Williams, 2006). Teens can be ambisexual and heteroflexible (Morris, 2006).

The homonegating processes existed even *between* us as a family, expressed in the banter of daily life. Now embedded in our relationships was a complex mix of acceptance, fear and disdain, for me and my relationship with Sallie. Our conversations were both innocent and difficult; I was surprised to find myself feeling hurt by my own children:

EXEMPLAR 32 (lines 1788-1803). One day while driving together, Lily related a conversation between her and her Dad:

“So he says, ‘Listen, I have to talk to you about something.’ And my first response is, ‘NO! Dad!... Please don’t tell me *you’re* gay too! Please, I can only tolerate one gay parent!’”

“Dad laughs and says ‘No, Lily, no, don’t worry about *that!* You never have to worry about *that* with me!’”

“Thank goodness, because one gay parent is *enough!*”

Lightheartedly my daughter relates this story of banter and intimacy between her and her father. I laugh along, but inside I feel the stinging hurt.

I have now become someone for her to “tolerate.”

“Don’t worry about *that!*” What I am is unspeakable to my former husband, and so terrible for my daughter that she must now endeavor to tolerate me.

A Family Comes Out

The process of coming out was not my own; it had become my family's. My children took it on as they negotiated their way through the questions and conversation:

Who is safe to tell?

EXEMPLAR 33 (lines 1687-1689). It came to be a complicated reality for John and Lily, who were sensitive to this injustice, and still needing to protect themselves by keeping the secret about my relationship with Sallie.

The very night I told the children about my relationship with Sallie, they began to ask questions about who knew, and to engage in the process of secret-keeping. John, almost ten at the time, asked:

EXEMPLAR 34 (lines 1548-1555). "Does Daddy know?"

"Yes, he does."

"Does Aunt Annie know?"

"Aunt Annie knows."

"OK, good. So, Mommy, can Sallie teach me how to play tennis now?"

Lily eventually said:

EXEMPLAR 35 (line 1569). "I want to call Katie and tell her. But just her, OK?"

But just her, OK? Note the immediacy of their apparent awareness of homophobia and the subsequent felt need to employ caution in sharing this information.

Most women who come out in midlife have children (Sang, 1993) although many do not come out due to the fear of losing family, friends, and livelihood (Green, 1987).

The fear of disclosure tends to be more common among women who have come out later

in life or who have been identified more with the heterosexual population (Pennington, 1987). The extent to which women were open about their lesbian identity with employers, former husbands and children was related to their sense of psychological well being (Rand, Graham & Rawlings, 1982). The more open and honest the woman could be with her children, the less stressful the transition for her (Green, 1987). A mother who felt more able to disclose her lesbian identity was also more likely to express a positive sense of well being. Those who do come out to their children struggle to decide if, when, and how to do so (Lott-Whitehead & Tully, 1999). Telling the children weighed heavily on my mind, and I spent a good deal of time thinking and talking about it:

EXEMPLAR 36 (lines 1489-1495). Friends began to urge me to tell them. The prediction was that Lily, who was twelve at the time, would somehow sense it, and know. I was very anxious about telling them. Cassie had prepared me for an intense reaction from Lily, saying that often female family and friends can become more threatened by a relationship with a woman. "Think about it," said Cassie, "Lily was never threatened by the closeness you had with Peter. But the closeness and intimacy with a woman is different and may in fact be more threatening to your daughter."

EXEMPLAR 37 (lines 1497-1501). I chose to tell the kids that February of 2004. We had been in the new house for almost six months, and Sallie was pretty consistently spending time with us. She was there on Christmas and New Year's and was obviously an important person in my life. So, one Friday night, while folding laundry, I began the conversation with Lily.

Lily and John had markedly different reactions to my telling them I was partnered with Sallie. I began the conversation alone with Lily:

EXEMPLAR 38 (lines 1503-1513). “So, I have some news. I’m in a relationship with someone and I wanted to tell you about it. I think I’ve really fallen in love.”

“That’s great, mom.”

“Well, I wanted to tell you about it, and as a matter of fact you know this person that I’m in love with. It’s Sallie.”

My daughter looked at me in shock. She said nothing and turned away. She had the oddest blank look on her face. She stared ahead at nothing. Lily was clearly angry and upset. And I think most of all, completely and utterly shocked. “I want to leave. I want to go over Kate’s house.”

After spending some time with Lily, I went to John’s room:

EXEMPLAR 39 (lines 1532-1546). I walked into his room and sat down on the floor with him. I was emotionally spent from the interaction with Lily, so I tried to lighten it up a bit.

“Mommy has something to tell you honey.”

“OK!”

“You know my friend, Sallie, right? Well, I just wanted you to know that I love her a lot, a real lot, and she’s my girlfriend.”

“I know, Mommy, you’re gay!!”

Now who was in shock?!

“And I don’t mean that it the bad way, I mean that in the good way.”

Notice that I did not use the language of gay or lesbian; that was how John languageed it from the discourses available to him. At eight years of age he not only knew what gay was, he could distinguish both positive and negative connotations of the word.

The disparate reactions of my children could be attributed to their ages at the time of my disclosure. Lily was almost thirteen years old; research has found that early adolescence is a particularly difficult time for disclosure, and that it is less stressful for children in earlier and/or later years (Baptiste, 1987; Huggins, 1989; Lewis, 1980; O'Connell, 1999; Patterson, 1992, 1995a; Paul, 1986). Pennington (1987) noted that adolescent girls can be especially fearful about their own sexual orientation or the perception by others that they are gay. Lily's gender may be a factor in her reaction; my lesbian relationship may be a greater threat to her since she identifies with me. She may also have the concern expressed by my therapist Cassie, about loss of intimacy with me.

After moving into our home together, Sallie, John Lily and I began to negotiate the coming out process as a family. It began with managing the secret:

EXEMPLAR 40 (lines 1765-1766). The four of us understood that we now shared a responsibility for secret keeping about my partnership with Sallie.

EXEMPLAR 41 (lines 1777-1780). Lily loved our new home and enjoyed giving "the tour" to first time guests. She would move from room to room, describing whose it was, or what it was used for. When she came to the master bedroom she would simply say, "And this is my Mom's room."

Where Sallie slept remained unsaid.

EXEMPLAR 42 (lines 1769-1773). But it was very important to Lily that she remain in charge of the dissemination of that information. Lily would

playfully test out stories she could tell her friends about who Sallie was, if need be. “I could just say she’s my long lost aunt. Or a good friend of yours who you took in to help recover from knee surgery.”

The need for secret keeping in families whose mother makes a disclosure is well documented in the research (Baptiste, 1987; Bozett, 1987; Lewis, 1977; O’Connell, 1999; Pennington, 1987; Rafkin, 1990). Children experience a variety fears: being teased, negatively judged, and losing friends, all of which leads to secrecy and hyper vigilance. It can also lead to anxiety, withdrawal and isolation (Pennington, 1987). The secrecy does not appear to impact the friendship patterns of the children of lesbians when compared to those of heterosexual mothers. Hotvedt and Mandel (1982) and Golombok, Spencer and Rutter (1983) found no differences between the two groups.

O’Connell (1999) found that the younger the child at the time of mother’s disclosure, the greater level of acceptance and comfort. Responses were more powerful in early adolescence and often included shock and disbelief. Pennington (1987) found a range of reactions in her sample, from “You’re ruining my life” to “I’m so proud of you.” O’Connell (1999) found both the presence of anger coupled with deep loyalty toward and acceptance of the mother.

Some researchers have suggested that children of lesbian mothers go through unique emotional processes in their experiences as members of lesbian-led households. Van Voorhis and McClain (1997) attempted to identify the process by which children respond to their mother’s disclosure, and proposed a five-stage model. The stages include denial, anger, attempted bargaining to continue heterosexual life or limit lesbian behavior, depression from loss of heterosexual mother and privilege, and acceptance.

The researchers note that although the transition is potentially very painful, many children later report positive outcomes. This is consistent with the body of work on children of gay fathers: regardless of the age of the child or means of disclosure, most children of both sexes responded favorably (Bozett, 1980; Harris & Turner, 1986; Wyers, 1987).

These processes between Sallie, the children and myself were complicated, and required that Sallie and I negotiate being able to tolerate the secrecy. In response to Lily's made-up stories about Sallie being a long lost aunt, I thought:

EXEMPLAR 43 (lines 1773-1775). While I don't think Lily ever used either of these stories, Sallie's and my ability to allow her this freedom and exploration was crucial.

EXEMPLAR 44 (lines 1784-1787). The more complicated truth is that Sallie and I knew we had little choice but to tolerate the silence and invisibility that defined our partnership in our home at that time. It was difficult and painful. And strange, to feel this hurt from my child. What she was doing *hurt*, and yet, I understood it was a necessary part of her own process.

Sallie and I were able to tolerate the children's processes despite the fact that they rendered us invisible in our own home. The emotional support I received from Sallie in putting the needs of the children first affirms the research on lesbian couples. For example, Green, Bettinger and Zacks (1996) found lesbian couples to have high levels of cohesion, and report more satisfaction with their relationship compared to heterosexual and gay male couples. Brown (1989) used the concept of normative creativity to address

the lack of clear rules about how to form a lesbian family, and the need for flexibility as well as creativity. In her interviews with grown children, Tasker (2002) found that a new lesbian partner was less likely than a new heterosexual partner to have a clearly defined role in the child's life when initially moving into the home. Although the lack of definition sometimes caused stress in the lesbian stepfamilies, it also meant that the relationship between the child and stepparent could evolve in a fashion and pace regulated by their particular needs. When assessing the involvement of the non-biological parent in the lives of the children, Tasker found non-biological mothers in lesbian led families played a more active role in daily caregiving than did most fathers in heterosexual families. Kirkpatrick (1987) found that lesbian mothers living with partners and children had greater economic and emotional resources. This was certainly true in my case; Sallie's presence in our family provided me with emotional, economic and physical support.

So although the children were guarded about my relationship with Sallie, they experienced me as supported in all of those ways by her. And there were numerous occasions that were celebratory and safe for us as a family:

EXEMPLAR 45 (lines 1701-1706). Sallie and I found a beautiful home that the children loved, and made plans to move in July of 2004. We celebrated with our friend Wendy and her children, who lived in the same small town. It was critical that both Wendy and Donna's spouses and children knew about and affirmed my relationship with Sallie; thus, in the context of Lily and John's familiar, inner circle of friends-as-extended family, there was no secret keeping.

EXEMPLAR 46 (lines 1950-1955). We hurt and ache from time to time, and bump up against each other as we move through this uncharted terrain of being an unplanned lesbian stepfamily. But this ever optimistic lesbian mother is buoyed by the tiny miracles that seem to happen daily: waking each day with Sallie, catching her and the children laughing as I walk into the room. Playing Monopoly for hours. Having birthday dinners together with Donna, Wendy, and all the kids.

Research has documented that children fare better when their mothers are in good psychological health and living happily with a lesbian partner with whom they share child care (Patterson, 2000). In O’Connell’s (1999) study, the dissolution of the marriage was a far more significant event for the children. The mother’s coming out was pivotal insofar as it confirmed the end of the parent’s marriage. Research has found that it is the quality of the parenting rather than sexual orientation that appears to be most crucial in children’s adjustment and development (Pennington, 1987).

The issue of how children of lesbian mothers fare is a complex and thorny one. This is true in the culture as well as in the field of marriage and family therapy. Consider this conversation between Lily and I, in which she asks about my relationship with Sallie:

EXEMPLAR 47 (lines 1561-1567). “So, mom, what’s it like?” Lily asked.

“It’s pretty wonderful. It’s a wonderful relationship. I’m very happy.”

“My friends and I talk about it, about what it might be like.”

”That’s great, honey.”

Inherent in this innocent conversation between mother and child resides the prevailing cultural fear that children can be influenced in becoming gay. Bound by this

fear as well as the need to protect lesbian mothers against losing custody, research has focused on defensively proving that children of lesbian and gay parents are similar to children of heterosexual parents. They have been compared on a range of measures that have included emotional adjustment and sexual orientation (Allen & Burrell, 1996; Patterson, 2004a; Tasker, 2002). The difference equals deficit discourse is an obvious and direct result of the ways in which heteronormativity and homonegativity have operated to shape and constrain research and theory in this area. Stacey and Biblarz (2001) cite the implausibility of the no difference findings, and contend that children raised by lesbian mothers *do* differ in some modest ways: children of lesbian mothers have a more expanded gender repertoire, are more tolerant of diversity and seem to grow up to be more open to homoerotic relationships.

Did I have any indication that this was the case for my children? In examining the data, it was clear that my children were more tolerant of diversity, especially around gay and lesbian issues. They were particularly vocal about their positive views on gay marriage. This was not necessarily due to having a lesbian mother; being familiar with gay and lesbian families was part of their social context:

EXEMPLAR 48 (lines 132-138). I was a member of the local Unitarian Universalist Congregation, and the children were enrolled in religious education classes. I was drawn to this congregation for a number of reasons: the respect for all religious traditions, the diversity of the congregation in terms of race and sexual orientation. Even though we lived in a suburb in close proximity to New York City, our community was largely white and

exclusively heterosexual. It was important to me to expose Lily and John to diverse people and families.

EXEMPLAR 49 (lines 653-654). Aunt Pants (real name, Nancy) lived with her partner, Alice, and their two children in Lakeville, Massachusetts.

Herek and Glunt (1993) found that personal contact with openly gay people was strongly correlated with an increased acceptance of lesbians and gay men. The personal, lifelong contact my children had could account for their level of acceptance, as well as having a mother who was in a lesbian relationship.

Covering

The pressure to assimilate to the dominant norm, the no difference discourse has been addressed as covering by Goffman (1963). The word 'covering' refers to the management of a stigmatized identity by downplaying the behavioral aspects of that identity. Relating this to sexual orientation, Bohan (1996) pointed out the most salient feature of covering behavior is the attempt to diminish the impact of the stigmatized identity. Thus an individual can be 'out' but "essentially duplicate the heterosexual norm." (p. 100) Clearly, my desire to view myself as unchanged in the process of transitioning to a lesbian relationship was evidence of the powerful impact of the normalizing discourses: do not be different. Be normal, just like everyone else. The scholarly literature that addresses children of lesbian mothers has done just that: emphasize sameness and downplay difference. It would seem that the challenge ahead is to imagine and implement the possibility that a gay or lesbian identity would not merely be *tolerated*, but be *desirable*. Or, perhaps, as Brown (1989) asserted, just unremarkable. If there were no heterosexism, these categories would indeed be unremarkable. The

possibility would be created that the quality of relationship is of utmost importance, rather than the sex of partner. What should be desired, above all, is a loving relationship.

The children and I continued to negotiate what this transition meant for all of us. Consider this conversation between the children and I prior to Sallie and I registering as Domestic Partners:

EXEMPLAR 50 (lines 1881-1990). “We can’t get married yet, so this is the best we have in New Jersey for now. It means that if either of us got sick, we could take care of each other, and make decisions for each other,” I said. “We’re going down to Asbury Park. We would love to have you come with us, but if you don’t want to, or don’t feel comfortable, please, you don’t have to.”

I, of course, *really* wanted the children by our side, celebrating with us. But, I tried hard to curb that enthusiasm.

John said he would like to go.

Lily said she didn’t.

A few days later, we called the Town Hall in Asbury, and found that the clerk was preparing to leave for the day. If we left immediately, she would wait. I told the kids, and gave them a few moments to decide.

Lily remained unequivocal: “No thanks, I’m staying home”.

I walked outside and found John sitting on the stairs, alone, head in hands.

“Honey, what is it?”

“I think I want to change my mind and stay home with Lily. But I don’t want to hurt your feelings,” he said, without looking at me.

“John, it’s OK. Sallie and I both understand. We know you’re happy for us, and that’s what matters. It’s really OK if you stay home.”

Ouch.

Once again it was necessary that John exercise the option to not attend; this, despite my felt but unstated wish for him to do so. I needed to attempt to conceal my desire and create room for John’s level of comfort. I did, but not without feeling somewhat hurt and disappointed. These were some of my thoughts about our process at the time:

EXEMPLAR 51 (lines 1919-1923). I also understood that the children were still....ambivalent about their Mom being a lesbian. Lily and John experienced the complexity of it all: the “coolness” of being a gay person, the danger of being teased, of being seen as gay or lesbian themselves because of me. Lily had told me of this concern. So while they were happy for Sallie and me, their happiness was tempered by the complex realities of their lives.

The strong emotional support I experienced from Sallie helped me to see the both/and of this time in our transition: the abiding love between the children and me and the fears that Lily and John lived with daily about how this would continue to impact them. At that time they could be in favor of gay marriage, but reticent to accompany us when we registered in Asbury Park. They did what they were comfortable doing:

EXEMPLAR 52 (lines 1940-1946). Sallie and I returned home a short time later. The house was quiet, and as I threw my keys onto the kitchen table, I saw some kind of note.

It was computer made, decorated with a big, pink lipsticked kiss. It read:

“CONGRATULATIONS! Mom and Sallie, on becoming domesticated partners!

Love always, Lily and John.”

It was of great importance that Lily and John be allowed to have their own processes around my relationship with Sallie.

The Binary Discourse Lesbian?

EXEMPLAR 53 (lines 1462-1465). I recall an early conversation with Sallie in which she asked, “How will you identify?” I didn’t know what she was talking about. “What do you mean?” I asked. Of course I had the privilege of never having had to face this question. “I don’t know” was my response.

Identity – always known to me as a noun meaning who I was as a person, became a verb. The need to identify in a particular way did not take on such significance until I fell in love with a woman in my mid forties. My partner Sallie had been out for twenty-five years. Her experience was much like that of her cohort group; coming out was a way to attack prejudice, reduce stereotypes about gays and lesbians, and a way to reduce personal isolation (D’Augelli & Garnets, 1995). It was a public group identity that signified membership in a collectively oppressed minority. Contemporary gay and lesbian communities evolved based on a shared identity derived from sexual orientation. It was to this community that Sallie belonged.

My falling in love with Sallie was the specific event that framed the transition from heterosexual marriage. The occurrence of this kind of event is consistent with the

findings of other researchers who have studied this transition as it followed heterosexual marriage (Charboneau & Lander, 1991; Colucci-Coritt, 2004; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). What were my initial thoughts?

EXEMPLAR 54 (lines 473-478). But I was walking around with this dilemma: what did it mean that I kept longing for more contact with Sallie? Why did I feel that I could never get enough? I told her that I respected what she said about not having an affair, and that if I wanted to pursue something with her I would do what was necessary on my end. What did that mean? I couldn't even say the word 'divorce' or begin to think about the anguish that would cause Peter, or the disruption for my children.

My initial thoughts about falling in love with Sallie had to do with the impact it would have on my husband and children. The meaning I assigned this was about the tragic dissolution of my family as I knew it. I did not begin to think about the category of lesbian unless I was asked. My internal dialogue was not about incongruence in my feelings for Sallie or wondering about my sexual orientation. The dissonance I experienced in falling in love with a woman had to do with the implications of those feelings for my family. I did, however, begin to think retrospectively:

EXEMPLAR 55 (lines 1264-1268). But I had feelings for a woman with whom I worked long ago in the mid 1980s. I never told her or acted on the feelings. When I discussed this with Cassie, and she asked me why, I told her that the woman was 'straight' and I thought it would ruin the friendship. But if I had had any inclination that this friend felt the same way, I would have acted on it.

I began to think retrospectively about prior relationships with women and my feelings in that regard. My experience of transitioning from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman resembles the process of self reconstruction discussed by Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995). This entailed remembering fragmented experiences and naming them, attempting to form some coherent narrative. The fact that I could have been in an intimate relationship with a woman over twenty years ago lends credence to Kitzinger and Wilkinson's assertion that sexual identity transitions could be influenced by "personal reevaluation, practical necessity, political values, *chance and opportunity*." (1995, p. 189) So it seems I could have been a lesbian twenty-five years ago.

My recounting or retrospective does not diminish in any way my experience of heterosexual marriage to the father of my children:

EXEMPLAR 56 (lines 1279-1282). I still felt love for him, and deep sorrow, compassion and guilt for what I was doing to his heart. I was very much in love with him when we were married; our children were conceived out of that love.

This sentiment does not indicate that I was out of touch with my true self or in denial about the potentiality of my feelings for women. Both parts of my experience were equally real and true. This is consistent with the findings of Golden (1987) and Blumstein and Schwartz (1976) about what Golden names the subcategory of elective lesbians. Like me, these women did not experience contradiction with prior heterosexual experience, and did not feel the need to reinterpret their past.

There are thus many meanings attached to the definitional category lesbian. Brown (1995) asserted that it was important to define which definitional paradigm one is

speaking from, since each reflects different definitional assumptions and inferences about the nature of lesbianism. As Brown explained, each model, biological, psychodynamic or stage, is problematic in its own right because the “definitional questions and theoretical models have arisen to one degree or another from outside lived lesbian experience.” (p. 18) Theory and research have been hampered by the inherent heterosexism, androcentrism and essentialism embedded in the paradigm that generates the research questions to be studied. This will be further explicated with an examination of biological essentialism.

Essentialism

My initial understanding of the meaning attached to the category lesbian was both essentialist and pathological in that it focused on the inherent differences between lesbian and heterosexual women. I viewed the categories as discrete and mutually exclusive. The essentialist discourse was ever present in my cultural surround in response to telling about my relationship with Sallie:

EXEMPLAR 57 (lines 1254-1260).when I began to tell casual friends, their most common response was, “Did you always know?” “Know what?” I would think. Then I would answer truthfully, “No, I was shocked myself. Completely surprised.”

“Did you always know?” was a frequently asked question. Embedded in this question are various essentialist assumptions. The first assumption is that there is knowledge about oneself that has been kept hidden, or at bay. This knowledge is that one’s essence is completely different than one appears to be. Intrinsic in this construction

is the notion that sexual orientation is linked to one's identity, and is a core facet of that identity. Consider this conversation with the children's father, Peter:

EXEMPLAR 58 (lines 1235-1245). On rare occasions, Peter would ask a question. During a session with Josh he asked, "Was it ever real?" Tears streamed down my face as I assured him. "Yes. I was very much in love with you when we married. And our children were born out of that love. It was all very very real to me."

Peter seemed to really try to take this in, but if our history together was 'real' how could I now love a woman? There seemed to be no way to make sense of it. Months later, Peter told me that he had come to accept that I was just 'different' and that I 'couldn't help it.' A friend of his, a golf buddy, had shared that he had a gay or lesbian sibling. Peter said, "So they just can't help it. That's the way they are. And I just have to accept this about you Jackie."

The essentialist version of the sexuality narrative positions me as having to surrender to this essential lesbian core – a process over which I have little if any control: "I just can't help it." Perhaps this discourse provides some needed comfort to the spouse, since it would absolve them from any responsibility in the dissolution of the marriage. It may facilitate acceptance of the situation and enable someone to move on, as it appeared to do for Peter. Regardless of the role this discourse serves for the spouse, for many gay men and women it *is* their narrative; they experience being gay and lesbian as an essential component of who they are. There is ample support and validation for the essentialist posture, and claiming the category gay or lesbian has had enormous personal, social, and

political benefit. Positioning sexual orientation as biologically fixed has served as the organizational cornerstone for the gay and lesbian community (Haldeman 1999).

I however, did not experience myself as essentially changed in this transition.

Here are several examples:

EXEMPLAR 59 (lines 864-869). I was the same person, I did not feel different. It was more like I grew, that I added a dimension to myself. That more aptly described it. It was not as if I was a heterosexual before I went to New York and a lesbian when I came home. In fact I rarely used that term, lesbian, except to describe *the relationship* with Sallie. I did not feel that I had been a lesbian all along and suppressed or denied it. I just had given myself permission to be open to an experience and to explore.

EXEMPLAR 60 (lines 1465-1470). I did not resonate with the sexual orientation discourses that dictated as a lesbian 'I have found my true self' or, for the children, that 'Mom is just different, she can't help it.' My children were already going through enormous change – I didn't want to tell them *I'd* changed too. I simply fell in love, and while I would describe my relationship with Sallie as a lesbian relationship, I did not take on the label of the category myself. Perhaps in time I would.

I did not immediately self-label as a lesbian. The current data as well as that of other researchers (Baumeister, 2000; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976; Diamond & Savin Williams, 2000; Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Peplau, Spaulding, Conley & Veniegas, 1999; Rust, 2000) clearly indicates the presence of another narrative for women. This narrative is about fluidity over time, and a focus on

emotional intimacy rather than sexual behavior. When positioned as central rather than in contrast to men, female sexuality does not appear to be well described by any model assuming fixed sexual orientation. Variability in the expression of same-sex desire over the course of the life cycle is normative for women, influenced by the complex interaction between the individual and her environment (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000; Savin-Williams, 1998).

Like other researchers, (ie. Bem, 1992) I felt the inadequacy of categories, a subjective sense of living outside of the binary options provided by my culture. The categories lesbian/heterosexual were experienced as a form of discourse imposed rather than a description of my true experience:

EXEMPLAR 61 (lines 1269-1274). If I had to pick a category I guess I would have said bisexual, because of these feelings. But none of the categories seemed to fit, not even heterosexual. I would joke about the irony of my leftist politics and traditional heterosexual family structure. In fact, Peter used to say that I was “left of left.” From the outside I looked ‘traditional,’ yet inside, there were so many possibilities.

As Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1993) asserted, the terms heterosexual/lesbian “are not symmetrical, the consequences of accepting them are different.” (p. 8) Essentialist arguments of sexual orientation are inherently apologetic in that they infer that the lesbian identity must be tolerated (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Heterosexuality is not natural, instinctive or “numerically normative.” (1993, p. 153)

I continue to reconstruct my narrative in an effort to move beyond the binary construction of identity, and to attempt to capture what these categories do not. Kenji

Yoshino (2006) described this process for himself: “I, so confident of words, have now met the limits of language.” (p. 59) Daily, I am presented with the challenge to weave together a new narrative that goes beyond the limits of language. I had such an opportunity when teaching a graduate class in family therapy:

EXEMPLAR 62 (lines 1844-1856). I began to think about how to introduce myself to the class. I wanted tell them who I was, but still felt that saying I was a lesbian was, in some sense, not saying *enough*. I anticipated that students could assume I had been a lesbian far longer than my ten minutes. Perhaps that language could also obliterate my years of marriage; it just did not capture my history. I found that this single word – lesbian - could communicate much that was untrue about me, and, at the same time, much that *was* true. There was no ‘transitional narrative’ in the dominant discourse from which to borrow. I wasn’t coming up with any succinct, catchy words. So I played with some ideas, and settled on this: “I live in a post-divorce, bi-nuclear family. My partner Sallie and I co-parent my two children, ages 10 and 14, and share residential custody with their father.” This use of language captured who I was in time. I was beginning to find a way to tell my story that held all the threads, the totality of my lived experiences, neither silencing nor privileging any one.

The binary discourse had little utility as I negotiated this transition from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman in my mid forties. My particular narrative, of sexual fluidity and change over time was not expressed in the dominant cultural discourses about sexualities. The either/or binary did not express my experience with heterosexual

marriage; both relationships were real and of great value, although claiming a lesbian identity had far different consequences. Even though heterosexuality was ubiquitous and compulsory, and I had ambivalent feelings entering into it, it was a true expression of my self at that point in time.

Motherhood

Motherhood was the most salient aspect of my identity throughout this transition. It was ever present, informed all decisions, and was unable to be diminished or compartmentalized. Virtually every decision that was made in this transition had to do with my role as a mother, and the consideration of the children. This included the decision to even pursue the relationship with Sallie; it was only after receiving legal consultation and reassurance that I would not lose custody:

EXEMPLAR 63 (lines 982-985). I needed to understand the law, and whether or not my being in a lesbian relationship would affect my ability to have custody of Lily and John. I came to learn that I was protected, that New Jersey had some of the strongest legal precedent concerning gay and lesbian parents.

I also had many conversations about how the pending divorce and my relationship with Sallie would impact the children. Reassurances from those who knew us well were critical:

EXEMPLAR 64 (lines 968-969). Later in that month of September I met with my minister, Kathleen. We had become friends so she knew Peter and the kids as well, and I trusted her.

EXEMPLAR 65 (lines 977-979). Kathleen's response was crucial in that once again I was reassured that I could do this, and my children would be alright. "You have very strong relationships with the kids. I know it will be hard for a while, but I'm sure they'll be fine."

The consistency of these messages about my role as a mother had tremendous impact upon my ability to continue my relationship with Sallie and plan with certainty the eventuality of telling Peter and initiating divorce. If I was not reassured by those who knew me and the children as well as the laws of the state, I could not have moved forward. As much as I loved Sallie, I would not risk losing custody of my children.

Everything that I considered was carefully weighed regarding the impact upon the children:

EXEMPLAR 66 (lines 543-547). For brief, fleeting moments I could understand the consequences of my feelings. Hurting Peter in a way I could never have imagined, ever. Disrupting the lives of Lily and John. Maybe, I thought, maybe I could do something in six years. Lily will be out of high school and John would just be entering. Maybe then.

EXEMPLAR 67 (lines 986-992). The consistency of these messages about my role as a mother had tremendous impact upon my ability to continue my relationship with Sallie and plan with certainty the eventuality of telling Peter and initiating divorce. If I was not reassured by those who knew me and the children as well as the laws of the state, I could not have moved forward. As much as I loved Sallie, I could not risk losing my children, either physically or emotionally. I was, it seemed, first and foremost a

mother, and it was this part of me that was most prominent in those early months.

Although my experience of self was first and foremost as a mother, I was not related to in that way. Members of stigmatized groups are often not viewed as whole or complete persons; instead, the stigmatizing quality assumes primacy, thus becoming the ‘master status’ (Bohan, 1996; Donner, 1999; Goffman, 1963). The master status functions to subordinate or obliterate all other facets of the person’s identity. Once the label lesbian is applied to a woman, it becomes her defining characteristic and all other facets of her identity become subsumed under this. This is yet another homonegating process in the culture; I felt this most acutely as it impacted my status and visibility as a mother during this transition. I wondered about this in thinking about my sister’s reaction when I told her of my relationship with Sallie:

EXEMPLAR 68 (lines 1160-1163). Ann’s voice was sharp and angry.

“Why don’t you just move to Berkeley?”

I was shocked. How could she think I would leave the children? “I’m not moving to Berkeley. I’m their *mother!*”

Brown (1995) viewed motherhood and lesbian identity as two identities at odds; motherhood is a more visible identity and tied to heterosexuality in this culture. It seemed I could not be both/and, a lesbian and a mother. Lesbian became the defining characteristic of my identity, and all other qualities became subsumed. Although I agree with Donner (1999) when she stated, “being a lesbian is in fact a big deal,” (p. 29) it was not a totalizing experience for me. The public commitment to a lesbian identity does carry meaning within a dominant heteronormative context (Brown 1995) but the issues

remain in terms of what the specific definitions are, and who is entitled to define. My experience of motherhood as the most salient factor in my identity is consistent with the findings of Kirkpatrick (1987). This researcher found that motherhood, not sexual orientation was the most prominent factor in the identity of both lesbian and heterosexual mothers.

Reflections: Assessing “Are We Not Family?”

This researcher will now revisit the criteria set forth in Chapter 3 for evaluating qualitative research projects. Researchers have argued for the application of a set of standards unique to qualitative research and asserted that the research be judged by the importance of the topic and its contribution to the scholarly literature (Hammersley, 1992). This autoethnography will be assessed in terms of the criteria proposed by Richardson (2000).

1. *Substantive contribution.* Does this piece contribute to our understanding of social life? Does the writer demonstrate a deeply grounded social scientific perspective? “Are We Not Family? The Transition from Heterosexual Marriage to Partnering with a Woman” contributes to our understanding of social life in several ways. This research illuminates constructs and ideas historically considered ‘normal’ or ‘natural,’ such as heterosexuality and the essentialist binary interpretation of sexual identity. These cultural narratives or dominant discourses are deconstructed concerning the ways they impact the transition from heterosexuality. The dominant paradigm of heteronormativity is examined for its impact upon family life. The compulsory nature of heterosexuality is revealed for the manner in which it constricts options available for partnering and parenting in our culture.

This research project is grounded in feminist postmodern theory; the various discourses available within postmodern theory critique knowledge, power and what has been considered 'truth.' Feminist postmodern theory also fosters various modes of inquiry, such as narrative and autoethnography. The methodology used in this study is an expression of feminist postmodern thinking in that it obliterates the hierarchical, binary distinction between subject/researcher, and erases the entire set of problems that come from representing the 'other' from one position within the hierarchy.

2. *Aesthetic merit.* Does this piece succeed aesthetically? Does the use of creative analytical practices open up the text and invite interpretive responses? In composing the autoethnography, this researcher used emotion, dialogue and intimate conversation between family members to construct a story of how, over time, they navigated enormous changes. To assess whether or not it succeeds aesthetically, this researcher must speak to the beauty of the piece, the tasteful representation of intimate details of relationship and family life. In this sense I believe the piece is successful; the story reads well in that events and conversation flow into one another. The text is rich with description of people and relationship. Emotion, conversation, and detail enhance the depiction of daily family life. Letters and poetry were also incorporated, when appropriate, to further elucidate a point or bring the story to a close.

This research study invites many interpretive responses. The text is expansive in that it does not seek conclusions; it seeks rather to 'try on' certain ideas, engage in particular discourses. As both subject and researcher I moved between personal narrative and scholarly literature to illuminate the relevance of certain discourses. I attempted to articulate the ways in which the cultural climate of a particular time, and the theories and

discourses therein, operate to direct and constrain certain behaviors. Ultimately this research provided a context to explore the limits of existing theoretical perspectives and to generate new questions for scholarly inquiry.

3. Reflexivity. How has the author's subjectivity been both a producer and a product of the text? Is there adequate self awareness and self exposure for the readers to make judgments about the point of view?

In utilizing autoethnography as the method, this author has been both, subject and researcher. I am both the producer and the product of the text; there is no distinction. Self exposure was adequate, certainly sufficient for the readers to judge my point of view.

I have explored some of the ways that contextual variables, such as race, class, and education impacted the transition from heterosexual marriage. My socio-political location had a profound influence on the autoethnography. In retrospect, the very decision to choose such a methodology was a product of my social location.

Autoethnography is relatively new, controversial, and requires great personal exposure. Had I not experienced various privileges in concert with professional standing, I may have chosen a less risky procedure. Ultimately, I could take the risk of writing an autoethnography because of my socio-political location.

Prior to partnering with a woman, I was immersed in a predominantly heterosexual paradigm. This permeated all facets of my life including professionally, my knowledge of theory and research. Although the narrative of women coming out of heterosexual marriage existed, it was not within my purview. As a heterosexual woman, I was unfamiliar with the psychology of sexual orientation and the narrative of women coming out to their children. I experienced this material as either nonexistent or new,

when in fact there was amassed a large body of literature in gay/lesbian psychology that spoke to many facets of my transition.

4. Impact. Does this affect me? Emotionally? Intellectually? Move me to write?

Move me to try new research practices? Move me to action?

My own experience of compiling and analyzing this data had tremendous impact, emotionally and intellectually. It has moved me to rethink the conceptualization of marriage and family therapy as a field. It has led me to think about the preeminence of heterosexuality, heteronormativity, and the compartmentalization of bodies of literature. What is the continuing utility of the identity labels gay/lesbian, and the ensuing ways that the world becomes organized as such? This research project generates questions that will be grappled with for years to come.

5. Expression of reality. Does this text embody a fleshed out embodied sense of lived experience? Does it seem true – a credible account of a cultural, social, individual or communal sense of the “real?”

I do think this seems a credible and true account, despite some of the difficulties I encountered in writing the autoethnography. For example, I was tempted to portray certain aspects of the story as much less difficult and emotionally painful. This was particularly true toward the end, when I was describing events between my partner and children and myself. In the autoethnography I even mention the need to resist the temptation of a more positive depiction. Too positive a portrayal of such tremendous family upheaval would have rendered the story unbelievable.

In writing the autoethnography, I kept in mind Ellis’s (2000) directive to write “stories that create the effect of reality, showing characters embedded in the complexities of lived moments of struggle, resisting the intrusions of chaos, disconnection,

fragmentation, marginalization, and incoherence, trying to preserve or restore the continuity and coherence of life's unity in the face of unexpected blows of fate that call one's meaning and values into question." (p. 744)

I endeavored to bring the reader into the story so that they could imagine asking questions of themselves. I did not have any preconceived notion of what the story might look like; it was bound by events, such as the conference where Sallie and I spent time together, conversations with friends and children, consultations, and moves. I kept answering the question, "What happened next?" I then layered the text with detail, emotion and dialogue.

One of the other difficulties I encountered was deciding what to include in the story without writing for a particular outcome. It was imperative that I share earlier versions with supervisors and add suggested pieces, or tease out responses to questions. This was a difficult process as some of those pieces were not within my comfort zone. I believe the autoethnography is stronger because I was compelled to move out of that comfort zone and examine aspects of the story that were more complex and difficult to sort when writing alone.

Autoethnography as a research method can have particular constraints. Since the story is only as broad as the author's own perspective, there may have been variables in play that I just could not see and account for. The narration is limited to the sole voice of the researcher/subject, bound by her particular vantage point. There are constraints too in representing others in one's work. Too harsh a portrayal of any friend or family member could potentially damage the relationship. These relationships, as with my former husband, were and are important, and have impact upon the children. In crafting the story I thus employed caution in representing others.

Does this story reflect my past accurately? Ellis (2000) addresses the issue of accuracy, and shifts the question: “Rather I must ask, “What are the consequences my story produces?...The crucial issues are what narratives do, what consequences they have, to what uses they can be put.” (p. 746)

The consequences of this narrative are timely indeed, in light of the cultural debate about the definition of marriage and family. This research project contributes to this dialogue as well as to the field of marriage and family therapy in several ways. First, an additional narrative has been brought to light that has implications for the ways in which the field conceptualizes and studies women’s sexual identity development. Although this narrative of sexual fluidity can be found in the scholarly research (Baumeister, 2000; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976; Diamond & Savin Williams, 2000; Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Peplau, Spaulding, Conley & Veniegas, 1999; Rust, 2000) as well as the psychological literature on lesbian identity development (Brown, 1995; Golden, 1987; Rust, 2003) it has not become integrated into the dominant discourses of our day.

This research also underscored the importance of the social context, and demonstrated the ways in which it both promoted and inhibited the transition from heterosexual marriage. The time, geographic location, my race and socioeconomic standing, all combined to impact on a daily basis my ability to proceed in partnering with a woman. It does appear to demonstrate the assumption, made by researchers Kitzinger and Wilkinson (1995), that rather than driven by biology or the emergence of a true self, sexual identity transitions could be understood as “influenced by a mixture of personal reevaluation, practical necessity, political values, chance and opportunity.” (p. 189)

In this research, I have used my story to begin to question and explore taken for granted ideas about what is considered ‘natural’ or ‘normal.’ The relationship between identity and sexual orientation is reconsidered, as is the linear trajectory that defines an orientation in early adulthood that remains static. Perhaps the most significant aspect of this work lies in the depiction of heterosexuality, and the subsequent implications for our field. It bears repeating that despite a more favorable climate toward non-heterosexuality, heterosexuality remains the preferred mode of relating; indeed, it is compulsory. All of the markers of adulthood – dating, marriage, children – are linked to heterosexuality. The ensuing climate of heteronormativity compels children and families to assimilate to the heterosexual norm. This directive has permeated theory, research and present day discourses that demand that all appear ‘normal’ and ‘no different.’ Heteronormativity was ever present in my own narrative as the children and I negotiated what it meant to become ‘other.’ Although ubiquitous, heteronormativity remains both unarticulated and imperceptible. Marriage and family remain heterosexual marriage and family. The fundamental question of who is included or excluded from these definitions carries tremendous meaning. In questioning taken for granted ideas about what is considered normal or natural, this research project adds to the literature while generating questions for further consideration and research.

Summary

The transition from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman was impacted in numerous ways by the cultural context in which my family and I were embedded. Various facets of this context, such as the historical time period, geographic location, and racial privilege functioned to facilitate the transition. But the overarching

cultural dominance of heteronormativity and ensuing heterosexism simultaneously operated as barriers to inhibit the development of a non-heterosexual identity. A significant outcome in this research project was the effect of the homonegating processes that, like air, were all around myself and my family, inside and out and between us, so quickly embedded in our relationships. I came to live with previously unknown fears: of losing custody of my children, of someone getting hurt because I loved a woman, of my children's friends not being allowed to play at our home. These fears existed despite the considerable privileges I owned: racial, economic, and professional. I journeyed from being unschooled in the ways of being lesbian, to becoming more guarded and vigilant, prepared to fight or defend.

In the compilation and analyses of the data, this researcher met the limitations of language. There were at times no words to express what I was experiencing, no discourse from which to borrow. Others, too were without words. My relationship with Sallie was unspeakable for some, at times silenced and rendered invisible. I had to bring new language into my vocabulary to speak of my experience of self and family: heteronormativity, lesbian, non-heterosexual, homophobia, heterosexism, internalized homophobia, homonegating processes.

The essentialist binary discourses were ever present in the current data as I negotiated the transition from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman. The assumptions were: 1. that I had to be *either* heterosexual *or* lesbian, that my identity could not contain both 2. that I knew I was a lesbian, and denied or suppressed this knowledge, rendering my heterosexual marriage 'untrue', and 3. that in partnering with a woman, we enacted the binary male/female gender roles in our relationship. Gender was

conflated with sexual orientation; non-heterosexuality was associated with gender role non-compliance. The current data does not support any of these assumptions. Rather it generates questions as to the tenacity of the essentialist binary discourse as the sole narrative for sexual orientation.

Employing the dualistic categories heterosexual woman/lesbian woman further implies a homogeneity to each. Intrinsic in this categorical paradigm is an assumption of uniformity of experience that highlights similarity along a singular dimension – that of sex and gender of sexual partner. Sex of partner becomes the defining characteristic that obliterates other crucial dimensions of the woman's life, such as age, race, and social class, as well as one's sense of self and self concept. 'Lesbian' takes on the dimension of master status (Donner, 1999). As the current research indicated, it was motherhood that remained the most salient feature of identity throughout the transition. Human identity consists of multiple identities, and all members of the same group do not experience group identity in the same way (Greene, 2003).

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

Feminist Postmodern Possibilities

The words *marriage* and *family* are central to one of the most fiercely contested issues of our time. What is the definition of a marriage, or of a family? Who gets to decide, and for what purpose? These are pertinent questions that mark this moment in history for the field of marriage and family therapy. The fundamental question of who is included or excluded from these definitions carries tremendous meaning, and is played out in the cultural debate about marriage. This is because families live within the context of law and social policy that establish certain rights and protections. Will gay and lesbian couples and families be included in the current definitions of marriage and family?

In postmodern thought, theory or knowledge is viewed as a set of ideas that can have generative and heuristic value (Laird, 1999). Hare-Mustin (2004) suggested that theory be viewed as a route to understanding rather than a privileged form of knowledge or authority. In this research project, feminist postmodern theory provided the tools to challenge ideas and values that have long been considered normal or natural. These included heterosexuality, the dominant discourse of the binary nature of sexual orientation, and the discourse that healthy child development is predicated upon co-parenting by two heterosexually married adults. These dominant norms, or narratives, create meaning within the framework of a culture, and shape the conception of both reality and legitimacy (Bruner, 2001). Within the rules of what has historically been known as science and the methodologies therein, certain stories have been silenced or subjugated (Hartman, 2000). Feminist postmodern theory emphasizes the inquiry into alternative ways of knowing by asking the questions: Whose truth? Who does it benefit, and for what purpose?

Feminist postmodern theory challenges the very way that Western thought is organized – “around a series of dualities, of operations of comparing and contrasting.” (Hare-Mustin, 2004, p. 15) When applied to sexual orientation, dualistic thinking, or the binary construal of identity is grounded in the theory of biological essentialism. This is a powerful and privileged narrative in Western culture (Laird, 1999). Biological essentialism gave rise to early and influential models of sexual identity development, such as stage theory, and continues to impact present day discourses as the dominant cultural narrative of sexual orientation.

The limitations of dualistic thinking were elucidated in this research project. This study of the transition from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman revealed the presence of another narrative of sexuality, particularly for women. As previously stated, although this narrative can be found in the scholarly research (Baumeister, 2000; Blumstein & Schwartz, 1976; Diamond & Savin Williams, 2000; Kinsey, Pomeroy & Martin, 1948; Peplau & Garnets, 2000; Peplau, Spaulding, Conley & Veniegas, 1999; Rust, 2000) as well as the psychological literature on lesbian identity development (Brown, 1995; Golden, 1987; Rust, 2003) it has not become integrated into the dominant discourses of our day. This narrative posits that sexual fluidity is the cornerstone for understanding and theorizing about women’s sexuality (Peplau & Garnets, 2000). Variability in both the emergence and expression of same-sex desire for women over the course of the life cycle is normative, and is best explained by the interaction between personal and environmental contexts (Diamond & Savin-Williams, 2000). The traditional measure of sexual orientation used in research, sexual behavior, is not a valid

measure of identity for women. Women are more likely to construct identities based on components other than sexual behavior and feelings (Rust, 2000).

In addition to obscuring certain narratives, dichotomous thinking organizes individuals and families into discrete categories that reify the abstract concepts heterosexuality and homosexuality. The categories heterosexuality/homosexuality are historically relative and culture specific (Bohan, 1996; Faderman, 1981; Katz, 1995). In each culture, sexual orientation may be viewed differently. Yet we continue to sort individuals and families into discrete categories as if it were a more exact science. Why the tenacity of the binary categories despite evidence to the contrary?

Sampson (1993) has suggested that the distinct lines drawn around group membership function to serve those in power. By constructing identities that exist only in relation to heterosexuality, heterosexuality is reified as both natural and normal. Brown (1995) argued as well that these categories exist for the purpose of discrimination. The hetero/homo binary constructs and maintains the identities gay and lesbian as sexual and numerical minorities, which reinforces the belief in the heterosexual norm (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Although they are used as such, the terms lesbian and heterosexual are not symmetrical, and the consequences of assuming each identity are vastly different (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1993). Indeed, as Kitzinger (1987) pointed out, construing sexual orientation as essential silences the political meaning inherent in assuming a non-heterosexual identity.

Feminist postmodern theory offers a cultural resource to begin imagining a rethinking of identities previously defined in science (Seidman, 1993). Rather than taking identity as a starting point, postmodern thought interrogates the categories themselves.

Queer theorists reject both categories, and favor instead a queer identity, meaning an identity “always in flux.” (Gamson, 2000, p. 349) Queer theory suggests that the study of homosexuality should not be about the identity of a sexual minority group; it asserts the need to interrogate the social practices that “organize ‘society’ as a whole by sexualizing – heterosexualizing or homosexualizing – bodies, desires, acts, identities, social relations, knowledges, cultures, institutions.” (Seidman, 1996, p. 12-13) Rather than relying on categories imposed by the dominant discourse, sexual orientation might best be understood “not as an entity to be discovered but as a script to be written, a discourse to be claimed.” (Bohan & Russell, 1999, p. 99)

Implications for the Marriage and Family Therapy Field

There have been significant gains in the field of marriage and family therapy regarding the inclusion of gay and lesbian couples and families in the scholarly literature. Since the publication of literature reviews that documented the omission of gay and lesbian issues in the marriage and family therapy field (Allen & Demo, 1995; Clark & Serovich, 1997) there have been two edited texts that deal exclusively with gay and lesbian couples and families (Laird, 1999; Laird & Green, 1996). Many new textbooks in family therapy have included a chapter on gay and lesbian issues (McGoldrick, 1998; McGoldrick & Carter, 1999; Silverstein & Goodrich, 2003; Walsh, 2003) and there have been an abundance of articles in the scholarly journals. Although gay and lesbians are more visible in the family therapy literature, they occupy the status of a minority group. Language is used as if one could clearly tell what family was ‘gay’ and what family was ‘heterosexual’. This demarcation is arbitrary at best, considering most families have both non-heterosexual and heterosexual members. Yet the field engages in the use of this

language as if a clear boundary could be established. Further, the dichotomous construction of family as gay *or* straight represents but one narrative in the sexuality story. As this research indicates, a family can be heterosexual at one point in time, and then lesbian at another. The narrative of fluidity and change is not represented in the binary depiction of families as either/or.

The naming of the non-heterosexual other while simultaneously silencing the *heterosexual* component of marriage and family recreates and perpetuates the preeminence of heterosexuality. *Marriage* and *family* remain *heterosexual* marriage and family. It might be helpful to think of this as isomorphic to racial identity politics. In the context of racial dominance, *woman* means *white woman*, and all others are defined in relation to her: African-American woman, woman of color. Just as this field has come to understand that racial privilege is enacted by carrying the “invisible knapsack of White privilege” (McIntosh, 1998) so must we now bring heterosexuality and all the privileges therein, to the fore. This would enhance scholarship in that gender oppression could be viewed as existing *simultaneously* with heterosexual privilege. Gender oppression is but one part of the story; it coexists with an array of legal and economic entitlements as well as with the considerable social status afforded heterosexual marriage. If the goal of feminism is “to unsettle the normativity that gives unearned privileges to an elite few” (Allen, 2001, p. 795) it is necessary to challenge and deconstruct the hierarchies of privilege that come within our view.

Adrienne Rich stated: “...the absence of choice remains the great unacknowledged reality...” (1980, p. 655) The inevitability of heterosexual marriage - compulsory heterosexuality - the absence of role models, and the presence of

heterosexism were cited in this and other research as barriers to the development of a non-heterosexual identity (Colucci-Corett, 2004; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). These barriers are real and impermeable to the extent that the cultural context of a woman's life affords her the chance and opportunity to pursue and claim a non-heterosexual identity.

Barriers to the development of a more fluid identity exist within the gay and lesbian literature as well. The heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy construes gay and lesbian subjects as sexual minorities. In the context of extreme heterosexism, the political benefit of positioning sexual orientation as biologically fixed is arguable. The premise of identity, based on group membership in a collectively oppressed minority, has been functional for the gay and lesbian community; it has served as the organizational cornerstone of that community (Haldeman, 1999). However, group identity has then been utilized to produce theory and conduct research without questioning the assumptions in the categories themselves. For example, within the context of traditional linear models of coming out, identity change is an indication that one has not completed the coming out process. Such models become prescriptive in that a linear trajectory is associated with progress; a non linear trajectory means regression. But researchers have found that many people do experience changes in their sexual feelings and behaviors during their lives (Rust, 2003). There are different developmental pathways with multiple trajectories in the development of a sexual orientation (Brown, 1995). Coming out can be viewed as a lifelong process with no static endpoint. Thus the politics of group identity are such that the complexity of a both/and position is necessary. Taking on the category label of the group identity can be a potential site for liberation, as well as the source of oppression.

Another example of the need to challenge the assumptions inherent in the categories themselves is found in the history of research conducted on children of gay and lesbian parents. Because custody could be denied on the basis of sexual orientation, the mandate was set to find no difference between those children raised by gay/lesbian parents when compared to those raised by heterosexual parents. Although maladjustment in children of heterosexual parents would not result in an indictment of heterosexuality, the assumption was implicit that symptoms could be attributed to the 'harmful' environment of gay and lesbian family life. Therefore, a normalizing discourse has permeated the field when describing the qualities of gay and lesbian families. The need to downplay difference and emphasizes sameness leads to the questions: Different from what? Similar to what? The hetero/homo dichotomy keeps positioning one against the other, comparing and contrasting, but always keeping heterosexuality as the dominant and preferred mode of relating without questioning the preeminence of the category itself.

Children of gay and lesbian parents must look like children of heterosexual parents. Gay and lesbian families must be similar to heterosexual families. The discourses of no difference and normalizing are fundamentally defensive and apologetic. Repeatedly, the directive is set to assimilate to the dominant heterosexual norm. Yoshino (2006) described the mandate for all outsider groups to assimilate to the dominant norm a covering demand. Covering, he believed, targets behavioral aspects of an identity. For example, one can be gay or lesbian, but must still look and act within the confines of the dominant heterosexual norm. According to Yoshino, "the contemporary resistance to gay

marriage can be understood as a covering demand: *Fine, be gay, but don't shove it in our faces.*" (p. 19) Covering, he believed is the paramount civil rights issue of our time.

The American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) has engaged its membership and board in a variety of ways to open discussions about the contested issue of gay marriage. A report has been issued from the AAMFT Board on Relationships, Health and Marriage. Following is an excerpt:

Motion adopted by the board is to reaffirm the board's previous policies regarding non-discrimination and publicize the adoption of the "What is Marriage and Family Therapy" statement adopted by the Board in July 2005. Concurrently as opportunities arise, AAMFT will support public policy initiatives that strengthen marriages, couples, civil unions, and families through the provisions of technical assistance.

AAMFT believes that all couples who willingly commit themselves to each other, and their children, have a right to expect equal support and benefits in civil society. Thus, we affirm the right of all committed couples and families to legally equal benefits, protection and responsibility. (AAMFT, 2005)

To what marriages and families are they referring? When they talk about "strengthening marriage" one can only assume they refer to heterosexual marriage, since that is the only one that exists.

One could argue about the use or omission of language in the AAMFT statement, and hypothesize about why they chose the particular wording. What is most revealing is their understanding of the power of language and how contested the words *marriage* and *family* have become. I ask again, who defines what is a marriage, or a family? Where are

the lines drawn, and who is included or excluded? Those questions remain before the AAMFT, and until they are clearly answered, the field will continue to represent only heterosexuality. The cultural climate of heteronormativity compels that *marriage* and *family* become actively redefined as inclusive of non-heterosexual relationships. Until then, couples and families who do not fit within the dominant definitions will be asked to continue to assimilate to the heterosexual norm – in effect, to cover.

To abandon the normalizing discourse and permit dialogue about the unique qualities of gay and lesbian couples and families would be a radical shift in thinking and discourse. Researchers and theoreticians have hypothesized that the gay and lesbian couple and family can be disruptive and unsettling; Romans (1992) asserted that the lesbian mother presents a threat because she challenges the dominant ideologies about gender and motherhood. Spaulding (1999) spoke of the lesbian as a threat to patriarchal values, since she can be fulfilled without being in relationship to a man. Indeed, gay and lesbian relationships present a challenge to the basic order of gender. In speaking of lesbian co-mothers, Gillian Dunne (2000) stated: “Rather than being incorporated into the mainstream as honorary heterosexuals, by building bridges between the known and the unknown, their lives represent, I believe, a fundamental challenge to the foundation of the gender order.” (p. 33) It may be the disruption of gender, rather than sexual orientation that poses such a threat (Bohan, 1996; Bohan & Russell, 1999; Herek, 1986; Pharr, 1988).

Future Directions for Research

There are many questions that remain in the study of sexual identity development. Little is known of the impact of race and class; models have generally been Eurocentric

and unidimensional. Longitudinal studies are necessary to understand the course of change over time, both for the individual and family. Coming out is a family process; there exist no observational measures or longitudinal designs, and thus little is known about the details of actual behavior or changes over time. Patterson (2000) suggested that the traditional emphasis on parental sexuality needs to be reconsidered, and focus instead on the significance of family process, not structure. Allen (2000) also asserted the need for research focused on the feelings and actions of family members, rather than on labels such as lesbian/heterosexual.

As the concepts of heterosexuality and heteronormativity are made more overt, research can expose the ways in which they are reified and reproduced. For example, Kitinger (2005) used conversation analysis to study the reproduction of normative heterosexuality, and how it is woven into the fabric of everyday life. Such research paradigms will render the invisible visible, and offer a fresh blueprint for cultural criticism.

Are We Not Family?

Jerome Bruner (2001) wrote, “Only when we suspect we have the wrong story do we begin asking how a narrative may structure (or distort) our view of how things really are.” (p. 9) In studying the transition from heterosexual marriage to partnering with a woman, I set out to examine the cultural discourses, the stories that shape and give meaning to individual and family life. As both subject and researcher, I moved between personal narrative and scholarly literature to illuminate the relevance of certain discourses. I did not set out to disprove a particular theory or argue the merit of any one over another. Rather, I attempted to articulate the ways in which the cultural climate of a

particular time, and the theories and discourses therein, operate to direct and constrain certain behaviors. I have used theory, such as the binary construal of sexual orientation, to facilitate the exploration of questions. Ultimately, this research provided a context in which to explore the limits of existing theoretical perspectives, and to generate new direction for scholarly inquiry. An additional narrative has been brought to light that has implications for the ways in which the field conceptualizes and studies women's sexual identity development.

My coming out was compelled by the heteronormative climate of the culture; it was a family process, as well as an individual one. The particulars of our cultural context: history, geography, law and social policy, race and class all facilitated this transition. Paradoxically, these influences existed in concert with homonegating processes that functioned as barriers to the construction of a non-heterosexual identity. Heterosexism and heteronormativity permeated the scholarly research, theory and subsequent cultural discourses. Warner (1993) wrote of this saturation: "The dawning realization that themes of homophobia and heterosexism may be read in almost any document of our culture means that we are only beginning to have an idea of widespread those institutions and accounts are." (p. xiii)

Social movements are constituted by stories, the stories people tell to themselves and to one another (Ellis, 2002). In this research, I have used my story to begin to question and explore taken for granted ideas about what is considered natural or normal. These included: sexual identity as a core and immutable facet of identity, the binary constructions of concepts such as sexuality, gender and homophobia, the ubiquitous nature of heteronormativity, the compulsory nature of heterosexuality. The categories

themselves, heterosexuality and homosexuality were deconstructed, and the discourses about gay and lesbian families explored. The directive to assimilate to the heterosexual norm was exposed and framed in the context of covering, a basic issue of civil rights. Just the naming of heterosexuality opens it to inquiry and compels a more inclusive definition of marriage.

Marriage is the currency of commitment that this culture understands. As I write this, my family and I await the decision of the New Jersey Supreme Court regarding marriage equity; it is due within the next ten days. In light of the recent decisions in New York and Washington states, we are unsure about whether to be optimistic. It does seem though, that there may be a generational shift taking place. The generation coming of age now has increasingly open ideas about sexuality that will likely create cultural shifts in the coming decade (Savin-Williams, 2005).

That was evident as I sat in the kitchen with coffee and newspaper, reading the New York Times in July of this year, 2006. The paper was opened to the Metro section, with the headline reading “Gay Marriage Ruling.” The New York State Supreme Court had issued their decision against gay marriage. Two prominent categories were displayed with large quotes from the majority and dissenting opinions. Lily joined me and noticed the headlines. She picked up the paper and, shaking her head in dismay, said, “That’s *your* generation, Mom, not mine!”

Notes:

1. from *Selected Poems II 1976-1986* (p. 77), by M. Atwood, 1987, NY: Houghton Mifflin. Copyright 1987 by Margaret Atwood. Reprinted with permission. See Appendix A.
2. from *My Mother's Body* (p. 38), by M. Piercy, 1985, NY: Random House. Copyright 1985 by Marge Piercy. Reprinted with permission. See Appendix B.

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