

How Labels that Hurt Can Also Heal
By Rebecca R. Rod, Moscow, Idaho [c2003]

Most of you remember Show and Tell time in school. This morning I've brought with me two small personal "artifacts" to show you. One is the tiny little pink plastic bracelet the hospital put on me when I was born in Decatur, Illinois, almost 52 years ago. It has my mother's name, Jeanette Rod, on it, and her room number, and my birth date, 2-21-52. I can't even get two fingers inside it now.

The other item is my hospital birth certificate. It has my full name, Rebecca Rachel Rod, on it, and my parents' names, and the back of it bears the faint ink prints of my tiny baby feet, with a picture of an angel in the middle, and a verse entitled "Where Angels Tread" that reads:

God has given life again
And blest a soul so sweet;
May the Guardian Angel ever guide
Those tiny, little feet.

My first labels in life. One tells who I belong to, and the other, besides recording the imprints of my unique little feet, directly declares my connection to God and the angels.

I like looking at these two artifacts of plastic and paper. They give me a perspective on my life I don't often think about – a mental picture of the sweet miracle of a tiny new baby, perfect in her completeness and potential. Ready for love and nurturing.

So now, here I am of course, Rebecca Rachel Rod, all grown up. I have lived in Moscow, Idaho, for almost 20 years now, and my partner, Theresa, and I have been members of the Unitarian Universalist of the Palouse for almost 12 years. We were also "married" (our term) here in 1996 in a beautiful and joyful ceremony, with the sanctuary full of our fellow congregants and many other friends and relatives. We each still refer to it as the best day of our lives.

I've spoken in this pulpit a number of times now – once, talking about the connection between my art and spirituality, another time about prayer, another time about the principles of Unitarian Universalism – and just last year I did a Groundhog Day service that included a children's story about a little girl groundhog afraid to come out of her hole because she was overwhelmed by all the expectations people had of her. Ironically, I'm doing another service

today about a different kind of experience of “coming out” – as the term relates to the lives of Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual and Transgender people – since it just so happens that, among other things, I’m a Lesbian.

I have accumulated a fair amount of labels thus far in my life, as you all have – some having to do with work: Librarian, Marketing Manager, Artist, Potter; some having to do with politics or world view: Feminist, Liberal, Democrat; some having to do with relationships: Daughter, Sister, Partner, Friend; and some of my labels just came with me at birth: Norwegian, Lutheran, Lesbian. Those last three are a challenging combination in themselves (!) and they have also been the “sticklers” in my life, holding me back sometimes in subtle and not-so-subtle ways. For instance, the Norwegian keeps me from dancing with abandon; the Lutheran keeps me from taking too much pleasure in the really fun sins; and the Lesbian keeps me from running for public office – not that I’d really want to.

I’m kidding of course, about that last bit. But, since I’m going to talk about my being a Lesbian for the rest of this sermon, I just wanted to be sure to remind you that you’re not listening to a one-dimensional person here. But that’s often the trouble with labels, isn’t it? – focusing on just one can become the definition of a whole person if you’re not careful.

That said, the “Lesbian” label is the one I’ve had the most difficulty embracing (so to speak), and of course it’s the one that generated the idea for this service relating to National Coming Out Day.

I grew up in Iowa, and, probably pretty much like many of you, in a fairly dysfunctional but loving family. I was fairly introverted in the sense that I didn’t hang out in groups, but usually had one best friend. I had crushes on a few of my teachers, but that’s not necessarily a red flag for gayness, since lots of kids do. I was pretty serious as a child, and, in my early teens, somewhat sullen, with a sarcastic flip side – again, not unusual for a teenager. But there was a kind of sadness or lost-ness that I seemed to carry around with me almost constantly – things I couldn’t name that bothered me – and I felt alone in those feelings. I often felt like something was wrong with me, but I didn’t know what. I’d wander around town alone late at night sometimes, and once, when I was in about 7th or 8th grade, I found myself standing up on the railing of the downtown bridge, holding on to a light pole, thinking about jumping off. But I didn’t.

In junior high and high school, I dated a fair amount and there was a guy I was pretty serious about during my sophomore year. But it wasn't until late in high school that I found I had a crush on a girlfriend that felt something akin to being "in love," and that bothered me. I remember wanting my brother to date her – a kind of a vicarious thing I guess, because I knew I would've been jealous if he had.

Then, during my freshman year at the Lutheran college I attended in my hometown, I met a girl – Linda – a friend of a friend of my friend that I really didn't like. She was sweet and bubbly and her shoulder-length red hair bounced around when she walked. I was more dark and moody and reserved, given to writing "serious" poetry and smoking cigarettes. But when she found out that we were both English majors, she somehow pulled me into a friendship with her strange, sunny disposition. Then I began to notice when I was with her I felt a kind of energy in the air, like sparks and the force of magnets working overtime. In fact, whenever we'd take a walk together we'd constantly bump against each other, and just this accidental contact between us seemed to leave a radiating space on my body wherever we touched.

This was new to me. Even though I'd had the usual physical contact with the high school boys I'd dated, this was different. More like – exquisite. Well, it turned out to be mutual, and soon we were "begun," so to speak. It was pretty wonderful – for a few months. Then it turned out there was a worm in the apple. She was a Baptist and the guilt of our loving started to eat away at her – and I was Lutheran after all – so pretty soon she had me praying with her that we would not do this anymore and just be friends. But it never worked. So, she broke our relationship off after a few short months.

My heart was broken and my spirit was crushed and I became a cynic about love. I was angry and confused at God for coming between me and my beloved. After all, "If God was Love, how could loving be a sin?" And if you are a religious or spiritual person at all finding yourself in this situation, you realize you have a Devil of a choice to make: God or Love. In my mind, this where the really crushing spiritual damage is done. For people who have grown up with God in their lives, who love God and have been told over and over again that God loves them, coming to this desperate point stunts the blossoming of a spiritual life just like (!) that. So I just stopped going to church and I packed the pain of it all away from myself. Yet practically daily I prayed to the God I didn't believe in anymore to "Please – just make me be normal!" I dated guys again for a while hoping something might "take," I guess. Nothing did. And thus I

began my stumbling journey of Hide-and-Seek with Love. Only it was more like Seek and Hide in the sense that while I was secretly seeking love – wanting it so badly – I knew if I found it, I'd have to keep it hidden.

Then in my senior year of college, I met another Linda and fell off the wagon and in love again. And the critical thing about this second relationship was that it made me begin to think that there just might be a pattern forming here in my life – like I could be a (gulp) Lesbian. Unless of course, I only had a thing for women named Linda, which wouldn't be near as bad as being a full-blown Lesbian!

Anyway, Linda and I actually talked about our relationship sometimes in rather nebulous terms, and we pretty much decided we weren't really Lesbians – that we were just in love with each other. After all, we both had had more relationships with guys than with girls. So comforted, we went on happily for some time, with no praying or anything like that. But as my feelings for her grew I felt at a loss for words to express the depth of them, being limited by the vaguely defined relationship we had. I can remember the day when I tried the best I knew how – I just told her I felt like I wanted to marry her – even though I knew I wasn't “entitled” to use that label! I felt so relieved when she didn't turn away in horror or laugh at me. Still, in the near future we went through some pretty convoluted relationship shuffles including a breakup and a marriage for her, before we finally got back together and decided we were indeed (probably) Lesbians.

Then we moved to the liberal hotbed of Iowa City where we found a whole bunch of women like us! There was a women's restaurant, a women's press, a gay bar, and there were women's dances – all places where women would hold hands and hold each other and laugh and have fun in – almost – public! I went to my first women's concert at the Unitarian Church there. It was all pretty amazing. And this is where the label that was so scary and to be avoided at all costs became the label of belonging and healing. We were Lesbians now, in the company of other women like us. Finding and being in community with people who accept you is definitely a salve for the pain of separation and alienation many of us feel.

Things went along pretty well for a while until Linda's mother figured us out. She came barreling down to Iowa City in her car to pay us a visit during which she screamed at us the whole time, blamed me for corrupting her daughter, and said, “If I had a gun, I'd shoot you both!” And then she left. The violence of that encounter was pretty stunning. Not long after

that, we broke up – again. This devastated me so badly that I couldn't hide it. That's when I started my coming out process with my family.

I have to say that I regard myself as one of the luckier ones in this. Not one person in my family rejected me, although my parents weren't exactly excited about it either. The strangest reaction came from my oldest brother who said, "but you're too pretty to be a Lesbian!" — which was kind of a mixed thing for me, since he'd never told me he thought I was pretty before and he was basically saying lesbians were, well, homely! My sister was most concerned that it would be a difficult life for me. In the world of coming out to families – this was pretty good treatment. So many, many gay people are kicked out and disowned by their families and relatives.

Still, I lived in the closet well through my twenties and into my thirties. My partner Linda was an elementary school teacher who could not risk being out. We went separately to our respective families every holiday, since our relationship was basically supposed to be kept invisible from her mother. I always had to be completely quiet when her mother would call on the phone, and if she came to visit, which was rare, we would put away all the visible pictures of ourselves together and make the second bedroom look lived in. And then I would leave for the day until her mother went back home.

What a denial of self and love this way of life becomes! The shame and secrecy not only wear you down over time, they destroy your spirit, undermine your relationships, and speed their collapse. This is exactly why "Don't Ask/ Don't Tell" policies are so toxic – they just reinforce a sense of wrongness and shame about our relationships.

I'm glad to say this is not my life any more. Theresa and I will celebrate 13 years together next month. We do not live in the closet. Our families and community and church not only acknowledge our relationship, they are supportive and happy for us. We are very blessed. We move through the world feeling mostly accepted and, yes, even normal much of the time!

But I am painfully aware that many others are not so lucky. Gay teens are estimated to be a third of the teenagers who commit suicide each year and hate crimes continue being committed against GLBT people every day. And while people are being entertained more and more often by caricatures of gay people on TV or in the movies, local, state, and federal officials are busily drafting more resolutions designed to keep us from being able to legally sanction our relationships. Apparently the Defense of Marriage Act isn't enough to guard the country against

people like us, so now we have talk of Constitutional Amendments! All this waste of resources and energy over who we love!

I suppose I basically believe I was born gay since I know I didn't choose it. But really, what does it matter? When I think of that little baby 52 years ago, ready to be loved and nurtured so she could grow into someone wonderful and loving, I can't help hoping the world will wake up and simply value the powerful potential of love in everyone. And realizing that, do everything in our power with all the resources we can muster to nurture it in every child as it comes – and not get so sidetracked by disabling it with labels. Blessed be.

Let's sing Hymn #151, "I Wish I Knew How It Would Feel to be Free"