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**OUT OF THE CLOSETS: VOICES
OF GAY LIBERATION**

Lavender Culture

Edited and with New Introductions by
KARLA JAY and ALLEN YOUNG

Foreword by
CINDY PATTON



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Gay Youth and the Question of Consent

by Gerald Hannon

It's easy to forget that you're talking about people. The topics can sound pretty academic: age of consent, the sexuality of young people, the concept of consent as it applies to prepubertal children, the idea of innocence . . . they're themes for debate, they can be hotly and variously contested. Psychiatrists used to do the same sort of thing when they talked about gay people. Facts and figures. Examples drawn from case histories reduced to their clinical bones. We don't let them do that anymore. We let them know that when they talk publicly about gay people, when they hold their forums on human sexuality, gay people had better be present. We are not just an interesting variation of human sexuality or whatever which can be debated as if the process did not influence the real lives of the real people with a multitude of joys and problems, needs to fulfill, and gifts to bring.

When we talk about the age-of-consent laws, it's easy to forget that we are debating an issue which crucially affects the lives of millions of people in Canada. People who must lead furtive and dangerous sexual lives until they reach the age of twenty-one. Not a few have six or seven years to go. We want you to meet some of them.

Jim is fourteen. He's taller than most fourteen-year-olds. He's as tall as I am. I am frankly astonished. I try to remember myself at fourteen—I don't think I'd even managed pimples, and I may, just may, have worked up to my first successful jerk-off before I'd reached my fifteenth birthday but I spent most of my early years acting out adventure stories in the woods.

"I've grown up so quickly. . . ." Jim knows it, but he doesn't say it with a sigh for the bittersweet delights of a missed youth—rather the excitement of someone who managed to avoid some of the compulsory silliness of

growing up: boy scouts, high school proms, comic books, and the Waltons on TV.

He came out just after his fourteenth birthday. Not, of course, that he hadn't known he was gay for as long as he can remember. So many of the young people I talked to in preparation for this article expressed the same thing—none of them had any doubts about the fact they were gay, and a good three-quarters of them never felt they were anything else. When they were eight, nine, and ten they didn't have a word for it. Now they do. They're gay.

It's crowded in the clubs. And not just the gay ones. There's a glitter "bi" crowd in Toronto, and they make their way to places like David's on Phipps Street. It's packed, and it's noisy, and it's smart, and it's not surprising that a fourteen-year-old might just get separated from his seventeen-year-old sister in the crush and suddenly find himself chatting with an attractive, friendly man of about twenty-four. He touched Jim's hand. That was all that happened that night. They exchanged phone numbers and promised to meet again, and did, and had sex together, but it was the first touch that remains in the memory. The guilt was there—no doubt of that. He couldn't pin down ever being told it was wrong but he *knew* what he was supposed to feel about being a faggot. But as he said: "The urge to do it was stronger."

Jim's mother knows he's gay. So does his sister. But the first person to hear about all this was his Big Brother—not his sibling, of course, but the man from the organization that befriends and helps young boys. That organization has an antigay policy but Jim was lucky. When he was ten years old, he told his Big Brother that he liked guys. There was no rush to enroll him on a hockey team, or buy him a toy rifle, or trot him off to a psychiatrist. He was told that all boys go through a homosexual phase, and that was that. But four years later, Big Brother took him to see the gay movie *A Very Natural Thing*. And went with him to a disco where Jim danced with a man for the first time in his life. He also pressed Jim to tell his mother—"It's about time she should know." So he did. She wasn't broken up, they discussed the whole thing, and she has come to accept him fully as he is. Which has made just about everything a

lot easier—from taking many of the tensions out of Jim's life to making it possible to bring his gay friends home, or stay out all night if he wants to.

Jim is blond, with pale, clear skin, vivacious eyes, and a wide, expressive mouth. Pretty, in fact. Which didn't exactly make it easy for him at school, but did make him an instantaneous success as a drag performer at two of the biggest gay clubs in town. He's done three shows, but doesn't think he'll do any more. At first, he found the excitement and attention fabulously rewarding. It was an unadulterated, good old startime thrill to walk into a room and know that everyone there knew who you were. But even after only three shows he found the atmosphere superficial and bitchy and he doesn't think he'll go back.

I reel back a little from this one. He's gone into drag and out again, he's already a little tired of the clubs, and I have to keep reminding myself that this articulate young man with the developing gay consciousness is fourteen years old. Seven years away from being legally able to do anything but masturbate.

There's another side to coming out at fourteen.

"Hey, sweetie, I like your eye shadow!"

"When are we gonna see your new dress?"

It isn't easy, especially if you're the only one in your school who's gay identified. Jim is in grade nine, and he hasn't actually told anyone he's gay, which is probably smart considering the kinds of things that have happened to Anthony and Gary, two fellows who did let the school know, and whose stories we'll hear elsewhere in this article. But a lot of students have guessed about Jim, or maybe it's just the fact that he doesn't like sports, or that he dresses carefully and well—in the sexually turbulent adolescent years it doesn't take much to brand you as a sexual loner, a social pariah.

It's been too much for Jim. He's alone in that school. Not, of course, that there aren't other gay students. And teachers. The fact I find most disturbing about his whole narrative is the reference to two of his teachers. They're gay. And to their (and his) astonishment, he met them in one of the clubs. Neither of them acknowledges his existence now—if they pass him in the halls they stare straight

ahead. No greetings, not even eye contact. They're frightened, of course. Theirs is a precarious situation. But they could give Jim support and encouragement, they could try (at least) to cut down on some of the verbal harassment he has to endure from other students. He hasn't gotten that kind of support. So in May of this year he stopped attending classes. He's still in school, but only to the extent that he gets assignments from his teachers and hands the work to them. He wants to go to the university, and says he intends to stick it out in school. He's going to need all the support and encouragement he can get.

For Anthony and Gary the situation seems worse. But at least they've got each other. Even that seems insufficient, sometimes, to the challenge of being openly and admittedly gay at the age of fifteen in a Catholic school for boys.

"I hate Monday mornings."

It's a heartfelt and bitter statement from Anthony, and all the more startling because he's generally so vivacious, good-natured, and optimistic. Or maybe it's a naïveté—both admit to having been a bit naïve, which is a fairly reliable indicator that a certain ingenuousness still lingers. In any case, both of them were popular young men in their school with their ordinary share of friends and acquaintances until Anthony stood up in class and said that he wasn't going to support Premier Davis in the then-upcoming provincial election because "he's against gay liberation." By noon it was all over the school. And since then they've had to endure harassment which has driven them to the edge of despair. No one will dare be seen talking to them on a one-to-one basis. They are taunted ceaselessly. They find obscene things written about them everywhere—on their lockers, on the blackboard when they enter the room, in their books. Gym class is hell. Anthony's gotten into a few fights. And won them. *That* made a difference. As hateful as that use of violence may seem, it also appears to be the only way to earn a bit of respect and freedom from harassment.

Again, there are gay teachers in that school. Anthony and Gary are sure of at least three among the men. But

the story's the same. No recognition, and support of any kind is just an unlikely fantasy.

Anthony: "My school life was nothing to turn to as a source of enjoyment. I was an open person and the other kids thought it only natural that I be treated very poorly because of it. Later in the year I and another open gay had extensive talks about being scapegoats, and how this might change if some positiveness was projected by the administration. It never went anywhere, but it might next year because one of the administrators has a gay son and he's in that school and this might give the push that is needed."

How did it happen? What changed the ordinary pattern of adolescence for these two young men so that at fifteen they could stand up in class and say, in effect, "I'm gay"?

They'd already had sex with each other. They'd been friends for years, and the sex just seemed a natural and happy outgrowth of their friendship. Not that there wasn't some guilt—they hadn't grown up cut off from society at large—but it was manageable, it did not kill joy.

What really bothered was the feeling that they were alone. Yes, they had each other. But was there anyone else?

They found *The Body Politic* in a downtown bookstore. Somehow they always knew the answer lay "downtown." Of course, they weren't aware of the existence of the "ghetto," so downtown meant a lot of wandering up, down, and around Yonge Street waiting for something to happen.

They cruised that copy of the paper as they'll probably never cruise another man. Should they pick it up? If so, who should do it? And who should actually pay for it? And most troublesome of all, who should take it home?

They bought it. Took it to a restaurant and went from page to page in a state of mounting excitement. They were dazzled, experiencing a feeling that no other minority in the world can know. Heterosexuals never really understand what we mean when we talk of the discovery of our not being alone. They have never been alone, not in that sense anyway. Many, many of us grow up enduring the certainty that there is no one else in the world who feels

as we do. The discovery that our cities and towns and villages are bursting with us, that there we are beside you on the bus, and teaching you at school and giving you a parking ticket, and—final surprise—marching past you on the street and calling you to join us; that discovery is one of the great epiphanies of our lives. Soon they had made contact with the gay movement.

Anthony: "... I met some gay people which before had been just a day and night fantasy. From here my world changed to one more like that which I had dreamed was possible. I became close to a gay activist who has put new questions and new ideas into my mind. This is helping me create a future that will be of a higher quality and more enjoyable."

Both young men began to cover ground that many of us spent years approaching. They told their parents within a month or two. Unfortunately, they didn't react the way Jim's mother had, and the story of their family confrontations is a combination of the ludicrous and the terrifying.

"If I'd known you'd turn out like this I'd never have had you."

That's Anthony's father talking. The boys were forbidden to see each other, or be out after ten, or use the phone unless Mom and Dad knew who was being called. Gary's father is from Ireland. He began to rant about going back—he was not going to stay in a country that had corrupted his son.

Anthony: "When I told my parents, they became very reactionary. All the freedoms, friendships, and rights guaranteed to all the rest were cut off. That occurred between intervals of my father thinking or praying that his son was straight."

There were fine, crazy moments as well. There was Anthony's mother coming into his bedroom during a thunderstorm and saying: "That's God talking, son. He's saying 'go the other way, go the other way . . .'" There was the pride and relief expressed by both sets of parents when their sons began getting calls from two young women. And when they began dating them, there was no suggestion that they should be home before a certain hour. The

parents were completely unaware, of course, that the two "girls" were two young lesbians that the fellows had befriended, and that those downtown dates usually meant the Manatee or a Gate dance for Anthony and Gary, and a romantic outing for the two women.

"Things are better now because I lie to them." Anthony tells his parents what they want to hear. He gains some freedom, the house is relatively calm, and a married couple have pretty much lost their son. The fine irony is that they think they've won him back, that his homosexuality was just a "stage" like all the books said. If it's a stage, it's a stage in the process of disentangling oneself from one's family, and maybe it's finally a good thing that the process has begun.

Anthony and Gary were perhaps less careful than was wise. There were moments of grand and exuberant carelessness. Playing footsy together in full view of everyone while rehearsing with the school orchestra. Or running about like madcaps on the school lawn tossing freshly cut grass at each other while the school machos sat knowingly on the side lines. They earned themselves a lot of hassles trying to be free and open, and until there's some sort of organized gay group operating inside the high schools, it's probably smartest to be careful and discreet. Being out is probably just not worth the agony, most of which has to be endured alone.

* * *

Carol and Sarah are lesbians, are lovers. They're older than the men I talked to—Carol is nineteen and Sarah is seventeen—but Sarah has felt that she was gay since she was eleven, and when Carol was six she thought it odd that only men and women should kiss.

Their stories are very different from the men's. Less dramatic certainly, less painful, and much more encouraging. Different stories partly because they were two very political young people (Carol was attending antiwar demonstrations when she was in grade eight), and different because they were surrounded by talk of feminism and sis-

terhood and in that atmosphere lesbianism as a topic seemed almost respectable. Why even Kate Millett...

What struck me in their narrative was the almost complete absence of any sort of guilt. Sarah admitted that for a short time she rather wished she weren't gay, but that was largely because she felt it would separate her from people, that gays were just a tiny minority and she would spend most of her life alone. That misconception vanished rather painlessly after she'd read the special lesbian issue of *Off Our Backs*, an American feminist periodical. It was clear to her then that there were lots and lots of us, but more important than sheer numbers was the fact that there was a strong group of lesbians who were organizing and trying to do something about their second-class status.

There would still be the occasional jarring moment. The time she attended a discussion of lesbianism at a women's center, for example. No one knew she was gay, and it was painful to hear lesbians discussed as "them," never as "we," and to hear women debate whether or not the presence of lesbians would give the center "a bad name." But an incident like that was the exception. Sarah came out almost effortlessly, and I was envious—it was so close to the way things ought to be.

She had her first sexual experience when she was fifteen, and that was with Carol.

Carol got used to being "different" at a very early age. Her family moved around a lot, and she was always the "new girl" in school. She was odd too in that she was always more concerned with American atrocities in Vietnam, or industrial pollution, or a host of other social and political issues than she was with clothes or dates or cheerleading or any of the other traditional outlets for teenage girls.

When she was fifteen she joined the Young Socialists. That was four years ago, and even at that time gay liberation was a topic that the group discussed. She came to lesbianism as a legitimate topic for debate, a controversial issue certainly, but one her political peers felt constrained to come to terms with.

She met her first male and her first female lover through

the YS. That too is envy-making because finding one's partners in one's ordinary world is an experience unknown to most gay people. Heterosexuals take it for granted that they can flirt with, date, seduce, befriend, marry, have sex with people chosen from those they meet at work or at school or anywhere else. That has not been our option in the past. We met in the ghetto. And certainly we stayed there. That happens less now. And for Carol and people like her it never happened and that will be one of the things that will distinguish this new generation from ours.

Every person out of the closet makes it easier for someone else to come out, and in people like Carol we glimpse the process of the future.

It is not, of course, the millenium quite yet. One of Carol's close friends simply stopped talking to her when she discovered Carol was a lesbian. And she hasn't told her parents. She's a practical woman. Her parents are supporting her right now, and will continue to do so as long as she's attending school. She doesn't want to jeopardize that support, and since she's uncertain of their reactions to having a lesbian for a daughter she's keeping it quiet, for the moment at least.

Carol is also aware that not everyone's entrance into life will be as easy as hers. She worked on a telephone distress line for a gay group in western Canada and she remembers, week after week, the uncertain voices of young people, thirteen-, fourteen-, fifteen-year-olds, waiting until night-fall, waiting until Mom and Dad were in bed, waiting for the chance to dial out there somewhere and speak, just *speak*, to one other gay person. It hurt. Because there isn't much you can legally tell these people to do. Except wait. "You're fifteen? Well, yes, you can attend meetings . . . but don't get any ideas. You've got six years to go."

* * *

"At least you won't get pregnant."

Sarah's father could only see the positive aspects of lesbianism through heterosexual eyes, and they were inadequate to the task. But he was more ignorant than antagonistic, so was her mother, and both have grown in

awareness and understanding since then. Mother told some of her friends, and experienced the shock of having one of them come out to her as a result. Every one "out" makes it easier somehow, somewhere for someone else. . . .

I asked Sarah and Carol if they felt age-of-consent laws should be abolished. They said yes.

During the preparations for this article I talked to dozens of young people ranging in age from eleven to nineteen. They're not difficult to find. They're on the streets, they're in the clubs, they're in existing gay organizations and they're creating their own. Everyone I talked to is enjoying a full sexual life, and that is why none of the names used in this article are the real names of the young people I talked to.

They are all lawbreakers. Every time two fifteen-year-olds, every time two twenty-year-olds go home together after a dance, or a picnic, or an outing on their bikes, they are breaking the law. It does not matter that they know what they're doing, that they have freely chosen their partner, that they may be in love—they are breaking the law. It does not matter that they may be old enough to drink, drive a car, join the army and learn to kill—they are breaking the law. It does not matter that they are being encouraged to make responsible decisions concerning their lives at school or at home or in the community at large—they are breaking the law.

What they do together is called gross indecency. Think about that for a minute. Gross indecency. It means two young bodies lovingly entwined.

"Everything's changed for the good for me." We are seated in a circle in a brightly painted room at the Church Street Community Centre in Toronto. This is a meeting of the Gay Youth Group. It is early evening on a Tuesday, light (and a lot of street noise) pour through the large half-open windows, someone has just gone out for Cokes.

The speaker, Bob, is letting us know how his life has changed in the last six weeks, in the time he's been out of the closet. It's a relaxed, casual atmosphere, and Bob finds it easy to be open, easy to tell us about how not so long ago he'd been a "regular guy" with a girlfriend and the

feeling that he ought to think of getting married someday. . . .

Meeting Edward, one of the organizers of the group, changed all that. He's gay now, realizes he always was, has let his straight roommates know. He's having a good time. Things look pretty bright to Bob.

There were five of us meeting that night, all but one under twenty and all male. The group would like to attract young lesbians, but they don't know how to go about it. It's much easier to advertise to young gay men, and they're getting their first leaflets ready to distribute at David's, at the Manatee, and the other clubs and bars in Toronto's gay ghetto.

I sit off to the side, observing, taking notes. As a meeting it is less formal, less structured than I am used to, than I have come to learn expedites and simplifies the business of keeping a group moving. And I have to resist an impulse to step in and say no, no, do it this way, select these priorities, put Edward in the chair and ask Bob to be secretary and you'll find that meetings become much more efficient. Perhaps at some point that sort of input from an older gay would be appreciated, but not tonight. Perhaps not for a while because certainly one of the articulated aims of the organization is to provide a sympathetic, warm, and supportive atmosphere for young gays coming out of the closet. That, rather than being very "political" and goal-oriented.

I think it works. One of them was there that night. John is seventeen, shy, and tells us that we are the first open gay people that he's ever spoken to. It's a "coming out" for John, and the others chat lightly with him, gently drawing him out, finding out what he's interested in, where he goes to school, what aspects of the group he might like to participate in.

They have an ambitious program. Eventually they'll be a group consisting of smaller committees which will undertake the main work of the organization—a political committee to lobby for things like the abolition of age-of-consent laws, a discussion committee to help young gays new to the scene talk out their feelings, a social committee to plan dances and other social events. . . .

How did all this start? I asked Edward and Donald, the two organizers, how it all began.

They met in the sexuality group organized by Huntley Youth Services, a Toronto organization (formerly Big Sisters) that works with troubled young people in the city. There were about eight young men in the sexuality group, all were gay and having trouble coming to terms with it, but had the advantage of meeting under the guidance of George Hislop, president of the Community Homophile Association of Toronto, and a sympathetic but straight female social worker.

During their discussion it occurred to Donald that this sort of thing was needed on a larger scale than could be provided by Huntley, and it was the sort of thing that young people could and should do themselves. He talked it over with Edward, who agreed that it was a good idea, and sometime around the end of March the group held its first meeting. They met in Edward's apartment, and continued to do so until a month ago when they applied for, and got, permission to meet at the Church Street Community Centre.

It was not easy to get. They had to obtain letters of endorsement from at least a half dozen agencies and individuals. Liberal Member of Parliament Margaret Campbell spoke on their behalf. So did Toronto alderperson Dan Heap. And Allan Sparrow, another city alderperson. Even with that prestigious support the vote was close: seven for, six against with one abstention.

It was certainly a victory of sorts: gay people winning the right to use community facilities as any other legitimate group could. But there were drawbacks. The Centre insisted that the lower age limit for membership had to be sixteen. That cuts out a lot of young people. It cuts out Anthony, Gary, Jim, and many like them. But the group has decided to live with it for the time being. After all, some board members wanted a psychiatrist and a social worker present at all Gay Youth Group meetings! At least they avoided having to put up with that.

Before I left that evening. I asked them what they felt about age-of-consent laws. Two were uncertain, but certainly felt the age of consent for gay sex should be at

least lowered to equal that for straights. Three of the five promptly said "abolish them."

It surprised me somewhat that not all of these young men would advocate the complete abolition of such archaic legislation. Then I realized that's why the group is there, and that's why it is important.

Simply being young does not endow you with a perspective on social change. That has to be learned. Consciousness-raising is crucial. Together, among your peers, in the heat of debate—that's one of the ways it happens. And if the Gay Youth Group isn't prepared quite yet to demand an abolition to age-of-consent laws, that's all right. But it's one of the things they're preparing for.

I have tried not to sentimentalize these young people and their plight. It would be easy, it would be very much in the tradition of our attitudes to the young, and it would cheapen and demean their struggle. If we see these people as puppies, clumsily—ableit charmingly—playing at life and liberation, if we see their passions as ephemeral, or ignorant, or tedious, if we see their convictions as misplaced or their struggles as idealistic but vain, we become part of the vast conspiracy against them.

There is perhaps nothing quite so destructive of one's self-esteem and one's convictions as not being taken seriously. And that is the final effect of the sentimental view of young people. It protects us from having to deal with the raw and real emotions and aspirations of people who are not just preparing for life, but who are living, living now. It protects us and deadens them—deadens them because all their urgent sound, all their lived and living fury signifies precisely nothing to us. At least, nothing more than a rather inept but charming imitation of what grown-ups carry off so much more successfully.

If I have learned any one thing from these young people, it is the breadth of their disenfranchisement, and their bitter awareness of it. Theirs are lives circumscribed by the restrictions of home and church and state. One of the most deeply felt, and certainly the most resented, is the restriction placed upon their right to full use of their bodies.

Nothing can persuade me that these young people I

talked to, these thirteen-, fourteen-, and fifteen-year-olds, should not be having sex with one another. They want to. And they are. Furtively, when they can steal the time, when they can find the place, when they can forget they are breaking the law and putting themselves and their partners in danger.

They know their love harms neither themselves nor society, and they have only contempt for the laws and attitudes which would try to prevent them.

The age-of-consent law. It is a law we must fight to abolish. That we must be *seen* to fight to abolish. A fight that must involve the energies and talents of young people themselves. They know it. And they're telling us. As Anthony puts it, "This past year has been a different one from years past, but it has given me new goals and shown me what gayness means in an antigay society. It has also shown me how much work is really necessary to change the destiny of gay people and society."

* * *

Why is childhood necessary? That seems an odd question. It seems odd to question a fact—like asking why four is necessarily the sum of two and two. Four is the *definition* of the sum of two groups of two, childhood is the *definition* of a particular period in human life history and that is that. Nothing simpler. Childhood is a word which describes what we all see, describes real and significant stages in the development of a human being. We have a lot of other words, in fact, which appear to describe equally verifiable and significant stages in the development of a human being. We have a lot of other words, in fact, which appear to describe equally verifiable and significant steps in all our lives: infant, child, preteen, youngster, adolescent, teenager, mid-teen. . . . Again that seems to make sense—we can all remember being a child, it was different from being a newly pubescent early teen, which was different again from being a full-fledged teenager. We were expected to behave differently at each of these stages, and certainly *we* felt that our needs and expectations varied considerably from age group to age group. We

even insisted on dressing differently in order to mark the change from one significant age level to another. When I was growing up, a teenager would rather have developed terminal acne than have been seen wearing braces instead of a belt to hold up his pants.

That was not always the case. It is not the case everywhere today. Some years ago I spent a considerable amount of time living with an isolated group of Mexican peasant farmers. It was a small village of some 200 people, and life revolved totally around agriculture—the simple necessity of growing enough food to eat. I worked in the community, became very much part of it, and at first imagined that I saw the groupings of my own society mirrored there—after all, I saw infants and children and teenagers, young adults, mature individuals, and so on. But I soon ran into problems trying to refer to those distinctions in conversation, and I realized they didn't make the rigid distinctions found in our society. They didn't need to.

I have been glancing through Philippe Aries' book, *Centuries of Childhood*, and discover that in European society as well the idea of childhood had no particular impact or reality until the fourteenth century or so. And even then it took a few hundred years more before it developed the lineaments which we recognize today: the innocence, the graceful, helpless, or picturesque qualities. Medieval artists portrayed children as miniature men or women, and it seems they did that because children were either little men or women or they were nothing. They wore the same clothing as adults did, they mingled freely with them in every aspect of their lives, they did the same work to the extent that they were physically capable, and they did amounts of work which we would assume today would be beyond the capabilities of a mere child. I was continually astonished, for example, at the difficult, back-breaking tasks which my Mexican village expected its children to perform.

Why is childhood necessary? It is a more comprehensible question now. It wasn't always necessary. And even today, the many subdivisions of preadulthood

do not correspond to any social reality in the sierras of Mexico, and very likely in other peasant societies as well.

The categories of childhood—and by that I mean infancy, childhood itself, adolescence, and so on—seem necessary as a result of the technological sophistication of a society, and of its economic organization.

We live in a technologically advanced, capitalist society. A capitalist society which produces and partly trains its future workers in social units which we call families. It seems to me that a technologically sophisticated society requires a protracted youth. There is no way a young man of thirteen or fourteen could amass the knowledge necessary to work as an aerospace engineer. (But he *could* work as a janitor. And we have ways of shuttling some young people out of adolescence and into early adulthood because our society needs a certain number of janitors, clerks, garbage-men, etc.) It also seems to me that a capitalist society profits from a protracted youth. One of the dazzling things about capitalism is the way in which it isolates groups of people for the purpose of marketing items to them which appeal to characteristics of that group which other groups are presumed not to have. There are a number of different clothing styles which are appropriate only during very specific times periods—no sixteen-year-old would wear what a thirteen-year-old would wear who would be appalled at the suggestion that he wear what his ten-year-old brother is wearing. There are games and toys which are to be used only by specific age groups. Books are graded. Even certain foods are deemed the province of one or another distinct age bracket. It is all very profitable, but it seems to be our economic system taking advantage, in its marvellous little way, of a time period which our society finds necessary for other reasons. (I would speculate that a society even more technologically refined than ours would no longer need childhood. If machines do most of the work, including running and reproducing themselves, an extended childhood would seem unnecessary. We might yet duplicate the medieval mingling of all the ages.)

Is all this really necessary? We seem to have strayed a long way from Anthony and Gary and Carol and the pungent realities of their lives. Yet in a discussion of age

of consent, and whether it should be eighteen or fourteen or there at all, or whether children or teens or preteens should have sex, it is important to realize that we are being forced to deal with categories that are largely artificial, a result of the way our society is organized. It seems to clarify the issue if we insist on seeing childhood as a *process*, a learning process basically, and one that intersects as frequently as possible with adult lives, rather than a series of plateaus which, once overcome, leave one stranded in adulthood. In effect, I am saying that childhood is a concept with which we should refuse to deal. It is *their* concept, really, and is generated by an organization of society which is not organized in our best interests, nor in the best interests of most people. It is difficult to change our way of looking at people who are not adults, because the various categories into which they now fit seem so natural and right. But I think we must. It helps to clarify why it seems as foolish to deny to a young individual something it both wants and can cope with as it is to deny to an adult the right to play hopscotch.

* * *

Why is sexual childhood necessary? By that I mean why is it necessary to maintain the myth that children are not sexual beings? It is maintained, after all, in the face of rather massive evidence to the contrary. Infants in their cribs have orgasms—Kinsey documented them in babies less than a year old. Six-year-olds masturbate, and most “liberal” Spock books are even saying it’s all right. We have our own memories, the testimony of our friends, and if we interact with children at all we have but to use our eyes—children are sexual beings. I think their sexual lives have a different value to them than ours do to us—they do not seem as linked to the debilitating passions of the heart—but the outlines are sufficiently similar so that we can recognize what is going on. In spite of all that, most people would rather believe that children have no sexual desires, and if they are brought face to face with the evidence they feel that it’s all happening too soon, that the kid ought to be into more “wholesome” things like

camping or basketball, something that will work up a very nonverbal sweat.

On the surface, it would seem that these attitudes are the result of two archaic concepts which still linger in our society—the idea of the innocence of children, and the idea of the potential harmfulness of sex. Sex is seen to be so linked to the most explosive human passions, so likely to bring out the worst in human venality and duplicity that a mere child is considered simply incapable of surviving such a situation. It is too innocent—it will be taken in. It is too defenseless—it will be harmed. Better, therefore, to wait until it is wise in the ways of the world before it is allowed to grapple with so muscled an opponent.

If that were the case, if society were merely laboring under certain misconceptions, then the solution would seem to be to simply correct these misconceptions. One would likely go about doing that in the traditional way—through the dissemination of correct information.

The fact that that doesn’t seem to work suggests to me that there are other basic reasons for the maintenance of the myth of sexual childhood. Let me give you an example of how the “misinformation” theory breaks down. I have read a number of popular sexual advice magazines, and from time to time they deal with the question of how parents should deal with the situation of discovering their child has been “molested.” Now by “molested” they do not mean the child has been raped or threatened or psychologically coerced—they mean the child has been discovered in some sexual relationship or other with an older individual. The advice to parents usually starts off rather well: don’t panic, your child has not been harmed; don’t call the police unless you really want to punish the adult because it’s likely to traumatize the child far more than the sexual incident; don’t punish the child; the child is very likely to have initiated the event and may even want to continue it. The article usually finishes by suggesting ways of preventing this sort of thing from happening in the future. That is astonishing. It requires a dismembering of the logical process. The evidence cited—the harmlessness of the activity, the fact that the child may well have initiated the scene and was certainly instru-

mental in perpetuating it—would tend to lead one to the conclusion that if the child's explorations were not to be actively encouraged, they should at least be tolerated. The advice, however, is to stop it, and ways of doing so are suggested.

It seems to me that the author of such advice has digested the facts that children are not "innocent," and that sex is not intrinsically harmful. If that is the case, there must be some reason why he is avoiding the implications of those certainties, or why he is refusing to promulgate them.

I think the myth of sexual childhood is maintained because of the way our society is organized, and because it is in the interests of certain groups to keep it organized that way.

I mentioned earlier that we live in a capitalist society which produces and partly trains its future workers in social units called families. I hate to use words like "capitalist" and "family"—they are buzz words that turn off just about everybody because they usually signal a flight into rather boring theoretical domains. But they're still useful—I want people to note at this point that we live in a society which produces primarily for profit (the profit of a relatively small number of people) and not for use, and the social unit which makes capitalism easy is the family. The family provides the unpaid labor of one person—the woman—to guarantee the continuance of the underpaid labor of another—the man. Children learn the naturalness and inevitability of this arrangement. Whereas in reality it is a limited view of the broad possibilities of human relationships, it is seen as safe, correct, "natural."

It is my contention that sex is a disruptive element within this particular arrangement. Sex is a centrifugal force which leads one outward into the community. It is exploration oriented. It can lead to the discovery that there is no particular need to relate to *one* individual on a life-long basis, that one can relate to many individuals, that there might be a variety of satisfying, loving ways for people to group themselves together. Happiness could be something other than living with one other person of the opposite sex for the rest of one's life. The earlier you be-

gin sexual exploration, the sooner you discover the possibility of more broadly based human relationships, the sooner you discover that your family is not necessarily the only locus of human warmth and affection.

This society must see sex as a centripetal force, one which binds the family together rather than contributes to its dissolution. Sex, therefore, must be seen as legitimate only within the confines of the family. That is a tall order. I think sex is a very strong centrifugal force—given its own way it spins people wildly out and into the community. That is not to be discovered or admitted, and the frightful problem of persuading people that sex is a binding, cohesive force requires the grotesque solution of preventing people from having sex during that period when they are likely to discover the opposite is true. That is why sexual childhood is necessary. Biting into the sexual apple will lead them right out of the familial Eden. The age-of-consent laws are there to keep the apples out of reach. To a large extent they work. And when they don't, and young people make their forays into sexual territory, they become so crippled by guilt that the expedition becomes not so much a voyage of discovery as an accidental holiday. One returns from holidays, and what one returns to is the family.

More and more gay people are opposed to the continuance of the family as it is presently constituted. We are always babbling on about how it distorts human relationships, how it exploits women, how it has no room for gays. I wonder sometimes if that disturbs people, people who see us attacking what appears to be one of the few remaining centers of human warmth in a society grown increasingly cold and uncaring. I think we ought to be clearer than we are in explaining that an attack on the family is *not* an attack on loving ways of relating, it is *not* a plea for a society organized solely around considerations of the equitable distribution of wealth. It is a statement that there are a number of ways of relating in a loving manner that cannot exist in the confines of the family as it is. It is because we say those loving ways of relating are more important than the family that we feel the family has to go. I sometimes feel we have *some* warm memories

of family life only because the human capacity for loving has exceeded the family's capacity to strangle it.

I have wanted people to think about two things in this article: that the problem of children and sex is something of an artificial one because the very concept of childhood is somewhat of a fabrication, and that childhood must be seen as a nonsexual time because it is dangerous to the way society is presently constituted to see it otherwise. I believe that means we have to behave in a certain way vis-à-vis young people. I believe that means we have to proselytize.

Such a dirty word. Proselytize. It's what they're always afraid we're going to do if too much freedom is extended to us, it's the horrifying probability if an openly gay person ever becomes a teacher, or a counselor, or a Big Brother. We're gonna turn all the kids into little fruits. We're sexual vampires—we aim lower than the jugular but the result is the same—our victims join the world of the giving head, the twilight world of the homosexual.

It is not true. It is one of the great disappointments of life that one cannot produce a homosexual by simply pawing a heterosexual, no matter what its age. By proselytize, of course, I mean reaching young gay people with the message that gay is good, that they are not diseased or sinful, that they should get out of their families as soon as they can, that they should organize with other gay people, that it's all right to be having sex. If we don't proselytize with our message *they're* going to with theirs and we will have further generations of gay people who wait until their twenties before they start to live. Gay people, and gay people in gay movements, have not seen proselytization as a priority, partly because the concept has such bad P.R., and partly because other aspects of the gay struggle have seemed—and rightly so, I think—to be of more immediate importance. The situation is changing though. I think it's time to reconsider.

During the recent gay conference in Toronto, the matter of age-of-consent laws surfaced for reconsideration. Their abolition is one of the demands of the National Gay Rights Coalition (NGRC), but there were forces at the conference who wanted to see that demand removed, and

replaced with the demand that age-of-consent laws be the same for heterosexuals and homosexuals. The interesting thing was that this proposal was not moved by a conservative group—it was urged on us by Gays of Ottawa, one of the most progressive, action-oriented gay organizers in the country.

Their concern was quite understandable. As the group in the nation's capital, theirs was the responsibility of making the policies of the gay organizations of Canada clear to Members of Parliament and various official organizations located in Ottawa. Their experience tended to be that the whole program of the Canadian gay movement was discredited by the inclusion of that *one* demand: the abolition of age of consent. They discovered that as soon as someone noticed that one phrase rationality went out the window, and they were forced into the position of spending all of their time defending one demand while the others, equally important others, received no attention at all. They have been the butts of insult and derision as a result. It is easy to understand their disillusion. It would seem a simple matter of smart political tactics to water down one demand so that the other nine in your program will gain a fair hearing. It would be tempting to put all that boorishness and bigotry behind you by simply tinkering a little and *still* ending up, after all, with a reasonably progressive program.

It isn't reasonably progressive, though, to ask for something reactionary in its effect. And it isn't reasonably progressive to exclude from the gay movement (by saying, in effect, that we are not interested in their rights) the hundreds of thousands of gay people in this country who happen to be under twenty-one. But one is still left with the strategic question of how to publicly handle this very explosive proposition.

The answer is to proselytize. Aggressively so. We must try to ensure that young people are attracted to the gay movement in large numbers. It won't be an easy task, considering the social barriers that are erected between gay people and the young. And there may even be legal problems surrounding the too active solicitation of the underaged. But certainly one thing that could be done is that

every public pronouncement of the gay movement, every poster and handbill, every speech should make it clear that young people are wanted and needed, that they have a crucial part to play in the struggle for gay rights in this country. We should not shrink from interacting with young people on a one-to-one basis—that is what makes people feel welcome.

In the final analysis, the demand for the abolition of age-of-consent laws must come from young people themselves. When we demand it, it can be dismissed as the self-serving craziness of a group that simply wants to get its hands on a lot of hot, young bodies. The demand must be taken seriously when the voices demanding it are those of the young people of this country. The next time the NGRC brings its demands before the legislature, its contingent should contain a few teenagers, and part of the formalities of introduction should be a mention of one's age. The next time *any* gay group in Canada interacts with *any* official or public body, there ought to be fourteen-, fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds present. And again, introduction ought to include a declaration of one's age.

The question is where to get them. The answer, again, is to proselytize. At present, we do not have organizations that are chock-a-block full of young people. As far as I am aware, Toronto is the only city in Canada that has a gay youth group. To attract young people to the gay movement in large numbers should be the challenge to the next phase of the movement. It is a challenge we have set ourselves simply by placing the abolition of age-of-consent laws among the demands of our national coalition. I do not think we realized what we did when we were very properly added that demand to the list, but we had better start realizing its implications because a failure to do so might result in a bitterly divided national movement.

We must work together. Yet it will only be because young people are seen as a distinct entity within gay groups that we will have much success in our attempts to abolish repressive, ageist legislation. To alter the aphorism: the abolition of age-of-consent laws can only be the work of young people.

IX

Challenging Macho Norms