

Growing Up Gay in Down East Maine

Victor Stanley

“What’s a homosexual?” I remember asking this question of my parents while they were watching the evening news in the winter of 1967. Walter Cronkite was reporting on the growing homosexual community in San Francisco. As a twelve-year-old boy, my ears picked up on the three-letter syllable in the middle, but had never heard the compound word *homosexual* before. My mother quickly responded, “You don’t have to know that.”

You see, there were no homosexuals in Down East Maine in the mid-Sixties. Anyone who was attracted to others of the same sex was so closeted that he or she did not exist as homosexual. That word was not part of anyone’s vocabulary—not the teacher, not the minister, probably not even the village doctor. For all intents and purposes, especially for a twelve-year-old boy, the word did not exist. South Gouldsboro, on the shores of Frenchman Bay, was thousands of miles away from San Francisco, and the residents were content to keep it that way.

In hindsight, there was Pin Bunker who lived in a modest bungalow with his “nephew,” Richard. The two drank too much, cussed too much, and never went to church. Pin’s pride and joy was his bed of peonies that edged the fence around his yard. Once a year, on a Sunday morning, a big bouquet of the fragrant, elegant flowers would appear on the altar. Nobody ever gave Pin credit for them, but there was an unspoken awareness of their source. I now find it odd that in a small town where gossip flowed like the tides, nobody ever talked about Pin and Richard.

Then there was Celia. She stood over six feet tall, had broad shoulders and manly features. Celia’s home was a small red house with all the outward signs of being the residence of a laborer. She wore flannel shirts and denim pants every day except Sunday when she put on a blouse and wool skirt for church. Celia was the only lobsterwoman in town. She cut and split her own firewood, did her own plumbing, and shot a deer on the first day of every hunting season. Religion was very important to her. She lived alone.

There were undoubtedly many more effeminate men, masculine women and other potentially homosexual persons who lived as the community and church wanted them to live. They married, bore children, and lived *normal* lives. Maybe not all of them were gay, lesbian, or bisexual, but some of them were. The realities of their innermost beings had been stamped “Top Secret” and been buried in a bureaucracy of emotional baggage. So nobody

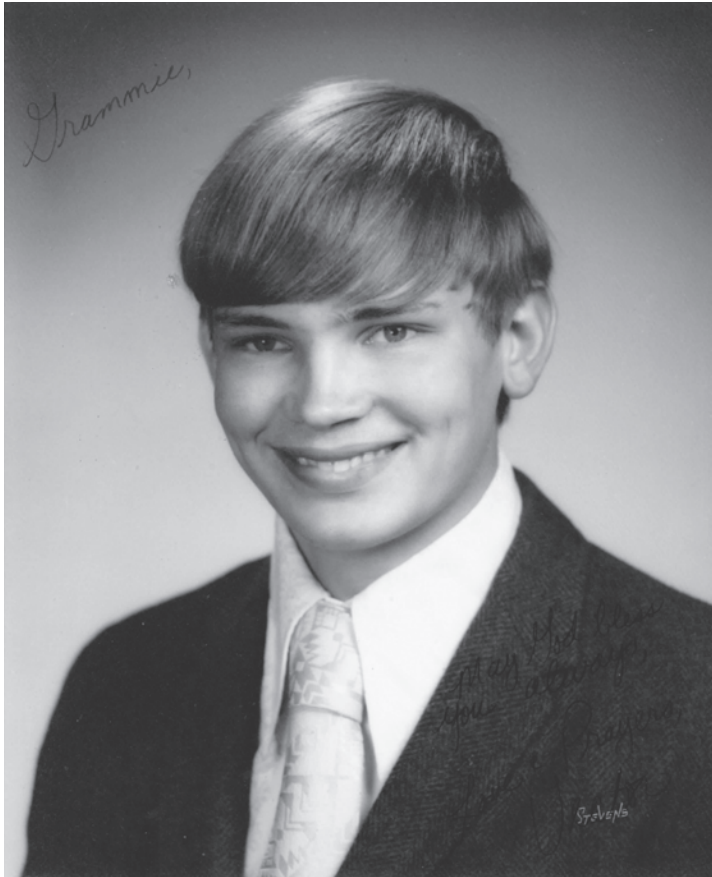
would answer my question, “What’s a homosexual?” Of course, I was the answer—the definition of the word.

One person who reached out to me was Theodosia Gray (1933-2011). It was my senior year when Miss Gray came to Sumner Memorial High School to teach French and Spanish. Dosa, as her friends knew her, had spent many childhood summers in Bar Harbor at her grandparents’ home. Her grandfather was MDI’s first attorney and eventually became Maine’s Chief Justice. She had graduated from both Wellesley and Harvard-Radcliffe, was a world traveler, and had made several trips to France. In the mid-Sixties, Dosa came to live fulltime in Bar Harbor with her mother, and immersed herself in the community and in her philanthropic interests. She became a board member at the Maine Sea Coast Mission, where she served as President from 1979 to 1996. Seeking to be a positive influence in the lives of young people, Miss Gray volunteered her time as a teacher at Sumner, bringing with her a style, grace, and cultural influence that most of the students had never seen before. A natural educator, she soon found herself instructing the girls on how to act at a formal tea, and insisting that the boys in her classroom conduct themselves as gentlemen should. Miss Gray and I were naturally drawn to each other, both in school and at the meetings of the Maine Sea Coast Mission. She probably saw in me a gay boy wanting to find his way out, but what was she to do? If she had initiated the conversation and been caught, she would have most certainly been dismissed from her teaching position. Nevertheless, I always knew she was my friend. Imagine my joy when, thirty years later, I saw her at a gathering of gays and lesbians who called themselves “Out on MDI.”

With no “out” homosexual role models in 1972, I did what the community and church wanted me to do. I got married, had children (two wonderful children), and tried my best to appear *normal*. I did not know I was living “in the closet,” but whatever it was, it was a dark, claustrophobic place. After my children flew the nest, I became physically ill, depressed, and suicidal. By this time, I had learned what it meant to be homosexual and I knew that I was. As pastor of a thriving Baptist church, I was faced with the challenge of how to make a quick, clean exit.

At just about this time, a small congregation in Somesville was taking up my thirty-year-old question. When I was looking for a way out, this church was opening a door inviting me back in. On January 28, 1996, the Somesville Union Meeting House, United Church of Christ, voted to become Maine’s first Open and Affirming Congregation.

This decision to welcome homosexuals “into the full life and ministry



Victor Stanley, Senior Year, Sumner Memorial High School, 1972.
Courtesy of Victor Stanley

of [their] community of faith, including membership, leadership, and employment,”¹ did not come easily. Neither did my decision to accept the word homosexual as a personal descriptive. Under the leadership of Reverend David Stillman, his wife Dotty Kay, the church Moderator, Margaret (“Binnie”) MacDonald, and many others, the members of the church spent a few years educating themselves in order to seek an answer to my question. While they were doing their work, I was busy seeking therapy and self-acceptance. Hallelujah! We all concluded that my life still had value.

By choice, my exit from the Baptist church was a quiet one. When word spread that I had come out as a gay man, the Baptists were relieved to know I was gone. I do find it a bit ironic that as long as I was living a lie, I was acceptable to them. Once I told the truth about who I am, I became an outcast.

When Reverend Stillman retired, I was asked to apply for the position

of Minister in Somesville. My advisers instructed me to win the search committee over before I told them about my homosexuality. But of course I couldn't do that. The first question asked was the usual "Who are you? Tell us a little about yourself." That led to a full revelation. Bill Fanazick's response was immediate and heartfelt: "You are in a safe place." Paula Dunbar followed up by saying "The fact that you are gay doesn't really matter to us. What can you do to guide us into the future?"

The call to serve the Somesville Church came in July of 2002. Since my coming to Somesville, many "church shoppers" have gone elsewhere because they weren't ready to attend a church with an openly gay pastor. Weddings and funerals have been few and far between because of the whispered, "He shouldn't be doing these things. He's gay!" I've had death threats, heard shouts of derision, and have been blamed for many natural disasters.

Thirty-five years after asking my question, when I came home to the Mount Desert Island area, I was astonished at how things had changed. I obviously was not in Kansas anymore. There were openly gay men and lesbian women all over the place. There was even a potluck group called "Out on MDI" that met regularly. In my absence, many people had been working to make life better for the LGBTQ community.

As Bar Harbor had Theodosia Gray pioneering the way, Northeast Harbor had Marguerite Yourcenar and Grace Frick. Their home, "Petite Plaisance," was in the heart of the summer community. The two moved to MDI in 1947, and lived together there until Grace died in 1979. Marguerite continued to occupy their home until her death in 1987. Grace served as Marguerite's keeper of the gate and would not let anyone see "Madame" unless formally invited. Marguerite was an accomplished novelist and essayist, winning the Prix Femina and the Erasmus Prize. She was the first woman elected to the Académie française. Grace and Marguerite lived together as any other married couple would have lived in their community—except they were a same-sex couple.

Southwest Harbor had Langdon Wood (1925-2001) and R. Gordon Manchester (1927-2007). As an art teacher in the MDI school system, Langdon was quite proper, reserved, and closeted. Gordon, on the other hand, was more flamboyant and outgoing. Gordon was a native Islander, had served in the Navy, worked as a caretaker, and was the go-to person for local information and sometimes a little gossip. The two operated a small

antiques shop out of their home at the head of the harbor. They were a very social couple, attended lots of parties, and hosted many people in their home. Naturally, they became a magnet for local gay men as well as those who were questioning their sexuality. Gordon was one of the first people to welcome me to the Island, and promptly busied himself with the task of getting me introduced to other gay men.

Even the Quiet Side had their pioneers. Ruth Moore (1903-1989) and Eleanor Mayo (1920-1981), both novelists, built their home in Tremont in 1947, where they lived for the remainder of their lives. Ruth was born on Gott's Island, and Eleanor was raised in Southwest Harbor. Even if the community thought their relationship queer, there was no questioning their roots in and devotion to Maine. Ruth's novel, *Spoonhandle*, and Mayo's novel, *Turn Home*, were both made into movies. Eleanor got involved in local politics and was elected as Tremont's first female selectman, prompting Ruth to write, "A great flurry it got in all the papers and on the radio, and all the old diehards and shellbacks in town, who think 'wimmen's fit fa one thing and that's all, by God,' and are standing on their heads and spinning."²

The Bible speaks of a great Cloud of Witnesses, referring to those who have sacrificed much, and sometimes all, in a united effort to bring us to the place we are today. They are the ones who have "exalted every valley, brought every mountain low, and made the rough places a plain."³ I did not become Mount Desert Island's first openly gay minister all by myself. I am deeply and sincerely indebted to these people I've mentioned here and a multitude of others who by their choice or my ignorance go unnamed. We've all been forced to swim against the current in order to survive. Today, the Island community is all the stronger for our efforts. Gone are the days when we had to refer to our lovers as *friend*, *housemate*, *sister*, or *companion*. My goodness! Men can now have husbands, and women can now have wives. Thanks be to all who questioned, "What's a homosexual," and sought the answer with open minds and caring hearts.

Notes

¹ "Open and Affirming Statement" adopted at the Annual Meeting of the Somesville Union Meeting House, January 26, 1996.

² Letter from Ruth Moore, March 23, 1950. Maine Women Writers Collection, University of New England.

³ Isaiah 40:4.