

Bound by Brotherhood?

By Alan Bennett Ilagan

The first member of my family to whom I came out as a gay man was my brother Paul. We were at a family wedding in San Diego in late 1996. I'd had a debilitating (and hopeless) crush on a guy who had let me down easy a few days before my flight West, and I was despondent over this latest love fiasco. In my sadness and loneliness, I turned to the young man who'd been my best friend throughout childhood ~ my brother.

Though wildly different from one another, we had gotten along well when we were kids. It was easy, being one another's only company much of the time. He was the only person on earth who knew exactly what I was going through ~ raised in the same house with the same parents and environment ~ he understood when no one else could.

I thought back to those days as I prepared to tell him that I was gay. It took about twenty minutes to fully convince him that I really was gay, that it was not a phase or an attempt to be trendy. At the end of it all he had only this to say: "You're still my brother and I love you. But if you were one of my friends I'd probably stop talking to you and hanging out with you."

At the time I thought that was fair enough. He accepted it because he had to. While it was by no means the worst reaction to one's coming out, it left much to be desired. Still, I felt confident that I could win him over. Many times had I witnessed someone's initial rejection of my sexuality or "lifestyle choice", only to watch it change over time as they got to know me. How thrilling to watch those walls come down as they learn I am not someone to fear. How wonderful to share in such an evolution, a process from which we are both benefiting. It's one of the reasons I do what I do. It's also why I was so severely jolted by my most recent visit to my brother in Miami last week.

Heading out with his friends (two of whom are gay), the subject of sexual preference came up. My brother, to my surprise and dismay, maintained that it was a choice, and that at some point in our lives we decided to "become" homosexual. He still didn't get it. In the seven years since I first came out to him he has not grown or opened his mind in the least. In that time I dismissed his homophobic remarks as flippant jokes. I turned a blind eye to the revulsion and disgust he truly felt about my sexuality. I even ignored his casual use of the word "faggot" for

anyone who upset him ~ a woman who cuts in front of him on the highway, a waiter who keeps him waiting for too long.

He infuses the word with vile hatred and a frightening vehemence. The hatred is audible. That hatred knows neither reason nor bounds. It cannot be contained or controlled or fought without some damage being borne upon both parties. Where does his hatred come from? If I could only figure that out we might have a chance, but there seems to be no answer.

Studies have shown that people who personally know a gay person are much more amenable and open to gay rights and marriage for same-sex couples. If I cannot convince my own brother that being gay is not a choice but simply an incontrovertible aspect of who I am, what hope do we have? Here is a man who has known and loved me since birth, and he still calls people “faggot” in front of me. Here is a man who has gay friends and relatives, but who refuses to acknowledge or embrace our differences. Here is a man who, strange as it may seem, I once looked up to ~ for his kindness, for his goodness, for his forgiveness ~ and who has let me down repeatedly with his careless hatred.

When we were younger everyone thought he was the stronger one ~ excelling at sports, fighting off the girls, and enjoying a social popularity that often overshadowed mine. Now he is a faded figure of lost adolescence ~ with a burgeoning pot belly from too much drink, the early symptoms of emphysema from too many cigarettes, and some clearly co-dependent relationship issues belying a crippling fear of being alone.

I will always love Paul ~ he’s my brother ~ but I don’t know if I’ll ever like him as I did when we were children. The forces of society are strong, and my brother is weak. There is only so much one person can do for another, and I fear I am losing the energy and desire to make an effort. I can’t even get my brother to vote in November – and he lives in Florida. He simply doesn’t care. I am powerless in the face of such apathy. Even the oppression of his own brother is not enough to move him. I could bow down in tears before him and it wouldn’t make a damn difference. How much more can I do before giving up?

I usually end my articles on a note of hope or optimism, no matter how dark or disturbing what came before. I cannot do that now. For the first time I am doubting whether we can do it. I honestly wonder if there will be a better day, or whether we are, after all that we’ve been through, without hope. It’s a frightening thought, and for once perhaps we should all be scared.