

# To Teach the Truth

by Ruth McClain

Just after midnight, Sarah quietly slipped the rope over her head, took that one step from the chair, and hanged herself in the dorm room of her university. In life, her smile had been warm and infectious. She had been my former student in high school taking all five of my courses and, in one, after a discussion of a short story in which a principal character struggles with his own sexuality, had outed herself to a roomful of students she had known most of her life. No one said a word as if in doing so, they would have diminished, almost profaned, her confession.

In those moments of silence, I envied her courage and honesty knowing full well that, in a small rural school, being gay was a subject rarely discussed except in locker rooms and small hallway conversations safe from the prying ears of faculty. And now, for the first time in thirty-seven years of teaching experience, one of my students had simply faced an audience of her peers to say she fully understood the struggle of the character for she, too, struggled and had finally admitted even to herself that she was gay and that she could no longer remain hidden.

The students sat muted, some with folded hands, some with eyes turned toward me as if seeking a response. Finally, one of the students in the back of the room broke the silence.

"I never knew you were gay, Sarah, but it's OK, You're still the same person I've always known, and I don't care if you're gay or straight." And so, the period concluded, and students filed out to their next class.

Two months later, Sarah brought her girlfriend--Sarah in a tux, her girlfriend in a formal--to the prom. Had my class not watched the prom tape the Monday after, I would have never been aware of an occurrence so blatant that it prompted a class discussion. On that spring prom night, as students filed into the school lobby to purchase their tickets, a school administrator videotaped them in all their evening finery. As Sarah and her girlfriend approached the ticket table, he turned the camera toward another couple following them all the way down the hall until the camera revealed that Sarah had passed, at which time, he resumed the filming of all those in line after Sarah. As we watched this tape in my class that Monday after prom, I was not the only one cognizant of this action; it was visibly clear to the entire class.

In private, Sarah asked me whether or not she should confront him. My feeling at the time was that she should not, for she had not been denied the privilege of attending the prom, nor had her civil rights been denied. Without question, he would have denied

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any intent to overlook Sarah and her partner nor would any discussion change his mind about how he obviously felt toward same-sex couples. In retrospect, I'm not convinced that my advice was right.

The week after prom, I received a phone call from Sarah and another student asking me to meet with them. They were both gay and felt that I was "someone in whom they could confide." And so, for several mornings, these students and I met in my classroom before school. They spoke freely of their concerns about being openly "out" with their orientation, their fears, their desires and, sensing a sympathetic and knowing ear, they asked my help.

After graduation, Sarah enrolled in an out-of-state university. Two months later, she was dead and, as I paid my last respects at her funeral, I was acutely aware of the anger obvious on my face. Here lay a young woman, rejected by her family and, for the most part, by the community. My only thought in those moments was whether or not I had done all I could to help her. Had I listened carefully enough? Had I offered the right advice? Had I been too cautious and fearful for my own teaching position? Had I raised enough issues related to the educational and social

needs of gay and lesbian students, or had I merely been falsely content to insert those issues every now and then into the literature I was teaching?

My school district had not grappled with the reality that gay and lesbian youth were among its students. It had simply avoided the issue altogether and, so, for reasons which include my own lack of courage, it failed to address the educational and social needs of not only those students but also the education of the faculty as well. For all of us, opening the classroom closet is a complex process that involves several different, yet integrated, steps-steps that should and must allow schools to become truly accessible to both self-identified and closeted gay and lesbian youth.

The foremost of these steps is the inclusion of gay and lesbian literature that reflects the experiences and culture of gay and lesbian writers. Yes, while it may be true that the works of writers such as Whitman, Dickinson, Lowell, and Tennessee Williams are frequently included in the high school curriculum, it is rare that teachers discuss the contributions of those writers in the context of their lives as gay people. In On Lies, Secrets, and Silence, Adrienne Rich writes:

Emily Dickinson--viewed by her bemused contemporary Thomas Higginson as 'partially cracked,' exercised her gift as she had to. In her white-curtained, high ceilinged room, a red-haired woman with hazel eyes and a contralto voice wrote poems about volcanoes, deserts, eternity, physical passion, rape, madness, separation, and suicide. In that room, Dickinson knew "freedom" and "organized her life on her own terms. The terms she had been handed by society--Calvinism, Romanticism, the nineteenth century corseting of women's bodies and choices" caused her to "retranslate her own unorthodox propensities into metaphor--to tell the truth, but tell it slant. It is always what is kept under pressure in us...that explodes in poetry. (Rich 160-161)

Indeed, Dickinson's life, like Sarah's, had stood "a loaded gun,"-a "lethal weapon that, without a possessor is condemned to remain inactive while its stored energy belies a dangerous and painful way to live" (Rich 174).

While Emily Dickinson's work is almost always included in the canon of American literature, seldom is the content of her poetry directly connected to the severe loneliness she must have felt in penning, "One sister have I in the house and one a hedge away." Our classrooms are full of students whose search for expression parallels that of Dickinson, who secretly pen their fears in their private journals; who sometimes rage and ultimately explode in their search for acceptance. When we fail to address the needs of gay and lesbian youth through the connection of literature to life, we send a very clear message of shame and denial and miss the opportunity to provide them with authentic role models.

A second point must also be addressed. To say that teachers need to be comfortable in talking about gay and lesbian issues is to dream that nothing bad exists in the world. The truth is that while some educators may discuss such issues, most will not. The truth is that it is difficult for most to truly adopt an objective stance for they view being gay as perverse and sick. The truth is that for years, our fears have been exacerbated by tension rising from reprisals by parents and communities bent on "rooting out" gay and lesbian teachers or those who address gay and lesbian issues. Perhaps we need to embrace a different approach and let the facts speak for themselves. The text is not always between the covers of an anthology. The text is the faces of those

who sit before us in the classroom--that "great cloud of witnesses" who simply exist.

I am reminded of a small poem entitled Incident by Countee Cullen.

Once riding in old Baltimore,  
Heart-filled, head-filled with glee,  
I saw a Baltimorean  
Keep looking straight at me.

Now I was eight and very small,  
And he was no whit bigger,  
And so I smiled, but he poked out His  
tongue, and called me, "Nigger." I saw  
the whole of Baltimore  
From May until December,  
Of all the things that happened there  
That's all that I remember.

Here, a small wide-eyed boy looks at the city, eyes filled with wonder, heart open to possibility. Only when the ugly word is spoken, does he turn inward and realize that the world has suddenly become a dangerous place. It is this assault to the soul through a word and a look that brings a world of shame slicing through a small boy's summer. Of all that he saw in his visit to Baltimore, the derogatory word remains foremost in his thoughts to denigrate the joy the trip could have afforded. I've no doubt that, like the small boy in Cullen's poem, Sarah had encountered ugly looks and uglier words in the crowded hallways of her high school and viewed the world as a dangerous place.

My classroom had been, for the span of an hour, a haven where issues involving all students had been raised to a level of awareness. But, Sarah could not stay there forever. While she yet lived, she was a participant in those "teachable moments" where she did not have to worry about finding an

acceptable environment in a more often than not hostile world. Our gay and lesbian students exist and ask nothing more than to be treated equitably and fairly, but most of all, to be acknowledged.

Finally, we who teach must either educate ourselves or learn from those who already know that, by discussing gay and lesbian issues in a positive way, we do not cause our students to become gay or lesbian. Perhaps one of the saddest aspects of our culture is the recognition that students' lives, which should be filled with the discovery of their own identities, are too often mired in shame and self loathing. Without question, it is imperative that we move beyond thinking that all our students and teaching colleagues are heterosexual. And, yes, while it may be difficult to find an accepting environment in the teenage world, it is equally difficult for the closeted teacher to find that world.

I am becoming more acutely aware of the power of personal story. Adrienne Rich writes, "A life I didn't choose chose me." It's about time we get over the idea that we can rest in the luxury of ignoring our gay and lesbian students. To continue a pattern of averting our eyes from all that threatens gay and lesbian youth is to not only do them a tremendous disservice but also to deny their very existence. We like things to be black and white. The truth is that most of our lives are lived in a hazy gray area where the edges are blurred. "O you," writes Rich, "who love clear edges more than anything/watch the edges that blur" (Rich 312).

I wish Sarah's story had been one of success--one where she grew to womanhood, found happiness with a

partner of her choice, and became a productive, accepted, and respected member of her community. That did not happen. And so, I am left to wonder who will come forth and initiate the necessary changes in our schools that will make them safe places for gay and lesbian students and faculty. In pondering the question, the only answer that makes any sense to me at the moment is that it is I who must be among those who press for change. My own courage seems small when compared to this enormous task.

Sarah's story is one of despair, but it is also one of courage on many levels. In becoming, each of us is pressed, molded, and shaped into a character whose testimony and legacy are found in our diverse individualities, and it is this diversity we must embrace if we are to encounter humanity face to face. Margaret Mead says it well: "If we are to achieve a richer culture, rich in contrasting values, we must recognize the whole gamut of human potentialities, and so we weave a less arbitrary social fabric, one in which each diverse human gift will find a fitting place" (Mead).

### ***Creating Safe Schools for Lesbian and Gay Students***

The issue of sexual orientation is one of both personal and public importance, and one of the most compelling reasons to address this issue straightforwardly, is that young people are asking about it. Silence communicates as loudly as does responding.

#### **What Can We Do?**

Of utmost importance is to recognize the truths regarding sexual orientation:

-- Approximately 1500 gay and lesbian teens take their own lives each year.

- Gay and lesbian youth are two to six times more likely than other teens to attempt suicide.
- Eighty percent of lesbian, gay and bisexual youth report severe isolation problems.
- Ninety-seven percent of students in public high schools report regularly hearing homophobic remarks from their peers.
- Gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth pose a greater risk for truancy, deteriorating school performance, running away from home, substance abuse, consultation with mental health professionals, juvenile prostitution, violence, dropping out of school, and confinement in a psychiatric hospital (Youth Pride, Inc.).

### **The Truth About Sexuality**

#### Orientation

- Lesbian, gay and bisexual people cannot be identified by certain mannerisms or physical characteristics.
- Sexual experiences as a child are not necessarily indicative of one's sexual orientation as an adult.
- Homosexuality is not a type of mental illness and cannot be "cured" by psychotherapy.
- There is NO definable gay "lifestyle." All educators desire to create a safer environment for students but are often in a quandary as to how to do this very thing with regard to gay, lesbian, and bisexual youth.

#### Some Suggestions

- Make no assumption about sexuality: If a student has not used a pronoun when discussing a relationship, don't assume one.
- Have something gay-related visible in your office—a sticker, poster, flyer, brochure, book, button. This will identify you as a safe person with whom to talk.

- Support, normalize, and validate students' feelings about their sexuality. If you cannot be supportive, please refer to someone who can be.
- Do not advise youth to come out to parents, family, and friends as they need to come out at their own safe pace. Studies show as many as 26% of gay youth are forced to leave their homes after they tell their parents.
- Guarantee confidentiality with students.
- Challenge homophobia. Encourage in-service trainings for staff and students on homophobia and its impact on gay and lesbian youth.
- Combat heterosexism. Include visibly gay and lesbian role models in the classroom.
- Learn about and refer to community organizations. Become also aware of gay-themed bibliographies and refer to gay-positive books.
- Encourage school administrators to adopt and enforce anti-discrimination policies for their schools or school systems which include sexual orientations.
- Provide role models. Gay and straight students benefit from having openly gay teachers, coaches, and administrators. Straight students are given an alternative to the inaccurate stereotypes they have received and gay students are provided the opportunity to see healthy gay adults.
- Stop referring to gay and lesbian youth as "they, " and study, for example, the gay rights movement in the context that other civil rights struggles are studied. (*Creating Safe Schools for Lesbian and Gay Students: A Resource Guide for School Staff*).

### Works Cited

- Creating Safe Schools for Lesbian and Gay Students: A Resource Guide for School Staff.*  
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- Spurlin, William, J., ed. *Lesbian and Gay Studies and the Teaching of English*. Urbana, Illinois: NCTE, 2000.

### Suggested Reading List

- Bauer, Marion Dane, ed. *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Caywood, Carolyn. "Reaching Out to Gay Teens." *School Library Journal* (1993): 39-50.
- Chandler, Kurt. *Passages of Pride: Lesbian and Gary Youth Come of Age*. New York: Random House, 1995.
- Cohen, Susan, and Daniel Cohen. *When Someone You Know Is Gay*. New York: Dell, 1989.
- Epstein, Debbie, ed. *Challenging Lesbian and Gay Inequalities in Education*. Milton Keynes: Open University, 1994.
- Grima, Tony. *Not the Only One: Lesbian and Gay Fiction for Teens*. Boston: Alyson, 1995.
- Harbek, Karen. *Coming Out of the Classroom Closet: Gay and Lesbian Students, Teachers, and Curricula*. New York, Hogath Press, 1992.
- Kerr, M. E. *Deliver Us from Evie*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.
- Klein, Norma. *Now That I Know*. New York: Bantam, 1988.
- Romesburg, Don, ed. *Young, Gay, and Proud!* Boston: Alyson, 1995.
- Singer, Bennett L., ed. *Growing Up Gay, Growing Up Lesbian: A Literary Anthology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994.
- Webunder, David. "Homosexuality in Young Adult Fiction and Nonfiction: An Annotated Bibliography." *Alan Review*, 23 (1996): 40-43.
- Williams, Robert F. "Gay and Lesbian Teenagers: A Reading Ladder for Students, Media Specialists, and Parents." *Alan Review*. 20 (1993), 12-17.

### List of Books Appropriate for Classroom Use:

#### **Picture Books and Books for Beginning Readers:**

- Newman, Leslea. *Too Far Away to Touch*. New York. Clarion, 1995.
- Quinlan, Patricia. *Tiger Flowers*. New York: Dial, 1994.
- Valentine, Johnny. *One Dad Two Dads, Brown Dad, Blue Dads*. Los Angeles: Alyson, 1994.
- Vigna, Judith. *My Two Uncles*. Morton Grove, IL.: Albert Whitman, 1995.
- Weeks, Sarah. *Red Ribbon*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.
- Wickens, Elaine. *Anna Day and the O-ring*. Los Angeles: Alyson, 1994.

#### **Middle Grade Books:**

- Coville, Bruce. *The Skull of Truth*. Orlando, FL: Harcourt Brace, 1997.
- Harris, Robie H. *It's Perfectly Normal*. Cambridge, MA: Candlewick, 1994.
- Kaye, Marilyn. *Real Heroes*. Fairbanks, AK: Gulliver, 1993.

Salat, Christina. *Living in Secret*. New York: Bantam, 1993.

**Intermediate and Young Adult:**

Bauer, Marion Dean, ed. *Am I Blue? Coming Out from the Silence*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

Crutcher, Chris. *Athletic Shorts*. New York: William Morrow, 1991.

Crutcher, Chris. *Ironman*. New York: Greenwillow, 1995.

Flynn, Tom and Karen Lound. *AIDS: Examining the Crisis*. Minneapolis: Lerner, 1995.

Ford, Michael Thomas. *Outspoken*. New York: Beech Tree, 1998.

Griman, Tony, ed. *Not the Only One: Lesbian & Gay Fiction for Teens*. Los Angeles: Alyson, 1994.

Kerr, M.E. *Deliver Us from Evie*. New York: HarperCollins, 1994.

Lamb, Wendy, ed. *Ten Out of Ten*. New York: Laurel-Lead 1995.

McClain, Ellen Jaffe. *No Big Deal*. New York: Lodestar, 1994. Nelson,

Theresa. *Earthshine*. New York: Orchard, 1994.

Porte, Barbara Ann. *Something Terrible Happened*. New York: Orchard, 1994.

Romesburg, Don, ed. *Young, Gay and Proud*. Los Angeles: A1yCat, 1995.

Sweeney, Joyce. *Face the Dragon*. New York: Delacorte, 1992.

Walker, Paul Robert. *The Method*. Los Angeles: Harcourt Brace, 1990.

Woodson, Jacqueline. *From the Notebooks of Melanin Sun*. Polk, WA: Blue Sky, 1995.

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