

## BACK INTO THE FUTURE: TRANSPHOBIA IS MY ISSUE TOO!

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### WARREN BLUMENFELD

*“Let’s face it: transphobia is our issue, too. As important as are our efforts in defeating sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, and biphobia, also important is our work toward conquering personal, institutional, and societal forms of transphobia and its offshoots, such as what some call ‘effemiphobia’ (or, as it has also been called, “sissyphobia”) — that insidious and dehumanizing fear and hatred of anything even hinting at the feminine in males.”*

**H**i, I am a gay man and my name is Warren Blumenfeld, or as my friends like to affectionately call me, “Estelle Abrams” — honorary Jewish bisexual woman from Brooklyn. I informally adopted that name after a friend told me that I looked like a woman that his mother played Bridge with. Actually, though, Estelle embodies the feminine side of my soul—my joyous, playful self – the creative, spontaneous, sensitive spirit that I have come to treasure and genuinely love.

But this wasn’t always the case. When I was quite young, long before I learned what were considered the “proper” rules of conduct, I naively introduced Estelle to my classmates and my neighbors. I was quick to discover that they feared and even despised her. Children called her names with an incredible vehemence and malice that I did not understand.

Adults hated her too. After I introduced Estelle to my parents, they quickly scheduled my first appointment with a child psychiatrist when I was only four years old. Over the next eight years, my parents and their hired shrink continued their efforts to kill Estelle, to exorcise her in the hope of

forever eliminating all contact, all vestiges, all memory of her ever being a part of me.

It was the early 1950s, the so-called “McCarthy Era”—a conservative time, a time when difference of any sort was viewed with suspicion. On the floor of the U.S. Senate, a brash young Senator from Wisconsin, Joseph McCarthy, sternly warned that “Communists [often thought of as Jews in the public imagination] corrupt the minds and homosexuals corrupt the bodies of good upstanding Americans,” and he proceeded to have gays and lesbians officially banned from any government service. To McCarthy, Jews, homosexuals, and Communists were one and the same.

For lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) U.S.-Americans during this era, police frequently raided their bars, which were usually Mafia owned; the U.S. Postal Service raided LGBT organizations and even published the names of their mailing lists in local newspapers; and people regularly lost their jobs for being “exposed” as queer. LGBT people were often involuntarily committed to mental institutions and underwent painful electro-shock therapy; some were even lobotomized (if you’re unfamiliar, this means that doctors removed the frontal lobes of their brains).

Not knowing what else to do at this time with what they considered to be my gender non-conformity, my parents sent me to a child psychologist because they feared that I might be gay (or to use the terminology of the day, “homosexual”). There was a basic routine in the “therapy” sessions. I walked into the psychologist’s office, took off my coat and put in on the hook behind the door. The psychologist then asked me if there was anything in particular that I wanted to discuss. I invariably said “no.” Since I did not understand why I was there in the first place, I surely did not trust him enough to talk candidly with him. When I was less than forthcoming in our conversations (which was on most occasions), he would take down from the shelf a model airplane or a boat or a truck, and we would spend the remainder of the hour assembling the pieces with glue. In private sessions with my parents, he told them that he wanted me to concentrate on behaviors and activities associated with males, while of course avoiding those

associated with females. He instructed my parents to assign me the household chores of taking out the garbage, mowing the lawn (even though we lived in an apartment building and we did not have a lawn), and not washing or drying the dishes. Also, I was forbidden to play with dolls or to cook. And – as if this all was not enough – he advised my parents to sign me up for a little league team, which, despite my hatred for the sport, I joined for two summers.

If I learned anything during my time with the psychologist, it was that I should cloak Estelle from the sun's exposing rays – to keep her well concealed deep within my consciousness, only to be resurrected during those rare but precious moments of solitude. It wasn't long after my sessions with the psychologist began that I began to be convinced that there was indeed something wrong with me. Why else would my parents be sending me, trying desperately to change me, my "mannerisms," my interests, my likes, and even my dislikes?

"When you wave," my father sternly warned one afternoon on the front steps of our apartment building when I was eight years old, "you **MUST** move your whole hand at the same time. Don't just move the fingers up and down like you're doing." He grabbed my arm, and despite my free-flowing tears and cheeks pink with shame, he vigorously demonstrated the "proper" hand wave for a man. Then, as if anticipating the scene in the film *La Cage Aux Folles* (and the U.S. remake *The Birdcage*), my father took me into the backyard and forced me to walk and run "like men are supposed to move." Obviously, I had previously been doing something wrong. "Of course the other children pick on you," he blamed. "You *do* act like a girl." I was humiliated.

For most of my years in school, I was continually beat and attacked by my peers who perceived me as someone who was "different." Names like "queer," "little girl," and "fag" targeted me like the big red dodgeball my classmates furiously hurled at one another on the schoolyard. I would not – and could not – conform to the gender roles that my family and peers so clearly expected of me, and I regularly paid the price.

This kind of bullying and policing of my gender started the very first day I entered kindergarten. It was 1952 and I was attending public school in Bronxville, NY. As my mother dropped me off and kissed me good-bye on the cheek, I felt completely alone and began to cry. My new teacher walked up to me and said, in a somewhat detached tone of voice, "Don't cry. Only sissies and little girls cry." Some of the other boys overheard her, and quickly began mocking me. "The little girl wants his mommy," one said. "What a sissy," said another. Without a word, the teacher simply walked away. I went into the coatroom and cried, huddling in a corner by myself, until she found me.

Years later, in 1970, after I came out as gay to my parents, I asked my mother why she and my father had sent me to "the toy doctor," as they had once called the psychologist. She looked at me urgently and with deep affection said: "You wouldn't have understood at the time, but we sent you because we felt you were too effeminate, and we thought you would grow up to be a homosexual." "Your effeminacy," she continued, "was the reason why the other children couldn't accept you and why they hurt you. We sent you because their taunts hurt us too, and we couldn't think of anything else to do."

But that wasn't the whole story; she also confided another reason for sending me. She told me the story of how my father suffered the pain of being different when he was young. He and his two sisters were the only Jews in their high school in the 1930s in Los Angeles. Because of the anti-Semitism of the time, the other boys beat him up nearly every day. While in elementary school, he hid in a small crawlway beneath one of the buildings during recess period to avoid attack by his peers. My mother told me that she and my father attempted to help me conform to gender expectations, to fit in, so I wouldn't have to go through what my father experienced.

My parents sent me to therapy, at least in part, in an attempt to direct my eventual gender expression and sexual identity (at the time, they equated my gender non-conformity to my possible homosexuality). My school reinforced this on my classmates and me every day. Even in kindergarten,

children were channeled into gender-specific activities: boys were encouraged to participate in sports, girls to hone housekeeping skills such as cooking and cleaning. This less than subtle encouragement seemed to grow more rigid with every new year of school.

Despite this, I developed what would become a lifelong appreciation of music and art. In the fifth grade, I auditioned for the school chorus and was accepted along with only a handful of boys and about 50 girls. The scarcity of boys in the cast was not due to any gendered imbalance in the quality of boys' singing voices. The determining factor was one of social pressure. I and the other four boys in the chorus were generally disliked by our peers. In fact, most of the other boys in our class despised and picked on us, and viciously labeled us "the chorus girls," "the fags," "the sissies," and "the fairies." The girls, on the other hand, who "made it" into the chorus were well respected and even envied by the other girls in the school.

The forces that set out to kill Estelle—those societal battalions bent on destroying all signs of femininity in every male—nearly succeeded in coercing me into denouncing her, but through some power more potent than they, Estelle was victorious in surviving their relentless attacks. Being mightier and more willful, she stayed with me through times of torment and times of "therapeutic" treatment. Even when, due to the overwhelming negative reactions she received from my peers, I began to lose trust and to doubt her, she never gave up on me.

My friends have often asked me, "What was that energy, that force empowering Estelle to repel her would-be executioners?" What kept her strong throughout those difficult years? I believe that it was, quite simply, a vision — a vision of social transformation articulated by feminists during the second wave of the Women's emancipation and liberation movement and later by early gay liberationists during Estelle's youth.

Looking back through history, for instance, men accused of same-sex eroticism in the Middle Ages (then called fairies), for instance, were rounded up, bound, tossed on the ground like kindling, and unceremoniously set ablaze. Their burning bodies served to ignite women accused of witchcraft

who were tied just above them. (This is, of course, where we get the word "faggot" – a word that originally referred to a bundle of wood used to start a fire.)

Many years later, the reverse would be true. Catching the spark of feminist thought and theory— which questioned and challenged traditional gender constructions, the inherent inequalities between the sexes, and enormous corrosive effects of heteronormativity—fairies joined together exploding conventional notions of gender, most notably definitions of masculinity. Radically queer groups emerged to disrupt the very foundations of U.S.-American constructions of gender and sexuality. During the early 1970s, I was an active member of Gay Liberation Front in Washington D.C., which formed the leading edge of a movement rising like a phoenix from the ashes of the Stonewall Inn in New York City. Our first meetings were held at Grace Church, the Washington Free Clinic in Georgetown, and All Souls Church on 16th Street, until we managed to rent a brownstone on S Street to establish a Gay Liberation Front living collective. Meetings provided a space for gays, lesbians, bisexual women and men, and transgender people to come together and put into practice what feminists had taught us—that the "personal is indeed the political."

We laughed together, and we cried together. We shared our ideas and most intimate secrets. We dreamed our dreams and laid out plans for a world free from all the deadly forms of oppression. And, somewhere along our journey, we began inventing new ways of relating to one another. For the men, we came to consciousness of how we had been stifled as males growing up in a culture that taught us to hate the woman within – that taught us that, if we were to be considered worthy, we must be athletic, independent, assertive, domineering, and competitive. Most of all, we rejected the idea that, to truly be men, we must bury our emotions deep within the recesses of our souls.

Looking back over the years, as our visibility has increased, as our place within the culture has become somewhat more assured, much certainly has been gained. But, also, I can't help but feel that something very precious has

been lost. Our early excitement, our desire— though by no means our ability—to fully *restructure* the culture, as distinguished from mere reform, seems now to lay dormant in many of our political organizations and communities. Today, reflecting on what seems to be the major focus of the mainstream movement, I see four main themes — or, what I am calling the “Four Ms” of the mainstream movement.. These “Ms” are: 1. Marriage Rights, 2. Military Inclusion, 3. Media Visibility, and 4. Making Money.

While these are laudable goals, I believe that if we are going to achieve a truly equitable society, we must reach higher, wider, and broader. I believe that we need to work to “transform” or “revolutionize” completely the society and its institutions by challenging overall power inequities in terms of traditional gender and racial constructions, the economic basis on which this country rests and the massive inequities between socioeconomic groups. We need to make links in the various forms of identity and forms of oppression, and form coalitions between various marginalized groups, as well as look at other means of activism, which can result in true and lasting systemic change.

I do remain hopeful, however. The increasing visibility and recognition of bisexuals and transgender people today is again shaking up traditionally dichotomous notions of male/female and gay/straight. Their stories and experiences have great potential to bring us back into the future — a future in which the Estelles (indeed, anyone on the gender spectrum) everywhere will live freely, unencumbered by social taboos and cultural norms of gender. It is a future in which the “feminine” and “masculine”— as well as all the qualities on the continuum in between — can live and prosper in us all.

With this in mind, let us not work only toward lifting the ban against gay, lesbian, and bisexual people in the military. Instead, let us also work toward lifting the ban against our transcending and obliterating the gender status quo by continually questioning and challenging standard conceptualization of gender in our society. For ourselves and our young, we must work to build a society in which we can all feel the freedom to express our gender in ways that are authentic, honest, and sincere to each individual, ways that we choose rather than those that are prescribed.

Let’s face it: transphobia is our issue, too. As important as are our efforts in defeating sexism, homophobia, heterosexism, and biphobia, also important is our work toward conquering personal, institutional, and societal forms of transphobia and its offshoots, such as what some call “effemiphobia” (or, as it has also been called, “sissyphobia”) — that insidious and dehumanizing fear and hatred of anything even hinting at the feminine in males. This is, of course basically a thinly veiled version of misogyny. Indeed, we can argue that homophobia, biphobia, transphobia, and heterosexism, have their roots in sexism. One cannot hope to eliminate the former categories without eliminating the latter.

While we continue to work on issues around same-sex marriage and domestic partnership, we should ensure that we work, as Estelle has done for me, towards strengthening a partnership between the many points on the vast continuum between our masculine and feminine qualities that make us all whole, integrated human beings. We must not, however, limit our efforts to these forms of oppression. For oppression operates like a wheel with many spokes. If we work to dismantle only one or a few specific spokes, the wheel will continue spinning and trampling over people. We must work toward dismantling all its many hideous spokes if we hope to ever truly dismantle oppression.

I believe that sexual and relational attractions and gender expressions alone are not sufficient to connect a community, and by extension, to fuel a movement for progressive social change. We must, therefore, look beyond ourselves and base our communities and movements not simply on our identities, but also on shared ideas and ideals that cut across individuals from disparate social identities. We must come together with like minds, political philosophies, and strategies for achieving their objectives.

This is my vision of a movement for social change, which follows a central tenet of Jewish tradition known as *Tikkun Olam*: meaning the transformation, healing, and repairing of the world so that it becomes a more just, peaceful, nurturing, and perfect place. I understand *Tikkun Olam* to be

equivalent of working for social justice and social equality, sometimes against incredible odds, for people of all social identities and all backgrounds.

Whenever individuals or groups oppose dominant ideologies and dominant group privileges, however, there is always a risk of ferocious backlash. The vicious attacks against Estelle are only one case in point. Currently, there is a cultural war being waged by the political and theocratic right, a war to turn back all the gains progressive-minded people have fought so tirelessly for over the years. Until LGBT organizations and movements join in coalition with other communities working to end oppression, we will never achieve a genuine sense of community, and a genuine sense of equality will be wholly unattainable.

It grieves me terribly when I see gay and lesbian organizations themselves restrict inclusion of bisexual and transgender people from our agendas, our communities, and our movement. That's when we also must speak out, because it is our issue. When anyone is targeted for hate-motivated harassment or violence based on their skin color, socioeconomic class, sex, gender expression, sexuality, physical appearance, ability or disability, ethnicity, this is our issue too. In the end, I have seen that whenever anyone is diminished, we are all demeaned, and I understand that the possibility for authentic community cannot be realized unless and until we become involved, to challenge, to question, and to act. Estelle has been an activist throughout her life to make the world a better and safer place for me and for others. She has acted with courage, compassion, and integrity.

So, if indeed it is true that, as the old saying goes, the fish is the last to see or even feel the water because it is so pervasive, then from our vantage point at the margins, queer people have a special opportunity – indeed, a responsibility – to serve as social commentators, as critics. Our experience as outsiders gives us tools to expose and highlight the rigidity of gender roles and the oppressive attitudes and behaviors that dampen and saturate our environment – and, most importantly, to challenge the culture to move forever forward and to grow. I hope we can join together and go out into our lives and work for *Tikkun Olam*. Let us transform the world.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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