



## Taking My Music Out of the Closet

By Sean McLennan

I have always been a sucker for those sappy songs that enjoy a certain popularity, but also wide public disdain because they are overplayed and perhaps overly sentimental. The best recent example I can think of is Celine Dion's *My Heart Will Go On* from *Titanic*, which, I think, has passed into realm of "songs one shouldn't admit to listening to". Unfortunately, a huge portion of my CD collection falls into this category and always has ever since *The Greatest Love of All* by Whitney Houston. It was one of her first and most beautiful hits and one of the first that I denied loving. That is a tragedy because it could be an anthem for our community—a litany of strength and courage and confidence. The message is one that we should heed, and now more than ever, use to focus our efforts..

Everybody's searching for a hero  
People need someone to look up to  
I never found anyone to fulfill my needs  
A lonely place to be  
And so I learned to depend on me

Would any out gay person not identify with these words? I think back to my childhood in rural Alberta, the time that I was coming to the realization that I my sexuality was not the norm, and all I remember is a sense of loneliness and alienation. There were no (visibly) gay people on TV; there were no (visibly) gay people in school. Kids called each other "fag" and "dyke" to be sure, but without any real suspicion behind it; gay people probably existed but obviously somewhere else. I guess I felt more denial growing up than real hatred.

I don't mean to say that I didn't have friends—I had lots, and many of them are still around. I also had a very loving and supportive family. In some ways, though, that made being gay harder because there was something to lose. And always there's the knowledge that you're different from those who are closest to you, and the despair of ever finding someone who will understand. Ironically, close friends and family, can be a source of alienation in and of themselves if you feel like you're hiding from them.

What I lacked was not a caring environment—although of course, many gay children growing up lack that as well—but any sense of community of peers, of role models, or of even safe people to talk to. That was not because those people did not exist—in hindsight, I can see some of the opportunities I missed—but because they never broke the silence nor their own denial to acknowledge homosexuality.

And, yes, that has bred in me a very strong sense of independence—I think of Arnold's emotionally wrought words to his mother in *Torch Song Trilogy*: "I have taught myself to sew, cook, fix plumbing, build furniture... I can even pat myself on the back when necessary. All so that I don't have to ask anyone for anything. There's nothing I need from anyone except love and respect and anyone who can't give me those two things has no place in my life." Independence is valuable and one of the great assets of the GLBT community, but I think we can all agree that there are more psychologically healthy ways of building it.

I believe the children are our future  
Teach them well and let them lead the way  
Show them all the beauty they possess inside  
Give them a sense of pride to make it easier

Homosexuality and children, in any contexts, is a sensitive—nay, *explosive* topic. Especially at this point in the gay rights movement. We aren't talking about individuals—responsible adults—any more, we're talking about a demographic that society feels obliged to protect. Even those who are OK with a "live and let live" attitude regarding adults, start getting squeamish when children are involved.

Ironically, both sides of the recent controversies concerning gay parents and gay teachers and gay clergy betray a significantly adult-centric point of view despite their stated concern for children. Let's take gay teachers as an example: the conflict primarily centres around the right of the teacher to be employed regardless of their orientation and the parents' concern that a gay teacher would be a negative role-model for their kids (or at the very least, bring up age-inappropriate issues). In this scenario, there's no acknowledgment of gay youth and needs and their concerns. Ultimately, they are the ones with the most to gain or lose.

One reason behind this, I believe, is that the intuitions about the frequency of

homosexuality need a slight change of perspective. Let's face it, comparatively, there aren't many of us! It's a fact. If you randomly picked someone out of a classroom, there would be a very low chance that person would be gay. So, it's very easy for parents, teachers and administrators to subconsciously dismiss homosexuality as a major concern.

That said, however, the statistics are such that as the class size increases, the chances that there is *not* a gay person in the class drop rapidly to the point where, given a class of twenty-five or thirty, a gay student is practically guaranteed. Which would have more of a psychological impact on a school administration: "one in ten of your students is gay", or "100 percent of your classes has at least one gay child in it".

Being faced with the fact that every single classroom, statistically, has a gay child who will grow up identifying as homosexual, who may be being harassed, and who may feel alienated and alone, I think it would be easier for schools and parents to recognize that having openly gay teachers is an asset—a resource that is in the best interests of their students. A real focus on the children could deal with both issues positively.

The children are not only the future for North American society and culture; the children are our future (with a big rainbow "our"). Being gay is no longer something that you finally face in university or as an adult—teens are coming out younger and younger. I teach at a program for high school students in the summer, and over the last three years, I've had six of my students come out to me. I'm in awe of them because they are stronger, more confident and better socialized at that age than I am now. They inspire hope in me that the problems both within the gay community and without are surmountable.

It's true that, in many cases, gay students in high school are enjoying a freedom that they never have before. Gay support groups are cropping up, and many students can be happily out in school. However, they remain distinctly an exception to the rule and, although we, the adult gay community support such groups once they exist, it seems to me that they arise from the bravery of the students themselves, not from any explicit facilitation on our part.

I think that we are coming to a point where we are capable of targeting teens and the public education system effectively in an effort to improve awareness of GLBT issues. Moreover, I think it's the right target, because healthier gay youth can only mean healthier gay adults.

And if by chance that special place  
That you've been dreaming of  
Leads you to a lonely place  
Find your strength in love

I think that one of the biggest barriers between children and education about homosexual is the word "homosexuality" itself. At least to the extent that the word reflects the widespread understanding that this issue is primarily a sexual one. Elementary school is really where we should be starting to educate children about diversity and discrimination, but no one would disagree that sexuality is an inappropriate topic for children of that age, whether it's homo or hetero. To some extent, it has been true historically that the issue is primarily a sexual one, because until the last few decades it's been all but impossible to maintain a public same-sex relationship. But being gay is fundamentally not about who we want to have sex with, but with whom we want to be intimate, with whom we want to share our lives, and whom we want to love.

The Japanese translation of "homosexual" is *douseiai*—literally "same-gender love". Doesn't that sound much less threatening in the context of children? "Love" is certainly not a topic that is inappropriate at an elementary school age. Perhaps we should move to change the label from "homosexual" to "homoagapao" or "homoamor".

Elementary education may still be way beyond our grasp. But at the very least, we should recognize our obligation to our progeny. Not the progeny that we have necessarily given birth to, but the children who will follow in our footsteps and who will inherit the community that we're building. We are building for the future, but haven't really focused on the children that are our future.

Because the greatest love of all is happening to me  
I found the greatest love of all inside of me  
The greatest love of all is easy to achieve  
Learning to love yourself, it is the greatest love of all

One thing I never really understood about the public disdain for "My Heart Will Go On" and *The Greatest Love of All* or any other of the "songs that you shouldn't admit to listening to"—by dismissing the song, aren't we dismissing the values that it promotes? I guess that's why, regardless of however many times it was played, I could never turn my back on music that tries to uplift the spirit. ▼

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