

Open-door policy

Acknowledging homosexuality enriches columnist's perspective



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I remember vividly the first time I ever heard a song by the Pet Shop Boys on the radio.

It was late at night, and I was riding in the back of the family station wagon with my sisters and parents. I can recall the glow of the dash lights and the headlights of passing cars.

I was 11 years old, and for the first time in my life, I became suddenly and keenly aware of my need and desire for a communion with my own kind.

Somehow, hearing the music of the Pet Shop Boys led me to conceive of myself as having an actual gay identity, and to realize the possible existence of a gay culture.

At a very early age, I simply realized that I was attracted to boys instead of girls. Somehow, I also realized, even at that early age, the importance of keeping it secret. Deeply secret.

Not much later, I would learn a vocabulary — faggot, queer, homo — to define what I was. And that was something different; something other; something not straight.

By the time I was in grade school, I understood pretty well the consequences of how I was different and what would happen to me if I revealed this fact about myself to anyone else.

Though I was very aware of the outlines of my libidinal impulses, I was still unaware of my needs for affection and the desire for any sort of physical or spiritual fulfillment.

As I sat in the back seat of my parents' car and listened to West End Girls, I began to conceive of such possibilities, and realized that others existed in the world who were like

me — others with whom I longed to interact.

For the very first time, I was imagining not just sex, but love and affection. For the first time, I viewed my homosexuality not just as the secret that made me different from my peers, but as that which defined my identity; which largely made me whom I was.

In that moment, I felt filled with both hope and desperation — because for the first time ever, I felt I had a connection to some larger whole, but it was something very far from my actual reach.

It would be nearly 10 more years — nearly the whole of my adolescence — before I was finally able to come out.

Not until I got away to college, away from my family and peers, did I tell another soul about the secrets I had spent a lifetime and so much energy hiding. Not until then did I finally kiss a boy, have my first boyfriend, or say, "I love you" to someone.

Not until then did I finally start living up to what always felt like my real identity; the one I'd always kept hidden, and really start living my life.

When I came out, I did it mostly on my own.

Unlike my heterosexual counterparts, for whom history, rituals of courtship, models of behavior and codes of decorum are handed out daily in the classroom, I've had to seek out my own rules of conduct and sense of connection to the world and history.

I had no script to follow when I came out: I had no social conventions, no sanctions and no rituals. I had to figure it all out by myself.

Our society has in many ways become an easier place in which to

come out. People are generally becoming more accepting, and there are greater resources available.

Still, even the luckiest gays and lesbians are isolated; even in places where people tell you it's all right to be gay. You have to tell them you're gay first, and that's never easy.

Despite my independence of thought and the support system I've created for myself, I often still feel an edge of alienation when around groups of my heterosexual counterparts.

Whatever else we might have in common, the different experiences and different languages of sexualities can create a barrier. One on one, it's usually not so bad, but when I'm in a group of straight people, the differences can become quite marked.



sexuality is valuable.

I am perpetually subjected to homophobia — be it from homophobic columnists who spout their narrow views about the immorality and indecency of homosexuality or worthless political candidates who thunder on about the offensiveness of gay marriage.

Because heterosexuality is the norm, no one ever examines our assumptions about it. To be open about one's homosexuality, by contrast, seems always and necessarily to be making some sort of "statement" about the fact of being gay.

Our society still works under the premise that gays and lesbians can be denied equal rights and fair treatment because of their sexual orientation.

I can be (and have been) fired for being gay. I can be denied housing. I don't have protection from hate crimes. I don't have the same rights to marry.

I have been harassed. I have been threatened with physical violence. I have grown up in a world where I have

had to hide my sexuality, suppress my natural development and miss out on a lot of the parts of my youth so many others took for granted.

In view of all this, I am obligated to be out and upfront about my sexuality because it is necessary to fight for my civil rights and equality before the law, to break down the barriers of homophobia and stereotypes and to gap the gulf between "them" and "us" — the heterosexual and homosexual realms.

I am obligated to closely examine our notions of sexual identity in all of its individualistic complexity.

I must be straightforward and "flaunt it" to make this world a safer and more hospitable place in which to live.

I am out because I refuse to take abuse and inequity for granted.

But being different, being an outsider, living on the fringes of our social systems — is valuable.

My life and experiences give me a rather unique vision of our world. Taking less in life for granted, I am better equipped to examine our ways of thinking. To be the voice of dissent.

Instead of blindly accepting and reaffirming the structures of our society, I am more apt to examine them. I am more sensitive to injustices.

The music of the Pet Shop Boys still evokes bittersweet emotions for me.

If at that moment in the back of the family station wagon, when I heard Pet Shop Boys and felt so suddenly very alone, I was presented with the possibility of becoming heterosexual — evading the struggle and uncertainty of living my life as gay — I honestly don't know how I would have responded.

Would I have taken the easy way out? Or would I then have decided to pursue the uncharted life before me? One scary and unpredictable, but perhaps still intriguing. What was in my heart then?

But such choices do not truly exist.

And quite honestly, I am very deeply grateful for the unique life I have led.

I feel my world is richer and more interesting for the uncommon experiences I have had and for having to examine more closely the

Sin tax errors

Raising taxes on 'legal drugs' won't cure social ills



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Honestly, do you think raising taxes on cigarettes is going to stop anybody from smoking?

Price was never the issue for the people I knew in high school who smoked. They would find the money one way or another. Jacking the price up wasn't going to do a damn thing.

The legal drug trade has been interesting to watch the past few years.

Don't kid yourself — cigarettes and alcohol are drugs.

As the tobacco industry has fallen under fire, with people complaining about second-hand smoke, or saying that the tobacco industry knew about the addictive and harmful potential of cigarettes for a long time, alcohol has passed right under the wire.

If you really want to keep kids from

smoking, put on a penalty they'll fear. Caught smoking and you're under 18? Welcome to a month without your driver's license.

We're already getting stricter on selling alcohol to minors, but tobacco's still getting off easy. Confiscating the cigarettes? Please. As they say in the business, "they'll make more."

So let's crack down on these people. Think the driver's license won't work? A night in jail, maybe?

Don't start talking to me about how smoking underage isn't a big deal. If you try that, you fall under the category of "dominated by the industry."

The tobacco and alcohol industries want you to forget that their products are hazardous. They want you to forget you're buying poison from them. They want you to overlook the fact that their products are responsible for thousands and thousands of deaths every year.

They want you to pretend with them that it's all going to be all right.

Smoking causes cancer. Cancer kills. Drinking usually enhances problems. Drinking irresponsibly kills. Drinking and driving kills.

We need to crack down on these problems. And there really isn't an obvious place to start.

As fascinating as prohibition was, it didn't work. Banning cigarettes would be about as successful, I think. Images of a guy in a black trenchcoat and dark

sunglasses going "You want to buy a pack of Camels?" are disquieting.

So banning them is out. And I hate to say it, but taxing the life out of them doesn't seem to be working either. The numbers of smokers dying is more than replaced every year by new smokers, a lot of whom are under the age of 18.

I've heard the "smoking is harmless" argument dozens of times and "Well, I know what I'm doing" just about as much.

I grew up in the house of a smoker. My dad even admits it's wrong and has tried to quit several times. I'm hoping he'll succeed eventually.

Why do they do it? Lots of people I knew smoked. Most of them claimed it helped calm them down, relax them and make their life easier.

What I found funny is they were often stressed out and the cigarettes never seemed to help. In some cases, they made them worse, as these people stressed out trying to get their next fix.

And I can't say that I didn't know anyone underage who drank. Most of the people I knew in high school had. Some of the people I know now do, and they're underage. It's a lot more rampant here than it was in high school. Most people say, "Oh, there's nothing wrong with having a few."

Right. I can't say I've never broken the law. I think everyone has sped at some time or another. There are little

offenses we've been guilty of, but drinking under age is not a "little offense."

Which brings me, in a roundabout way, to my other point. Why aren't we taxing the life out of alcohol?

We tax cigarettes a ton. Why aren't such taxes on alcohol? Why haven't we banned alcohol ads on television? Why aren't we stipulating more firmly the ads alcohol companies can have?

Many people say that it is because alcohol is a social drug. So are cigarettes.

A lot of people say that alcohol doesn't have the same dangerous effects as cigarettes.

Tell that to the people who died from drunken drivers.

Tell that to the people whose bodies are wasting away.

Tell that to the families of people who lost a loved one to suicide while that loved one was drunk.

I didn't drink in high school. Now I only drink at home in the company of friends. If I decide to go to a bar, odds are I will be the designated driver.

Call me paranoid, call me overcautious. But you can still call me because I'm still around to answer the phone.

I say raise taxes on alcohol. The government can use the money, and it can be put towards cutting down on drunken driving.

And take photographs at an acci-

dent scene of a drunken driver. Don't take the kind where you see just the car or the glass scattered on the street. The ads showing home movies of people before they died aren't good enough.

Take pictures of the bodies, of the injuries. Show these high school students the gruesome reality of what drunken driving results in.

Just because alcohol's devastating effects are less direct doesn't mean it should fly under the wire of our detection. Nor should we be lenient on cigarettes because tobacco companies are making a weak attempt at repenting.

There is only so much I can take of this, and it's something we need to stop kidding ourselves about.

You have the right to be a drug addict, to drink and smoke to excess. The government has the right to tax the living daylight out of it and use those taxes into educating the populous.

I don't think there's a smoker out there who doesn't know it's hazardous. They think they're immortal, but that's their choice. Maybe people don't think liquor is dangerous. Maybe they say, "Hey man, I don't drink and drive."

But someone's doing it. Look at the death rates. It's happening.

And on Friday, a lot of you will go out to your drug dens and have a few drinks just to "relax."

I'm glad to see someone can relax, because I sure can't.