

## Lessons from the Margins: What Interfaith Couples and Families Can Learn from Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Activism

By Karen Erlichman

At a recent community interfaith workshop for family members, I listened to a woman ask in a very open, heartfelt manner for advice about her relationship with her youngest daughter, married to a non-Jewish man, who had recently given birth to her first child. Her daughter was not planning to raise her son with any Jewish traditions or practices — a source of tremendous sadness and grief for this participant. She felt unsure how to be her Jewish self with her new grandchild, and had come to the workshop seeking support and guidance.

She explained that her oldest daughter had come out as a lesbian several years ago. The new grandmother shared her story about the many responses and challenges she experienced as a result of her daughter's coming out. As she talked, she realized and explained that as a result of the growth and closeness that ensued between them, her daughter "taught me the true meaning of unconditional love." With that insight, she then went on to say that she believed she could begin to understand and accept her other daughter's interfaith marriage.

By the end of the workshop, this woman said that her oldest daughter's courage to come out as a lesbian had inspired her to invite her children and grandchildren to witness and be part of her life as a practicing and proud Jew.

I listened to her describe the strength she found in her own process of exploration and acceptance with her oldest daughter. Moreover, her remarks sparked my thinking about the coming-out process and about how lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) identity development and relationships might inform our understanding about interfaith relationships themselves, and their impact on families and society.

My thoughts, feelings, and interest in this question of how LGBT experiences and activism might inform us about interfaith issues arise from several sources: Professionally, as a clinical social worker who works with interfaith couples and families as well as with lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals, their partners and families, I am consistently facilitating the building of emotional, spiritual, and relational bridges between loved ones in conflict. My own life partner is an African-American woman who is not Jewish, and we have worked diligently and lovingly to create a life together which incorporates our individual cultures, traditions, and extended families, and which is sustained by a shared spiritual vision.



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The coming-out experience for many LGBT individuals, and the history of the LGBT activist movement, reflect a process of challenging social norms and traditions, and creating new paradigms for relationships, families, and social justice. Coming out defies the gender, sexual, and relational “rules” most of us are taught, either covertly or overtly, by society, the media, our families and schools. To come out usually involves tremendous personal risk, including possible loss of friends and family members, and in some cases loss of children, jobs, housing, income, or loss of life itself.

The same hatred that drives homophobia is also at the root of xenophobia, the fear of others of different races or cultures. The judgment and alienation that many interfaith couples and families experience is similar (although not identical) to that of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender people. This bigotry can result in loss of employment, housing, personal relationships, and more. For example, one woman was refused a job at a local synagogue when she informed her future employer that her partner was not Jewish. Moreover, none of the major rabbinical schools in the United States — except the International Institute for Secular Humanistic Judaism Rabbinic Seminary — will accept applicants who are in interfaith partnerships or marriages.

Falling in love with someone from another culture or religion contradicts the way most of us have been socialized, and engenders difficult feelings and conflicts with friends and family members. Like parents of LGBT children, the parents of Jews who choose interfaith partnerships or intermarriage often describe feelings of disbelief, anger, grief, sadness and betrayal. They sometimes fear for the safety of their children and worry about the impact on their grandchildren. Their children’s interfaith partnership may conflict with their religious or political beliefs. They may worry about upsetting the grandparents or about what their neighbors, friends, and colleagues might think.

The individual coming-out process, as well as the lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender movement for justice and equality, can inform and liberate all of us who are advocates of interfaith and multicultural partnerships, and all whose lives are touched by them. Parents, Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays, also known as PFLAG, is a national support network that “promotes the health and well-being of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered persons, their families and friends, through: support, to cope with an adverse society; education, to enlighten an ill-informed public; and advocacy, to end discrimination and to secure equal civil rights.” Most PFLAG chapters around the United States offer workshops and support groups for LGBT individuals about the coming-out process, as well as for their loved ones to explore their feelings and their reactions, and to encourage respectful, loving relationships. Support groups are also available for parents of interfaith couples.



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What have lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender individuals and their loved ones learned over the years that might offer valuable insights and tools for us about interfaith and cross-cultural partnerships?

1. Acceptance is a process that takes time.
2. There is much work to be done on the interpersonal, community and family level. Interfaith and multicultural couples have their own internal challenges that require communication, patience, and persistence.
3. Not only do our family members experience sadness, grief, and disappointment, but also often the partners in an interfaith relationship experience these emotions. It is important to honor our feelings and listen to each other.
4. Whatever lifelong interpersonal dynamics or issues exist between you and your parents, they will likely play out in their reaction to your interfaith or cross-cultural relationship. For example, feelings will likely get hurt, and offensive things might be said, even unintentionally.
5. Strength comes from support; support and discussion groups are extremely helpful and inspiring. The old feminist adage, “the personal is political,” holds great merit here.

Whether or not you intend your relationship to be a political or cultural statement, it may serve as a catalyst for personal and social change in your life and in the lives of your loved ones. Even on the most mundane level, now when a disparaging interfaith remark is made in the presence of your family members (just like homophobic remarks), they will have to choose whether or not they will challenge that remark and advocate for real acceptance.

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