

# THROUGH THE EYES OF WOMEN

*Insights for Pastoral Care*

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## 8

## Sexual Identity and Pastoral Concerns: Caring with Women Who Are Developing Lesbian Identities

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Pastoral caregivers who seek to empower and support women will be met by women who want to discuss matters of sexuality. Essential to a pastoral perspective is thoughtful reflection on identity formation and sexual orientation. For example, caregivers may be asked to respond to women who are struggling to make sense of internal sexual feelings or who are wondering about their sexual orientation. Apprehension may be voiced by family members who seek pastoral guidance as they speculate about what the disclosure of a relative who has self-identified as lesbian means for their family relationships. Women may turn to pastors with anxiety that has surfaced as they move through the process of verbally acknowledging their lesbian sexual orientation to friends and families. Likewise, there are lesbians who may approach sensitive pastoral counselors to talk about the deep estrangement they experience within their communities of faith. The richness of issues that women who love women bring to pastoral care and counseling is as vast as the number of persons who struggle to be honest and to live with integrity as lesbians.

This chapter focuses on pastoral care with women who primarily are attracted emotionally, physically, spiritually, and sexually to other women or who self-identify as lesbians. Since the goal in this chapter is to examine briefly how sexual orientation, identity formation, and the Christian faith converge in pastoral care, the appropriate starting place is to examine issues of sexuality and identity formation in general. Women who share

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their lives intimately with other women offer those within the community of faith the opportunity to think critically and seriously about what it means to be a sexual being. Second, this chapter proposes that attention be given by pastoral caregivers to the manner in which sexual orientation emerges in women's lives. While there is some predictability about the process through which many women move in self-identifying as lesbian, precisely what that process looks like is dependent upon the particularity of each woman's family of origin, community support, class, ethnicity, self-perception, and a number of other variables. This chapter, albeit limited, offers some initial reflections on the process that lesbians may face in arriving at an integrated sense of self. Finally, I address some of the specific concerns that lesbians bring to their churches, to their communities of faith, and to pastoral care specialists.

## SEXUALITY AND IDENTITY FORMATION

Identity, an ongoing process of development that occurs at both the conscious and the unconscious level, is tied to a number of other aspects in the construction of the self. Consciously, persons recognize the struggle to solidify a sense of who they are by the way they fashion commitments, friendships, intimate relationships, and discernment about vocations. At the more unconscious level, persons attempt to define who they are as emotional, physical, sexual, and spiritual beings while they seek to integrate material from families of origin, earliest childhood experiences, and hidden motivations and agendas. The process of identity formation first surfaces most clearly during early adolescence, but the movement toward resolution of identity comes only later in life, perhaps as late as young adulthood or mid-adulthood. Many theoreticians argue that identity refinement occurs throughout the entire life cycle (Kegan 1982).

While there are several aspects that contribute to identity, sexuality is certainly one of the most salient facets in terms of its impact on the deepest internal and external levels of being human. By "sexuality" I mean to suggest more than how persons engage in physical relationships, although these are certainly part of the whole. A broader understanding of sexuality connects it with perceptions and self-awareness as embodied and engendered beings, of core values and beliefs about what it means to be body-selves, and of the manner in which persons yearn and seek communion with others. James Nelson and Carter Heyward, two contemporary sexual theologians, have noted that understandings and experiences of sexuality also ultimately inform our knowledge and experience of God. Hence, sexuality is intimately connected to more than physical life, pointing toward

the communion of life at its deepest levels—emotionally, physically, sexually, and spiritually (Heyward 1989; Nelson 1978).

As individuals discern what it means to be embodied, to interact with other sexual beings at both intimate and informal levels, they shape and form their identities. Persons relate to one another *through* self-understandings as women and men. Sexuality becomes one of the most significant arenas around which individuals form and integrate various aspects of the self. This does not mean that sexuality is *the most* important or the only integrating aspect of identity, but it is pivotal as it contains some of the most vital facets of our experience with other human beings and in the world. To have an integrated identity means, in part, to have the capacity to think about, reflect, and engage with other human beings as sexual beings.

How persons think about and experience sexuality often becomes a place of intense emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual energy. Certainly writers like Carter Heyward and Audre Lorde have articulated the richness and depth of sexuality as they talk about "eros" and the energy that is a part of being sexual (Heyward 1989; Lorde 1984, 53–59). This power is evident in the vitality of conversations about diverse sexual topics such as abortion, marriage and sexual fidelity, children's sex education, and homosexuality. Issues related to sexuality can spark intense debate, and even division, within the context of church and society because they are integral to self-understandings and relationships. Since so much is contained within the arena of sexuality I will limit this discussion by defining three terms that are important in conversations about sexual identity and orientation: sex, gender, and orientation. In the process, nuances related to pastoral care with lesbians begin to emerge as each of these words reflects notions of the meaning of an integrated identity (Shively and De Cecco 1993, 80–88).

Sex, a word that has come to signify many things, often raises anxiety in the community of faith. For purposes of this chapter, I suggest that the word "sex" be limited to two distinct meanings. First of all, sex is the word utilized to convey the reality of our creation as male or female. In this sense the word references biological givenness, not necessarily the attributes that have come to be culturally or religiously associated with the particularity of being male or female.

The term "sex" has also come to signify the physical act of intimacy, more specifically of intercourse. Using this word as a verb to refer to specific physical acts has contributed to the confusion of defining sexuality in general, for we are tempted to limit our understandings to this aspect alone. The word "sexual" refers to the human capacity that people have to relate at more than physical levels, but at emotional and spiritual levels as well. All humans have the capacity and yearning to communicate at the deepest levels of their being. Sexuality, in its broadest understanding, refers

to this more comprehensive set of characteristics and qualities of human living that engage persons in relationships at physical, emotional, spiritual, and sexual levels.

A common mistake made by well-intentioned pastoral caregivers is to adopt the assumption that homosexuality is only about the way persons engage in the physical activity of "sex." Being lesbian, however, reflects much more than this as it refers to the fundamental perspective that women bring to various experiences of communion and intimacy, including those which are spiritual, emotional, physical, and sexual. Lesbian orientation is central to the way some women communicate with other human beings (women and men) at more than just the physical or sexual level. Hence the emphasis in pastoral care should not be on the activity of "sex" but on the meaning that women bring to this part of their realities as sexual beings and the way in which lesbian women communicate with others at the least and most intimate levels of relationships.

The word "sex," when utilized to specify whether persons are male or female, is often confused with the meaning of gender. This latter term, "gender," refers to the cultural, religious, and communal understandings attached to what it means to be women and men. To recognize that understandings of gender are bound by cultural and religious interpretations and experiences suggests that what it means to be female may differ according to social location and context. Gender identity, then, refers to the internal sense of what it means for a particular person to be a woman. The experience of identifying with a gender occurs early in childhood. The reality is that there is not one "feminine" way to be in the world, but individuals interpret and experience relationships, in part, through the cultural assimilation of what gender has come to mean.

Internalized cultural notions about being female sometimes conflict with other realities in the lives of persons. Gender, having more to do with cultural assignments and roles given to women and men or how persons have been culturally conditioned to think about what it means to be women or men, can become a source for struggle for women who are in the midst of discerning their sexual orientation and identity. For example, the cultural or religious expectation communicated to women may be that they ought to marry men and raise children. However, internal feelings may invite women to find appropriate ways of seeking intimacy with other women. These intimate relationships may or may not involve raising children. Hence, internal gender identity may conflict with external expectations of the culture, of families, or of churches. Times when this conflict is most persistent in the lives of persons are often opportunities for sensitive pastoral counselors to assist women in coming to terms with the dichotomy between internal realities and external messages.

Finally, persons are endowed with sexual orientation or preference as homosexuals, heterosexuals, or bisexuals. Persons internally seek out and experience primary emotional, physical, and sexual attractions and attachments to other sexual beings that are built upon not only sexual but emotional, physical, and spiritual external relationships with others. Primary attractions to persons of the same sex are only one facet of being "lesbian." To self-identify as having a particular orientation indicates something about how persons experience the world and interpret reality. As with any other distinguishing feature of identity (race, class, culture, religious faith), orientation becomes one piece of the lens through which persons experience the realities of life.

There is earnest conversation among scholars in the field of homosexuality about the difference between sexual orientation (implying an internal way of being) and sexual preference (implying a more self-consciously chosen way of being). In some sense the debate centers around understandings of the social construction of lesbianism, issues of choice, and notions of biological essentialism. For purposes of this chapter, I will utilize the more familiar term "orientation" to remind readers that self-identifying as lesbian involves more than sexual activity or choice but centers on a way of being in the world that creates a meaning in and of itself.

It is extremely important to separate sexual orientation from sexual behavior, or to distinguish between self-identity as lesbian and the experience of physical, sexual activity with persons of the same sex. Same-sex sexual activity does not necessarily mean that persons have internally come to lesbian self-identities or that persons have an orientation toward intimate and significant relationships with others of the same sex. Likewise, sexual behavior with someone of the opposite sex does not necessarily suggest that persons are exclusively or primarily heterosexual. The issues are much more complex.

It is true that there are times when same-sex sexual activity actually does reflect other issues that may be under the surface in the lives of individuals. In a similar manner, it is inappropriate to assume that all same-sex sexual activity is pathological. This latter understanding mistakes the richness of God's creation for something corrupt and sinful. Extreme care must be taken as pastoral caregivers attempt to diagnose and work with persons in same-sex relationships.

The question for pastoral caregivers is not whether individuals are having physical or sexual relationships with persons of the opposite or the same sex. Instead, the concern should be whether there is an internal congruence between the emotional, physical, spiritual, and sexual needs of individuals and the way they embody those needs in relationships. What determines the authenticity and appropriateness of sexual behavior is not



dependent upon the biologically based sex of persons; rather, genuine intimate relationships require congruence between the internal sense of self and what it means to be faithful persons who embody qualities of love in relationships with others.

Sexual identity formation indicates that a significant aspect of how persons come to understand themselves is through their ability to relate to, reflect upon, and engage one another as sexual beings. Diane Richardson notes: "What is crucial . . . is the particular meaning that individuals ascribe to their sexual feelings and activities, which will depend not only on the specific situation in which sexual conduct occurs but also on the significance of sexual orientation in a particular historical, social, and cultural context" (Richardson 1993, 20). The appropriateness of sexual behavior has more to do with the meanings brought to the context than it does with the sexual activity and behavior in and of itself.

Identity is the synthesis of all aspects of sexuality that enter into the notions of what it means to be a self, not just our physical or sexual behaviors. Sexual identity and orientation should not be the ultimate defining factors in identity, although they may be among the most prominent aspects in shaping relationships with self, God, and others. An identity that is moving toward resolution and maturity is one in which there is congruence between one's internal sense of sex, gender, orientation and the external behaviors that are embodied in relationships.

### SELF-IDENTITY AS A LESBIAN

To self-identify as lesbian is to mark the significant moment when women begin to struggle with and/or claim as part of their internal identities that of being lesbian. For some women, the time in which this first arises is when they discover their feelings of attraction for another woman. For others, self-identity develops gradually as they grow into claiming their lesbianism as part of their total identity. Still other lesbians talk about having always known, from their early childhood, that they were attracted to persons of the same sex.

There are at least two implications in using the phrase "self-identity" in the context of pastoral care. The first suggestion is the reminder that it is erroneous to label someone as being lesbian simply because of suspicions or hunches about a particular person. Pastoral caregivers need to exercise care in respecting the fact that some women may "appear" to others as lesbian but may not internally consider themselves to be so. For example, some women are emotionally connected with one other particular woman and they may even be sharing some kind of physical relationship (hugging one another, for example), but may not consider themselves to be lesbian.

The meaning attached to the word "lesbian" by the person involved in a particular relationship may differ from cultural understandings. Some women who are engaged in primarily physical, sexual, emotional, and spiritual intimacy with other women may talk about themselves as women who happen to be in significant friendships with other women but are not lesbian. Women may be married and still find themselves attracted to other women or involved in relationships of significant depth but still not identify themselves as lesbian. For many women it is not unusual that some level of sexual behavior occurs before they identify with the term "lesbian." Some women who struggle with orientation identity may never come to the point of self-identity as lesbian. Hence, working with self-identified lesbians (those who affirm, accept, and have integrated this orientation into their lives in a more congruent and long-lasting way) is different from working with women who are going through a process of discerning what is appropriate for their relationships. Not all women in intimate relationships with other women should be identified as "lesbian."

The second implication of the term "self-identity as lesbian" emphasizes the fluidness present in notions of sexuality. It is sometimes difficult to articulate to pastoral caregivers the meaning of this fluidness, but it is nonetheless a crucial concept to understand. Saying that sexuality is a fluid reality implies that most persons—straight, lesbian or bisexual—do not experience their sexuality, their yearnings and desires, or their relationships in precisely the same way throughout their lives.

Persons who write in the field of sexual theology articulate this notion of fluidness with some clarity. Carter Heyward, for example, suggests that traditional notions of sexuality as being essential and fixed in our beings have been challenged by theories on the social construction of reality. Hence, not all persons experience themselves as heterosexual or homosexual throughout their lifetimes. Some move through different seasons in expressing their sexuality, participating in same-sex relationships at times while at other times feeling more heterosexual in their relating to others. The way persons interpret and think about sexual orientation and behavior is not fixed and essential, although it may be long-lasting and durable. Heyward's invitation, then, is to develop sexual ethics that center in relationships rather than in essentialism. This attitude recognizes that persons have a high degree of choice and freedom in developing their relationships and making meaning of them (Heyward 1989).

One factor in working with women who are searching to understand their sexual feelings is to recognize this fluidness and relational context for women. Moving away from essentialism (from thinking of sexuality as a given that never changes over time and experience) allows for the fact that women may experience a variety of heterosexual relationships prior to lov-

ing another woman. For example, many women have been in traditional heterosexual marriages at one point in their lives and have children they bring into their lesbian families. Simply because persons have been traditionally married, or are currently struggling to make sense of relationships with other women, should not suggest automatically that they are, or are not, lesbian. Instead, what is needed is often the opportunity for women to talk about and work through their notions of sexual identity as they have developed and evolved over time.

Richardson accurately points out that women sometimes "reconstruct" their past in light of their current experiences (Richardson 1993, 122). This does not mean that women falsify the realities of the past or rationalize the present with new images of themselves that are inaccurate. Instead, women often find themselves caught in an attempt to discern the various sexual feelings and experiences from their past and present, integrating them into the totality of self-identity. Some women who have been traditionally married and who are now in lesbian relationships begin to make sense of the past by stating that they have just discovered they really are lesbian and that their past heterosexual relationships were not really honest for them. Other women talk more clearly about being bisexual as a way of self-identity. The careful pastoral caregiver receives these comments in the broader framework of a more fluid understanding of sexuality, refraining from judgment as women interpret and make sense of their past and present.

It is important, likewise, not to fall into the trap of thinking that women are capricious or casual in choosing their relationships. Recognizing the fluidness of relational living suggests that women may approach pastoral caregivers with differences in thinking about what it means to be embodied and to be created as sexual beings dependent upon their present interpretations of themselves and their relationships. This fluid way of thinking should not be interpreted as persons acting out their maladaptive behaviors nor as women being pathologically inclined in their relationships. An understanding of the process through which women move toward self-identifying as lesbian can assist pastoral caregivers in appropriately responding to those who are attempting to understand and integrate their experiences as women who love women.

While there are many ways of thinking about this process, the work of Vivienne Cass seems most helpful. Cass articulates six developmental stages for women moving toward claiming self-identities as lesbians (Cass 1990, 239–266). I would suggest that these not be seen as linear, prescriptive stages through which women necessarily must, nor should, travel. Instead, these stages might be seen as "ideal types" or as different perspectives and interpretations that women bring to their experiences of lov-

ing other women, creating meaning in the midst of their relationships (Troiden 1993, 194).

Pastoral caregivers are most helpful when they encourage women to move at whatever pace they find most comfortable in the process. A faithful and caring pastoral presence can be significant in creating stability as women move through the process toward self-identity, arriving at new levels of integration along the way. Again, not everyone moves through the process in similar fashion. Some women will arrive in pastoral care offices appearing to be at the first evolution, while others may be struggling with the latter phases of integration.

It must also be clearly stated that women come to these interpretations of their lives with a variety of ethnic, cultural, class, and gender realities. Hence, no two women move through the process in identical manner, and each woman finds resolution in her particular style. The goal of pastoral care during this process is to be the faithful reminder of God's grace and presence, affirming the journey of women and their attempts to bring theological meaning to their lives and relationships, never completely knowing where the journey will eventually take them. The focus of care must remain on the process of moving toward an integrated sense of identity and not merely on reflections about particular sexual behaviors. The paradigm that follows, of course, is only one way of conceptualizing how many women struggle toward full acceptance of their orientations and lives.

The first of Cass's stages, "identity confusion," surfaces as women struggle with intimacy desires for other women. In approaching a pastoral caregiver, they may talk about these feelings as "confusing." For some women, these emotions arise when they are very young or during their teen years. As girls or adolescents, they may or may not have acted upon their feelings. It is common for attractions to other women not to surface until they are well into young adulthood, or even later. Women have a tendency to arrive at their internal senses of being lesbians at later ages than men who understand themselves as gay. There are several reasons for this delayed questioning, one being the tremendous social pressure on women to marry and raise families. For most women even to begin to question their presumed heterosexual identities requires courage and considerable internal work as well as an opportunity with another woman to risk voicing feelings and experiencing same-sex love. It is not unusual for women to be surprised and to begin to question their heterosexual orientations when they "fall in love" with another woman. For some, this means juggling between heterosexual marriages and the feelings they are experiencing in a specific relationship with another woman.

Pastoral counselors who meet women at this stage must be very careful not to push to premature resolution for women or to suggest that this is a



"phase" through which persons are traveling. Caregivers may feel the frustration of not knowing exactly how to be helpful as women may choose any of a number of options in response to these feelings. One of the assumptions to be very careful about in pastoral care is thinking that if women "wonder" whether they are lesbian, then they must not actually be lesbian. Some women will decide that the risk is too great or that there are too many moral directives that prevent them from pursuing their feelings. Others may decide to seek out a relationship with another woman in an attempt to explore their feelings or to participate more fully in a relationship that has begun to emerge. For most women, this moment of wondering becomes an important time to reflect theologically and morally about their life experiences. It is not at all rare for women to seek the assistance of a pastoral person during this stage of confusion. Pastoral caregivers are obligated to remain open to the diverse feelings that women express during this time in their lives.

The second stage, "identity comparison," is identified by Cass as beginning "with the tentative acceptance of a potential homosexual identity ('I may be a homosexual') and finishes with the acknowledgment that such an identity is likely to be applicable to self ('I probably am a homosexual')" (Cass 1990, 248). In other words, women begin to experiment with what it might be like to identify as lesbian, imagining the many losses and fears that accompany such an identity. Persons will choose some way to resolve this stage and move toward the next, or they will decide that they are not able to state honestly that they "probably are homosexual."

Pastoral caregivers can offer opportunities to women as they move through this stage to identify verbally and name some of their potential losses and fears, exploring what each means to particular individuals. Realistic fears that women may have about losing particular relationships with their children, families of origin, spouses, or employers provide rich material as women sift through what it means to pursue lesbian relationships or to form lesbian identities.

The third stage, "identity tolerance," occurs when women intentionally consider what it might actually mean to live as lesbians in the world. At this point women give themselves permission to experience internal feelings in ways that lead to more clarity about their identities and sexual orientations, but it does not necessarily eventuate into full self-acceptance as lesbians. Increasing awareness of potential losses in living as lesbians, as well as a recognition of the attitudes of culture and religion, continues to dominate perspectives and emotions during this stage.

Pastoral caregivers become quite important for women at this stage who are seeking to live faithful lives. Questions about the perceptions and beliefs in their churches, their communities of faith, or on the part of God

become important conversation themes during this season of exploration. Often this is a time when women begin to yearn for stronger supportive communities, and, in search of such support, they move toward greater interaction with others who identify themselves as lesbian or gay. This can be an extremely significant time of integration in women's lives as they work through the socialization processes of living as lesbians in the world. Caregivers who assist women in finding supportive church communities and places for engaging with other lesbians and gay-affirmative people and organizations will facilitate the movement of women through this phase.

"Identity acceptance," the fourth stage identified by Cass, arises as women continue to establish clarity about their internal realities as lesbians. From the perspective of increased comfort with themselves as lesbians, women confront issues of self-disclosure in new ways, taking on more positive self-images and being less fearful of sharing openly with others. For many women, these are moments of transformation as they adopt new ways of being in open relationships with others. Most women are very selective in deciding with whom they first self-disclose about their identities or relationships. Cass points out that at this stage women avoid potential conflicts and confrontations with persons who might not be supportive. At the same time, the pressures of remaining hidden and "in the closet" create increasing internal tension. The ongoing internal conversations that women have about with whom to be open and honest consume an incredible amount of emotional energy.

Pastoral counselors at this stage can be most helpful as they talk honestly with women about the realities of self-disclosure and the dynamics of loss and gain. It is never helpful to ignore the griefs that accompany self-disclosure, even when confiding with others may bring new-found friendships and freedoms. Being clear about the inherent losses in self-disclosure and engaging women in planning for self-care through the process of self-revelation can be extremely important. Pastoral persons who not only personally affirm women at this stage but who also assist them in locating supportive communities are invaluable.

In the fifth stage, "identity pride," Cass notes that women often seek out clearly defined lesbian-affirmative places and people while continuing to grow in their positive sense of self-esteem. Often this is coincidental with increased awareness and anger about the rejection they encounter in society and, most particularly, in the church. Women may experience extreme discomfort in places where, up to this point, they had felt comfortable in their quietness about their sexual orientation. For example, women may have spiritual crises as they struggle with what it means to participate in churches that do not affirm their lesbianism or their relationships.

Persons in this stage may hesitate to seek out pastoral caregivers because

of the intense anger and distrust experienced in communities of faith. At the same time, many women recognize a deep spiritual awareness during this stage and may want to find pastoral representatives who not only can affirm but can be pro-active in seeking justice in the church and community. There are relatively few pastoral representatives who can assist women in this stage, since women seek caregivers who are willing to become advocates in their churches, denominations, and communities.

Finally, Cass suggests that "identity synthesis" occurs as women experience greater security in their identities and recognize that being lesbian is one significant piece of their total identities. In the previous stages women often focus almost exclusively on their sexual orientation and the feelings that accompany the process. Cass maintains that because women in this final stage are more comfortable with their lesbianism as one part of their identity, it does not become conflated with the totality of who they are. For women in this stage there is a greater propensity to live openly in all the places of their lives, regardless of the cost.

Sensitive pastoral caregivers will find an increased awareness of what it means to be whole persons in working with women at this stage. Issues brought to the counseling context may focus less on what it means to be lesbian and more on the quality of the relationships in which they participate or on other emotional or spiritual material. Women connected to the Christian faith may move toward conversations that reflect theological issues and concerns in new ways, such as thinking about how their issues relate to the broader issues of justice such as classism, sexism, and racism.

Self-consciously claiming lesbian identities suggests that women arrive at the point of recognizing that sexuality is one facet of their total identities, albeit an extremely important piece. It is important to remember that not every woman who begins the journey of self-exploration will eventually self-identify as lesbian. Similarly, not every woman who has an intimate and meaningful physical, sexual, spiritual, or emotional relationship with another woman will self-identify as lesbian. The processes through which women travel, regardless of the eventual outcome in terms of self-identity, become opportunities to explore what it means to be faithful in relationship to God, others, and self.

#### PASTORAL CARE ISSUES WITH LESBIANS AND THEIR FAMILIES

Given the backdrop of the previous discussion, it is helpful to turn to particular pastoral care issues that may appear in the context of working with women at various points in the process of self-identity. Again, the con-

cerns and the complexities of lives are as diverse as the individuals and the partnerships with whom caregivers work. However, there are some issues that often become part of the context of pastoral care and a brief articulation of their content seems appropriate. It is important to begin with the person of the pastoral caregiver.

#### *The Pastoral Caregiver*

Pastoral care means not only participating in the activity of sitting with people as they find meaning and direction in the midst of crises but also entering the process aware of the theological, moral, and ethical content present within conversations. Pastoral representatives are not neutral caregivers, particularly when they recognize and confirm pastoral theological perspectives which they bring to the context of care. Questions about sexuality, orientation, families, and relationships offer opportunities for persons to reflect theologically on their lives. It is imperative that pastoral caregivers be as clear in their own perspectives as possible, particularly when working with women struggling with issues of sexual identity and orientation.

There are at least two considerations pertinent to self-assessment in working with women who raise questions and concerns about sexuality. The first aspect involves coming to terms with one's own theological and moral positions on the issue of homosexuality. The most helpful pastoral persons are not necessarily those who agree with the lifestyle and/or sexual orientations of parishioners. Instead, the most helpful caregivers are those who can state clearly where they stand on the issues and who have thoughtfully reflected on the many theological, ethical, and psychodynamic concerns that present themselves around the complexities of sexuality. Pastoral persons who have not yet come to terms with their own positions on homosexuality should responsibly refer women elsewhere in the community. Or, if pastoral persons are extremely opposed to the position of women who approach them, it is most ethical to offer other options for women who seek pastoral assistance.

Ethical accountability requires that pastoral caregivers not use women who approach them on issues of orientation to help pastoral counselors think about where they stand. Clarity on the part of caregivers makes it easier for parishioners and clients to work on the issues they bring rather than assisting pastoral persons in coming to some self-understandings for themselves. Various resources are available that reflect divergent biblical, theological, and ethical perspectives. It remains the responsibility of caregivers to explore this literature critically and thoughtfully prior to providing care related to these issues.



The second consideration for pastoral caregivers relates to self-assessment in terms of comfort levels when working with persons who are self-identified lesbians or who are in the process of coming to some self-understanding about orientation. Caregivers need to assess the presence of homophobia and heterosexism in their internal worlds and in the agencies and churches of which they are a part. Homophobia refers to the internal fear that many persons have in working with others who are lesbian and/or the fear that they have about discovering lesbian or gay feelings in themselves. Often this is talked about in clinical circles as issues of transference and counter-transference. Whatever the frame brought to thinking about homophobia, it is imperative that counselors and caregivers be as clear as possible about their internal comfort levels of being with persons of the same gender or of sitting with persons who raise concerns about homosexual identity.

Heterosexism is a more difficult issue to address in some ways, for it lives in the systems and cultures of which everyone is a part. By heterosexism I mean the structures that actively encourage the formation of heterosexual identities and that actively discourage the formation of lesbian or gay identities and relationships. This is not the same as homophobia, but it is closely related. Pastoral caregivers who may not be very homophobic because of the internal work they have done on their sexuality may discover that they unconsciously participate in perpetuating structures that reinforce heterosexist assumptions. Internal surprise or discomfort with the fact that two women choose to give birth to children and raise them as part of their lesbian family probably means persons have some work to do on heterosexism. Perplexity over why some lesbians are angry that they cannot be considered a "family" when buying insurance or memberships to organizations may mean that caregivers have not thought carefully about the structures that hinder women partnerships from participating in the culture in the same way as female-male partnerships.

There are many avenues for exploring the comfort levels necessary for good work with parishioners or clients. Reading the literature, poetry, and works of self-identified lesbians can assist pastoral caregivers in gaining a perspective on what it means for women who live in the world as lesbians. Going to a bookstore and browsing in the section devoted to lesbian and gay writings offers opportunities for pastoral persons to keep track of internal feelings as others see them looking at these books and may be wondering why they are interested in this section. Listening to women-identified music raises the breadth of diversity in the community of women who love women.

Being open to working with women who are lesbians or who are asking questions about their sexual identity often means being forthright about one's own perspectives. There are times when lesbians appear to be suspi-

cious of pastoral care specialists. The cautious approach of lesbians should not be interpreted as a resistance to the process of counseling, nor should these women be seen as overly concerned about what caregivers think. Instead, pastoral care specialists should recognize how difficult it is for some women to trust those within the community of faith. It is natural and appropriate for women to ask in a direct manner about the perspectives on homosexuality that a particular caregiver maintains. When a caregiver is asked questions about moral understandings of homosexuality or interpretations of Scripture, it is not helpful for the caregiver to respond by wondering why it is important for the parishioner or client to know where you stand. Because women often must struggle to find safe places to talk honestly and openly about being lesbian it is inappropriate for pastoral counselors to display insensitivity by wondering why these might be important questions for women who love women.

Sensitive pastoral care also requires that persons know the resources and organizations within the community that are available and supportive of lesbians. For example, it is essential that caregivers know which churches welcome lesbians and their families, where to obtain the women's newsletter or be put on mailing lists for regional newsletters, what the denominational support systems and contact persons are in the area, where the closest PFLAG meets (Parents and Friends of Lesbians and Gays), or how to locate the names of other networking organizations. These associations provide rich resources not only for women and their families but also for pastoral care persons who may seek assistance and guidance on specific issues.

### *The Bible*

A significant offering of pastoral caregivers to women struggling to deal with issues of sexuality is to reflect with them about Scripture. It never ceases to amaze me that some pastoral caregivers dismiss biblical passages as if the Scriptures did not exist or were not important for individuals and their families. Pastoral counselors have one of the most pivotal positions in our culture as they avail themselves of the reality that, for many faithful persons, what the Scripture says and how it is interpreted continues to hold meaning. Every pastoral care person ought to have deliberated about the biblical passages that have been utilized in conversations about homosexuality. The questions of interpretation remain dynamic opportunities for every community of faith.

An important aspect in reflecting on the biblical texts is to focus on issues of interpretation. Do persons understand all Scripture to be the literal word of God? How do particular parishioners/clients think about other controversial pieces of Scripture (such as those on marriage and divorce or

women in the church)? How does the church or persons who are within the context of the community of faith choose which texts to take literally and which ones to interpret metaphorically? What does it mean for someone to seek out biblical authority? These are questions that cannot be foreign to pastoral conversations. Caregivers should be as comfortable in conversations about biblical interpretation as they are in discussing other matters of significance to persons.

Some of the specific passages that pastoral counselors need to examine are the creation stories from Genesis, the Genesis account of Sodom and Gomorrah (Genesis 19 and its parallel story in Judges 19), the holiness codes found in Leviticus (18:22 and 20:13), and sections from the Epistles (Romans 1:18–32, 1 Corinthians 6:9–11; and 1 Timothy 1:8–11). Many of these texts are utilized by persons who understand homosexuality to be a sin, and the interpretation of these texts often becomes problematic for women who are struggling to discern faithful ways of being lesbian in the context of their religious beliefs. Again, there are several excellent resources in biblical interpretation that can assist pastoral caregivers and women and their families as they struggle to make sense of these texts. Books that offer a variety of perspectives can be available for persons who want to struggle with Scripture and its interpretation.

### *A Word about Etiology*

Throughout the process of developing self-identities as lesbians, women and their extended family members often raise questions about the causes of homosexuality. The question of etiology might surface in this fashion: What is it that makes or causes persons to be lesbian? Indeed, this matter can consume the emotional energy of many individuals, families, and communities of faith. Dealing with etiology is important not because it is necessary to explain why women are attracted to women but because many persons approach pastoral care specialists to talk specifically about this issue. Faithful people genuinely struggle with the causes of homosexuality in their attempts to come to terms with themselves or others. Astute pastoral caregivers who can bring candor to the discussion of etiology will, undoubtedly, be sought out for conversations on this matter.

There appear to be a number of related issues in considering the causes of homosexuality. One concern is whether all persons are created by God as heterosexual beings or whether, biologically, some persons are created as homosexual beings. Second, the question arises that *if* there is a biological base to homosexuality, does that necessarily imply that persons who identify as being lesbian should be condoned in their lifestyles, or does it mean that homosexuality is an “abnormality” to be reckoned with much as

persons might deal with other kinds of “diseases” diagnosed at birth? Finally, how do people understand those who claim to “choose” to live as lesbians but may or may not assume that God has created them this way? These questions, of course, deserve much more attention than can be addressed in this chapter.

In traditional psychoanalytic literature there have been several predominant themes in response to the etiological question. Some suggested causes of homosexuality have included beliefs that homosexuality is a disorder created by an early narcissistic injury or fixation; dysfunctional family relationships result in homosexual ideation; there is some kind of internal gender identity disturbance that leads to or supports homosexual behavior; or a pathological defense against heterosexual relationships has resulted in homosexual behavior. Since 1973 when the American Psychiatric Association deleted homosexuality from its list of mental disorders, care specialists in the field of psychology and psychoanalytic theory have pursued several other avenues in reflecting about the cause of homosexuality. One exploration, centered in biological psychology, contends that there is a genetic link or chemical basis to the creation of persons as either homosexual or heterosexual. Again, there is not space in the brevity of this chapter to focus on these theories, but it is important to know that they exist. Resources in the bibliography at the end of this chapter address some of these complexities.

For some women, the internal sense of being created as lesbian is something they can easily identify at childhood. Hence, the notion that they have been biologically created this way is comforting. Likewise, families who are coming to terms with women who begin to self-identify as lesbian may seek solace in the reality that God has richly blessed creation with a variety of sexual orientations. Lesbians do reflect the richness of God’s creation in unique ways. This biological notion, however, must be placed alongside perspectives that suggest that there might be a more fluid sense of sexuality as briefly articulated above.

Women who are farther along in the process of claiming their self-identities often find concerns about etiology less significant. For example, women who are comfortable with their sexuality and who have moved beyond the stage of identity tolerance as articulated by Cass have less tolerance for discussions about the “why” of lesbianism. Instead, they find conversation and reflections about what it means to live in faithful and just covenants with one another to be more meaningful. The nature and the structure of their covenantal partnerships are probably more important for women in care and counseling at the latter stages of identity development than are concerns and questions of causality. Utilizing the developmental process outlined above assists pastoral caregivers in thinking about what

etiological concerns may surface as they work with particular persons and their families.

Pastoral care persons offer opportunities to explore with women and their families what it means to be lesbian. For some, it is appropriate to attend to questions of etiology and the conversation will be welcomed; for others, there is little need to talk about "why" they are lesbians, they just are.

### *Coming Out*

Alongside the process of forming a sexual identity as lesbian is that of "coming out," or making choices about self-disclosure. To come out means to self-identify or to be identified by others as being lesbian. Sometimes this self-disclosure happens quite intentionally, whereas, at other times, coming out may be brought on accidentally as someone "discovers" that another person is lesbian or is in a relationship with another woman. Self-disclosure usually begins with a few trusted friends. From there the circle may be widened to include colleagues, families, churches, or other community contexts. There is no set pattern of coming out, yet there are common concerns that arise throughout the journey.

While moving toward self-identity as lesbian, many women simultaneously go through a process that is sometimes referred to as "coming out to one's self." In other words, the growing internal realization that women have that they may be lesbian or that they want to live in lesbian relationships parallels the process of self-disclosure to others. Discerning how lesbian identity fits into total self-understandings entails revealing to one's self that she is lesbian. Hence, one of the first pastoral concerns to address in counseling is how the process of coming out to one's self is being internalized and made sense of in the reality of particular parishioners or clients.

As persons continue to be comfortable with themselves as lesbians, they seek safe places to talk about their lesbianism, however tentative that identity may be at the moment. At times this sharing will occur only with trusted friends who may or may not respond positively and affirmatively. Working with individuals during this process to assist them in naming the potential losses they face by sharing their sexual orientation with others can be essential. It is highly unlikely that persons will go through the coming out process without experiencing some kind of rejection from someone who has been important and significant in their lives. At the same time, with increasingly positive experiences of coming out, women find more courage to take the risk to tell others and to expand their trusted community.

Pastoral caregivers must remain extremely sensitive in maintaining confidences throughout the process of working with women as they choose about when to come out and to whom. For some persons, coming out may

mean the loss of job or the loss of family relationships or the loss of church support. The reality that another person—even a pastoral caregiver—holds the "secret" of lesbian identity often contributes to the fear that women carry. The truth is that some of the most dangerous persons for lesbians who are trying to maintain and manage the secret of their sexual orientation are others who seem not to be bothered by the fact that someone is lesbian and who feel that others should not be bothered as well. Hence, they sometimes take advantage of the privilege of knowing that someone is lesbian and talk about this inappropriately with others. The key for open and caring pastoral persons is never to confuse self-openness with the right to share information that has been given to you with others. When women come out to pastoral caregivers it is helpful to ask verbally who else knows, with whom they are comfortable sharing the information, and from whom they receive support.

As has been mentioned, there are often good reasons why persons choose not to tell others about their emerging lesbian identities. The reality of rejection, the fear of losing relationships, the potential of job loss, or the grief that may be associated with coming out are appropriate reasons for women to choose very deliberately and intentionally about their coming out process. Motivations for keeping the secret are often based on solid reflection and a careful consideration of the losses. At other times a commitment to remain in the closet for some women becomes an unnecessary burden, and pastoral caregivers may become part of the opening of lives by being receptive to self-disclosure. For many women, the fear of coming out is greater than the hope of new freedoms that may accompany the process. Discerning what is appropriate for each particular woman takes time in self-reflection and painstaking deliberation. Experience teaches me that persons move through the coming out process in direct correlation to their internal pain. The greater the internal pain, the more clearly they will seek to be open and honest with others. At the same time, there is increasing pressure in the culture and among lesbian- and gay-affirmative communities to encourage all people to live out and in the open. This can create increased internal pain on the part of women struggling to discern their own processes in the context of the broader community of lesbians and gay men.

Siblings are often the first ones within families of origin to be told by sisters about their lesbianism. Persons seem to find it more difficult and complicated to tell parents, and, consequently, pastoral caregivers may need to participate in extended conversation about the process of coming out to other family members. There are also times when some members of the family are aware of lesbian self-identities, while others within the family may not have been told. This can create genuine tension for all within the family, and pastoral care persons often can become participants in think-



ing with women about the various levels of coming out within particular families (Strommen 1993).

Moving through the process of coming out raises questions and concerns for spiritual journeys and lives. Craig O'Neill and Kathleen Ritter have written a very helpful book, *Coming Out Within*, in which they examine various ways that spiritual issues become part of the process of coming out. Utilizing the concepts of grief and loss, they engage persons in thinking about spiritual transformation through coming out. Having a resource such as this book available for women and their families can be a tremendous help as persons raise spiritual concerns about their coming out process (O'Neill and Ritter 1992).

### *Seeking Community*

Lesbians often live on the edges or margins of the various communities of which they are a part. For many, this means never experiencing full acceptance in the contexts in which they live, work, or worship. Women often experience acceptance and openness in one place but not in other places. For example, it may not be safe to talk at work about significant life partners or about friends who self-identify as lesbian or gay, just as some families may remain silent or prefer silence from children who are living as lesbians. There may be relatively few communities in which women live openly. At the same time, women may find solace in PFLAG or other supportive communities living half their lives in the closet and half their lives more openly. A large number of lesbians spend energy screening conversations and being careful about what they say about their personal lives and to whom they speak, trying to remember who knows and who does not.

Experiencing a supportive, affirming, and caring community of faith is often very difficult for women in lesbian relationships for a number of reasons. First, the overt and covert sexism of the church in its tradition and history has been a barrier to various women who seek a community based on feminist principles of mutuality. The emergence of feminist theology in the last several years is helpful to women seeking to find inclusive and justice-oriented communities of faith.

Second, few churches have embraced women who self-identify as lesbians or have offered a place for them to be open about their relationships and commitments. It is not difficult to find churches that lesbians attend. However, the usual pattern is that members of the church may not know that particular women are lesbian, and, in turn, women may feel reluctant to be open about their sexual identities for fear of what self-disclosure may evoke in others. Some people in the church may be aware of the orientation of particular parishioners but encourage them to remain silent about the issues that concern them lest a controversy arise around homosexuality.

Many lesbians look for alternative communities of women to find spiritual nurture and support. These separate communities often become the context for women to experience their lives as blessed and affirmed. Communities of women who are open and who share in their lesbian orientations become rare opportunities for women to feel the freedom to share more completely all of who they understand themselves to be. Dan Spencer has suggested that, "The *ecclesia* of lesbians and gay men will be a *community at the margins*: of the society, the broader church, our communities and families of origin" (Spencer 1994, 398).

Communities of faith that are open and that refuse to be silent on the issues of homosexuality can become sanctuaries where women can reveal the center of their lives with less caution. Part of what is needed from pastoral caregivers who are concerned about justice is a willingness on their part to engage issues of lesbian and gay concerns within the broader communities of which they are a part. In other words, pastoral caregivers who talk openly about sexuality, who are willing to take stands that may not be popular, and who remain committed to seeking justice in the context of their churches will be welcomed by lesbians who are seeking out communities that reflect God's extensive care. Lesbians often seek not only places in which to worship God but communities that work toward justice.

Churches offering sanctuary for women, candid discussions about pain and hope, or prayers that speak to the hearts and concerns of women struggling with lesbian identities will be locations where the good news is embodied and experienced.

### *Being Family: Partnerships and Covenants*

One of the questions currently consuming this culture is: What does it mean to be a family? With broader conceptualizations of what constitutes families in our culture, the church and those who participate in pastoral care have been challenged to engage with extended families, single-parent families, and blended families, as well as lesbian partners. Relationships between two women offer new dimensions to be brought to ongoing conversations about family.

First, women bring concerns about their primary relationships, especially the other women whom they consider to be their immediate family and the children who might be part of those families. The lack of opportunities for formal conversations about partnerships is one of the adversities many lesbians encounter. In traditional heterosexual marriages the church encourages couples to sit down and talk about what it means to be united in marriage, what their hopes and dreams are for their relationship, how they think about God and the church in the midst of their marriage

vows, and other important aspects of their covenantal relationships. Usually this occurs in pre-marital conversations, couples therapy, or marriage encounter groups within the church context. Women in lesbian relationships, however, very rarely experience the opportunity to have such open and honest conversations in the context of their communities of faith.

In similar ways, few lesbian partnerships experience a more formalized covenant service where persons acknowledge and offer blessings for their relationship in ritual moments in their churches. Holy unions or covenant services have been created by lesbians who have sought to bring their relationship into the context of their faith, deciding that the church cannot own the rituals of God's presence. The church has not always welcomed, or known how to participate in blessing covenantal relationships that are not heterosexual but that may still reflect the values of partnerships encouraged in the community of faith. Lesbian covenantal relationships can be guided by the same visions of love, justice, and mutual fidelity in relationships as heterosexual unions. Churches that find ways to honor and bless these covenants add to the richness of the lives of all who participate in them.

As with all other partnerships, there are times when lesbians face particular issues. For example, since lesbian relationships are comprised of normal human beings, their partnerships may encounter addictions, sexual difficulties, struggles over financial realities, or any other number of complex situations. Lesbian relationships are not unique in terms of having struggles and concerns in partnerships. However, since the partnership consists of two women, the dynamics in their relationships may differ from heterosexual couples and it may be more difficult to ask for help. The temptation exists for some lesbians not to talk about the issues of their relationships to persons outside the partnerships. Isolation and silence can be fostered by the fear that persons have of their relationships being interpreted as inherently pathological or not healthy because they are lesbians. Given the negative response toward homosexuality in the culture, it is not difficult to see why these barriers might be present.

These are just a sampling of the questions and struggles that surface in what it means to be a family and how issues of family dynamics are handled in the context of lesbian relationships. Added to these are the concerns that may surface when children are added to the picture: What does being lesbian mean for the mothers who have had children born in the context of previous heterosexual relationships and who are now claiming their identities as lesbians? How do they talk with their children about their relationships? What does it mean for churches to participate in the baptism or dedication of children born or adopted into lesbian partnerships? What does it mean for churches to participate in the lives of children and youth

who experience lesbian feelings or attractions? The church family is compelled to respond faithfully to these concerns.

## CONCLUSION

Women who are in the process of coming to terms with their sexual identity deserve pastoral caregivers who can collaborate with them in communal care and self-care. The church can become one of the sanctuaries for women as they journey through development and evolution into becoming more fully human in their relationships with God, self, and others. The relational qualities that persons seek to embody as faithful human beings are those which lesbians also pursue. Genuine pastoral care offers women the opportunity to ask questions, to deliberate, to reflect, and to make movements in their striving to embody right relationship.

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## Women and Motherloss

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Since Adrienne Rich (1976) broke the silence that surrounded the most formative relationship in the life of every woman—the mother-daughter relationship—much has been written about various aspects of that relationship. But only in recent years has the silence been broken about women's experiences of the deaths of their mothers. Hope Edelman's, *Motherless Daughters: Legacies of Loss* (1994) attests to the fact that no matter when a daughter loses her mother through death, divorce, or abandonment, motherloss is a distinctive kind of loss for women, one that has enduring effects on a woman's sense of her self, her relationships, her lifestyle and career choices, and her sense of mortality. In my book *Midlife Women and Death of Mother* (Robbins 1990), I discuss how motherloss also has profound effects on adult women's spirituality, their images of and relationship to God and the church.

When silence is broken, new data about important aspects of women's experience arises. This data gives us insights into what daughters lose and mourn when their mothers die; the dimensions of grief that become exposed as women mourn the loss of their mothers; and the unique ways in which women engage in the mourning process according to where they are in their own development. This new data requires us to examine our underlying assumptions pertaining to grief and mourning; women's development; and the importance of the mother-daughter relationship in the formation of

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