For Minorities, Timing Is Everything
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Left-handedness and homosexuality both tend to run in families. As my husband’s family and mine have some of each, it is not surprising that one of our children is left-handed and another homosexual. Both my left-handed daughter and my homosexual son turned out to be bright, funny, talented people with loving friends and family. But their experience of growing up in different minority groups was a striking contrast and an interesting illustration of how societal attitudes change as sufficient knowledge accumulates to make old beliefs untenable.

By the time my daughter was growing up, left-handedness was no longer regarded as a sign of immorality or mental deficiency. Almost everybody knew “openly” left-handed friends, teachers and relatives and viewed them as normal people who wrote differently. Except for a little awkwardness in learning to write at school, my daughter’s hand preference was simply never an issue. If people noticed it at all, they did so with a shrug. Nobody called her nasty names or banned school library books about left-handed families, as school trustees in Surrey, B.C., recently banned books about gay families. Nobody criticized her left-handed “lifestyle” or suggested that she might be an unfit role model for young children. Nobody claimed that she chose to be left-handed and should suffer the consequences.

My gay son did not choose to be different either, but when he was growing up, homosexuality was still too misunderstood to be accepted as just another variant of human sexuality. Because gay people still felt unsafe revealing their sexual orientation, he was deprived of the opportunity of knowing openly gay teachers, friends and relatives. He grew up hearing crude jokes and nasty names for people like him, and he entered adulthood knowing that being openly gay could prevent you from getting a job or renting an apartment. It could also get you assaulted.

Bigotry has never been reserved for homosexuality, of course. I am old enough to remember the time when bigotry directed toward other minorities in Canada was similar to that which is still sometimes aimed at

homosexuals. In my Vancouver childhood, Chinese were regularly called “Chinks” (the boys in my high school wore black denim “Chink pants” tailored for them in Chinatown). Black people were “niggers,” prohibited from staying in most Vancouver hotels. Kids in the special class were “retards” or “morons.” Jews were suspected of all sorts of crazy things, and physically disabled people were often regarded as mental defectives.

When I was a child, left-handed children were still being punished for writing with their left hand, particularly in the more religious parts of Canada. (When I was a graduate psychology student in Newfoundland doing research on handedness, I discovered that several of my “right-handed” subjects were actually left-handers; at school their left hands had been tied behind their backs by zealous nuns.)

The gay children and teachers of my childhood were simply invisible. Two female teachers could live together without raising eyebrows, chiefly because women in those days (especially women teachers) were not generally thought of as sexual persons. Two male “bachelors” living together did tend to be suspect, and so gay men brave enough to live together usually kept their living arrangements quiet. “Sissy” boys and “boyish” girls took a lot of teasing, but most people knew too little about homosexuality to draw any conclusions. These boys and girls were expected to grow up and marry people of the opposite sex. Some of them did, divorcing years later to live with one of their own.

Many of the teachers and parents of my childhood who tried to convert left-handed children into right-handers probably believed they were helping children avoid the stigma of being left-handed, just as many misguided therapists tried to “cure” patients of their homosexuality to enable them to avoid the stigma of being gay in a heterosexual world.

Thanks to advances in our understanding, left-handedness gradually came to be seen as a natural and innate trait. We know now that people do not choose to be more skillful with one hand than the other; they simply are. While researchers are still debating the precise mechanisms that determine hand preference, there is general agreement that left- and right-handedness are just two different (and valid) ways of being. Left-handers are a minority in their own right, not “deviants” from normal right-handedness.

The same is true for sexual orientation. Although we do not yet clearly understand the mechanisms that determine sexual orientation, all indicators point to the conclusion that it results from interactions between genetic, hormonal and possibly other factors, all beyond the individual’s control. Like left-handedness, sexual orientation is an innate trait, not a
choice or “lifestyle.” Like left-handedness, homosexuality is a valid alternative sexuality, not a deviance from “normal” heterosexuality.

As with other minorities, attitudes toward homosexuality are inevitably becoming more liberal, at least in Canada. A recent poll, commissioned by the B.C. Teachers’ Federation, found that almost 70 per cent of B.C. residents think students should be taught in school to accept homosexuals and treat them as they would other people. (Twenty per cent said homosexuality should be discouraged, 9 per cent said they didn’t know and 3 per cent refused to answer.) These results indicate that overt bigotry toward homosexuality is increasingly limited to religious extremists. The Surrey school trustees who voted against having gay and lesbian resource materials in schools are probably at about the same stage of cultural evolution as were the Newfoundland nuns who tied children’s left hands behind their backs 40 years ago.

Even so, I’m grateful that they’re further along the path of enlightenment than their predecessors in medieval Europe, who burned many left-handers and homosexuals at the stake. Being born in the late 20th century was a wise move on the part of my son and daughter. In some things, timing is everything.

NOTES AND DEFINITIONS

Modern readers may have trouble accepting that there was once a strong prejudice against left-handed people. Parents and educators trying to reform such children were acting out of more than a desire to make life easier for the children. One example of how left-handedness had bad associations is the fact that the Latin word for left is “sinister,” which now means evil in English. Many cultures still have such associations.

STRUCTURE AND TECHNIQUE

Johnson uses the technique of comparison and contrast throughout the article. She sets up the comparison in her introduction, by linking left-handedness and homosexuality as both being genetic traits. She explores the attitudes towards left-handedness in one paragraph and then contrasts them with homosexuality in the next. Paragraph 7 talks about both traits, and she returns to that pattern in the last two paragraphs, her conclusion. The comparison/contrast method requires the proximity of the two items so the reader can grasp what is different or similar immediately.
Johnson uses the personal examples of her son and daughter and her own experiences growing up to illustrate her points. Then she leads out to a general, encompassing discussion.

**TOPICS FOR DISCUSSION AND WRITING**

1. Is the title effective? Note how the essay ends with a repetition of “timing is everything.”
2. Homosexuality has often been called a “lifestyle choice.” Some people think that it can be “cured.” Has scientific evidence that is in fact biological led to our society’s growing acceptance of homosexuality? Discuss.
3. Why are human beings so prejudiced against minorities? What is needed to change such beliefs? Why has our acceptance of prejudice changed so much in the last two generations?
4. Is bigotry and prejudice tied to religious extremism? Discuss.