

## The Love That Will Finally Speak Its Name



*It took the death of my dear life partner for me to find the courage to come out of the closet.*

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I was born at a time when to have romantic feelings for another woman was known as "the love that dare not speak its name." I first read Radclyffe Hall's "The Well of Loneliness" around 1938, in my impressionable teens. The book was a heartfelt cry for understanding and acceptance of the "invert." Now we say "gay" and "lesbian," and nobody faints, although we still lack the same rights as other citizens. In

how many ways have attitudes changed? And how have they not?

When I went to college in the 1940s, the sex books were kept under lock and key in the UCLA library. I was too embarrassed to ask for permission to borrow those books.

Seeking enlightenment, I looked at young women walking around the campus engrossed in one another, and I thought, "Well, at least they have each other."

I did not realize that even I was judging them, while perhaps envying them. I was dating men regularly and enjoyed being thought popular. Nevertheless, when I came home after each date, said "Goodnight" and closed the door, I usually breathed a sigh of relief.

One eligible young man said, on leaving, "We'll get together soon." I said, "All right, but be sure to warn me."

"Warn you!" he exploded, slamming the door as he left.

And then I met a woman: a teacher on campus, who helped me see beauty in the whole world. At 28, for the first time, I was loved and knew love, for myself, for the person I really was.

But while glorying in my never before-experienced happiness, I knew it had to be hidden. She was married. Often, the only way to see her was with her husband. I was also dating her brother, and we all would sometimes go dancing.

That relationship ended after a few years, when my loved one's husband intervened. I didn't see her until years later, when I stood in line at her book signing at USC. She was alone, cordial; she asked about my mother. But no, she couldn't join me for coffee afterward.

Now I write this after living for 44 years with the most loved and loving, giving, understanding and delightful partner imaginable. For all our time together, we were "in the closet."

For so long, if you were a known homosexual you could lose your job. We kept our relationship from our families—or at least we thought we did. After my partner died, her son told me that her family knew about us, but kept our secret because they believed our relationship was our own business.

But our silence for all those years was also partially a self-induced caution. Looking back, I think it's possible that as the world changed, we didn't change fast enough.

We knew a few other lesbian couples, and we were comfortable around them. But most of our friends were straight, so we had separate bedrooms to make it seem as though we were just roommates. On one occasion, when my partner and I were with cherished, straight friends, just the four of us after a satisfying dinner, sitting quietly in our living room, I thought how liberating it would be for us to tell our friends of our relationship. They must have seen it coming, for they quickly changed the subject. We four remained warmhearted friends, but we two never again tried to enlighten them or any others.

I never spoke about my sexual orientation with my mother, but she also must have known. When she died, the last thing she said to me was, "I never understood your way of life, but I do now." I didn't reply.

Finally, after almost nine years since my beloved partner's death, I am able to do what I could never have braved in earlier years: present myself here with to the world as a lesbian, along with all the women who ask to be judged by the full facet of our characters.

Why am I now able to speak the unspoken? A friend at the retirement community where I live recently came out in the local and national newspapers. When I saw her do that, I thought, for heaven's sake, nobody can fire me, I'm 88 years old, my parents are gone.

Still, I was frightened. It took me several days to put this essay in the mailbox. I owe a lot of credit to people who are comfortable enough in their own skins to say, "This is who I am."

Shall I be haunted for trying to tell my story now, when many might still not wish to address it, or shall I, perhaps, be congratulated?

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