

MARSHA BUCK

“Bi” Understanding

Please picture me as an ordinary mom who wears sweats around the house, loves to garden, and has lots of bad hair days. I may be unusual in that I was a school administrator before I retired, but thankfully that is becoming less unusual for women. I have two incredibly fine daughters who now both label themselves “bisexual.”

As I write this chapter, I am trying to accurately remember the feelings I had when my daughters told me they were bisexual. That is hard for me to do, because I see myself as a mother who loves her daughters unconditionally. I think some of my difficult feelings about my daughters’ bisexuality have been shoved deep down inside me, for fear of not being totally supportive. On top of that, I stubbornly refuse to be oppressed in as many areas of life as possible. Fear and other negative thoughts feel oppressive to me. When I feel oppression, I get active and tackle the issues head on even though my insides (and often my outsides, too) tremble like jello. Over the years, I have learned to live with the trembling because it goes away in the course of advocacy. This is how I handled my feelings when my daughters told me about their bisexuality.

My oldest daughter, Lys, is now twenty-six. She came out to me almost four years ago when she was a college student working on her master’s degree. Prior to that time, Lys had often talked with me about her best friend, a young man with whom she shared many interests and much time, and

I am a fifty-two-year-old recently retired educator living in Alaska. I am also a musician and play oboe in the local symphony. My daughters, a food microbiologist and a pastry chef, live in Oregon and North Carolina.

who eventually told her that he was gay. Along with her good friend, she began to learn more about what it meant to be gay or lesbian. While this was going on, I became gradually aware of silent, nagging, little fears within myself that Lys might be a lesbian. I felt that if she were a lesbian, she would never again be worthy of pride in the eyes of my parents and our extended family. And I felt like crying because I thought *she* would never be happy!

I was not prepared, however, for the news that she was bisexual! That possibility had never occurred to me, primarily because I knew so little about bisexuality. I felt astonished at her news rather than fearful as I had felt earlier. My first reaction was to read books about bisexuality, and Lys was able to send me one book. Beyond that, I found one other book easily and then the search became difficult. I became frustrated that more books about bisexuality were not available. How were parents supposed to learn anything?

In her normal style and approach to life, Lys was then and is now confident about her sexuality. She had done her emotional and intellectual homework before she came out and has been “at home” with herself ever since. She expects other people to accept her with the same positive regard that she has for herself, and it appears to me that they do. I think it was her attitude of certainty and acceptance of bisexuality that kept me from dwelling on the myths about bisexuals. Many people think about bisexuals as people who need partners of both genders to be satisfied, as people who are over-sexed, as people who are confused or just going through a phase on the way to either heterosexuality or homosexuality. I just dismissed these ideas as old myths that no one believed any more—after all, the myths didn’t fit Lys! It makes me want to start a campaign to clear up the misinformation!

My biggest initial concerns were that Lys would not have children of her own, and that she would face job discrimination. I thoroughly enjoyed having children. I have always wanted my daughters to know that experience as well. And I

am ready to be a grandma! Lys assured me right away that she planned on having a child of her own—that being bisexual and being a mother were not incompatible. As for my second concern, Lys has not experienced any job discrimination to date, and I plan to do my part in lobbying for passage of the Employment Non-Discrimination Act (ENDA) now before Congress to make certain that never happens.

Although I was full of questions and images of possible “weird” relationships when Lys announced her bisexuality, it appears that I may not have experienced as much anguish as some other parents. Part of the reason my struggle was not terribly intense or extended was that I participate in a women’s support group. The women in the group have become great friends and colleagues, and most of them happen to be lesbian. With the support of friends like these, a daughter like Lys, and a relatively liberal mindset of my own, it didn’t take long to think of myself as the proud mother of a bisexual daughter.

Lys kept educating me gradually during the first few years after she came out and kept cleaning up my language to make it more correct. When I would use the shortcut word “homosexual” to refer to “gay, lesbian, and bisexual” she would remind me that “homo” meant “one” and therefore was not appropriate for bisexuals. When I would call her bisexuality a “gender orientation” or a “sexual preference” she would remind me that it was her “sexual orientation.”

Lys called one day to tell me that her friend, Dave, whom I had met and enjoyed, was a transsexual and was about to begin the process of becoming a woman, of becoming Dianne. This news threw me into a “tizzie”! How many more things were there to learn about sexual and gender differences? How far could I stretch emotionally while being a totally supportive mother? I wanted to close my mind and heart, but of course I didn’t because that didn’t fit my self image. Instead I invited Dave, who by this time had just become Dianne, to come and spend time in our home over

the holidays. She came and we all had a wonderful time helping her learn some of the practical skills she needed in order to approach life as a woman. Getting to know Dianne as a loving, caring person was the best way I knew to deal with my desire to shut down my caring—and it worked.

I am continually becoming more aware of how many stereotypes and myths exist about bisexuals. One of the questions sometimes asked about bisexuals that fits into the stereotype category is whether bisexuals form long-term, committed, monogamous relationships. Lys and her partner of three years, Liz (who tells me openly that she likes her mother-in-law), definitely answer that question in the positive!

Shortly before Christmas a year ago, I received a second set of news for which I wasn’t prepared. My twenty-three-year-old daughter, Lene, called to tell me that she was in love with a woman. This time my reaction was more emotional. Lene had been actively involved in loving relationships with men prior to this time. She is glamorous and shapely, and she clearly enjoys and returns the attentions of males in her day-to-day life. She came out explaining that I had taught and modeled open-mindedness while she was growing up. As a result, when she saw how happy her sister was in her relationship with Liz, she realized that she did not need to limit her loving only to men. She laughingly reported that her “gayness” was therefore *my* fault and thanked me profusely for it.

I had more difficulty dealing with Lene’s coming out than I did with Lys’. In retrospect I think that after Lys came out, I shifted a large portion of my hopes and dreams for a “normal,” formal wedding, daughter/son-in-law/grandchildren ideal onto Lene. Those hopes and dreams seemed to be blown away by Lene’s coming out. I felt depressed. I talked with friends to help sort out my feelings. I panicked at the thought of my parents finding out that *both* my daughters were bisexual. Would they be judgmental and distant?

Lene was not interested initially in putting the label of “bisexual” on herself. She felt that the important point was her love for Michelene and that a label wasn’t needed. She was comfortable with calling herself gay, but knew that term referred primarily to men. Over time, I noticed in our conversations that she came to refer to herself as “bi.”

When Lene first came out, Lys was not totally happy with the announcement. She feared that Lene was experimenting with a woman just for sexual excitement and that bisexuality had nothing to do with it. In addition, the unique niche that she had carved out for herself in our family now had to be shared. Over time, Lys’ feelings changed. Lys has come to fully accept that Lene, too, is bisexual. She has seen that Lene is serious about working on a relationship with a woman.

Lys and Lene are two distinctly different bisexuals. Lys is in a long-term relationship with a woman and has experienced sexual attraction to men. Lene has been active in relationships with both men and a woman. Both daughters fit the definition of bisexuality which is the capacity for physical, romantic and/or emotional attraction to persons of both genders. Lene has experienced the pain of being shunned by lesbians because she “couldn’t make up her mind” and “had the nerve to enjoy being with a man.” Lys has experienced being part of a college association for gay, lesbian, and bisexual persons where bi’s were not only welcomed but were often leaders. Both women, however, look toward the future with the “heart” knowledge that they can and will love people, not because of their gender or race or body build or social status, but because of the richness of the people themselves.

Not long ago, a friend of mine let me know that she loved my daughters, but thought they had made a “bad decision” by labeling themselves bisexual. I was sad that my friend felt that way and I was also filled with questions. Was it a decision for my daughters? Was it a choice? Much literature I have read emphasizes that psychologists do not consider

sexual orientation to be a conscious choice for most people—a choice that can be voluntarily changed. When I asked my daughters how they felt, Lys replied that for her the choice was to acknowledge her bisexuality or to stay closeted. She has chosen not to deny who she is—not to live a lie. Lene replied that for her the choice was to be close-minded or open-minded enough to see the beauty in women as well as in men. She has chosen to see the possibility of loving either a woman or a man. Both responses were helpful although neither was an answer to the questions raised by my friend’s comment. I still do not know if bisexuality was a decision or a choice for either Lys or Lene. At the moment, I’m feeling comfortable without an answer in light of Lys’ recent comment to me, “Does it really matter?”

Most days I feel like an ordinary mom, but I also feel like a mom who is beginning to pull together many new thoughts about bisexuality. I don’t think that there are as few parents of bisexuals or as few bisexual persons as it appears. I *do* think that many, many (perhaps even most) people experience physical, romantic and/or emotional attractions to persons of both genders, but our present culture has taught us to legitimize only the heterosexual side of those experiences. Within the gay and lesbian community, there is pressure to recognize only the homosexual side of those experiences. Therefore, many people who label themselves as straight, gay, or lesbian could more correctly fit the definition of bisexual.

I also think that many people feel confused about bisexuality because our lives are often given order by thinking in terms of black and white, right and left, yes and no, rather than gray and center and maybe. It is not easy for any of us, no matter how ordinary or extraordinary, to live with the full complexity that life really hands us!