

Twenty Questions About Homosexuality

Julie Parker Amery,
a Unitarian Universalist

1. Who is a homosexual?

In my mind, a homosexual is someone who is attracted primarily to people of the same gender. By this, I don't mean to imply that gay relationships are all about attraction and sex. Gay relationships naturally involve all the same complexities of straight relationships—love, affection, anger, trust, misunderstandings, insecurities, intimacy, intermittent doldrums.

But the importance of attraction and physical intimacy in love relationships shouldn't be disregarded. Straight people can have intimate, lasting same-gender relationships, just as gays and lesbians can have intimate, lasting relationships with people of the opposite gender. But physical intimacy, in all its many forms, brings two people closer together—it adds another dimension to the relationship, if the relationship is already a strong one. And one can't have honest sexual intimacy if one isn't physically interested.

2. How is homosexuality or heterosexuality determined?

Probably genetically or hormonally. I can't say for sure, but I'm quite certain that it's not something that people choose. It just happens that way. That is, we're born with our orientations.

This question becomes less relevant to me with time. I used to get hopeful whenever I heard about a new study indicating that a person's sexual orientation was genetically- or hormonally-determined. I naively assumed that this would be enough to convince people that it's wrong to oppress gays, lesbians and bisexuals. Like they'd magically say, "okay, you're not *choosing* to be this way, I guess it's okay then!" What a naive, stupid assumption. All one has to

do is look at racial oppression, ableism, sexism, etc. to see how blatantly untrue that is.

A much more meaningful question for people to be asking is, What causes homophobia? That should be the question on everyone's lips.

3. How many homosexuals are there?

Most studies that I've heard quoted say that one in ten persons is gay. I'm not certain what that means, exactly. Does that mean that one in ten is attracted *exclusively* to people of the same sex? *Primarily* to people of the same sex? Are these one in ten self-identified as gay, or identified that way by someone else's standards?

I have no reason not to believe that *at least* one in ten persons is primarily attracted to people of the same gender. I'd say that even more than ten percent of the people I associate with are out gay men or lesbians. But beyond that, things get blurred for me. Where does heterosexuality end and bisexuality begin? Where does bisexuality end and homosexuality begin? My theory is that we're all on a sort of continuum with heterosexuality on one end and homosexuality on the other end. Though the majority identify ourselves as straight or gay, I think that few of us are at the very end of either side of that line. Most of us fall at some point in between. I know a gay man who had a loving, fulfilling, physical relationship with a woman, yet he still identifies himself as gay. Likewise, there are self-identified heterosexuals who occasionally engage in homosexual sex. I went to an all-women's college, and it wasn't uncommon for women to be in lesbian relationships while there, only to "go straight" upon leaving. I was often developing crushes on women—and sometimes still do. One, in college, was just about as strong an attraction as I've had to anybody. I'd think about her and go out of my way to see her and blush when anyone mentioned her name. Does that make me bisexual? I don't identify myself that way, but who can say for sure? Who defines the terms?

4. Is homosexuality healthy?

It's healthy when the person accepts it and accepts him or herself and is able to feel okay about being gay/lesbian/bisexual in spite of society's general bad feeling toward them. It's never healthy for someone to live in denial. It's also not healthy if the person is filled with self-loathing or feels inferior to heterosexuals. But in this case, it's not the homosexuality that's unhealthy—it's society's view of it, and how that quite understandably gets internalized.

I've been hearing a lot lately about "internalized oppression," which I believe is an issue that a lot of gay and lesbian groups are addressing now. I think I can relate to this phenomenon. I've considered myself a feminist since college, yet still I grapple with self-esteem issues that at least partially came from being raised in a society that values men more highly than women. I still bristle a bit when I come into contact with a highly aggressive woman. Intellectually, I'm thinking she's awesome but at the same time, I'm feeling annoyed by her. The feeling that women shouldn't be that aggressive is ingrained in me, though I don't agree with it in my head. My intellect and emotions aren't in sync. I imagine it works that way for some gay men, lesbians and bisexuals. It takes a long time for us to unlearn what we've been raised with, and to move beyond the attitudes that surround us daily.

5. Is homosexuality a matter of choice? Can it be changed?

I believe sexual orientation is something we're born with. But whether we respond authentically to that orientation or not is, I suppose, a choice. Certainly, if a person is born gay, he or she can choose to live the life of a heterosexual. One can deny or hide one's whole life that he or she is gay, lesbian or bisexual. It's not right that a person would have to choose between being disingenuous or being true to oneself but also ostracized, oppressed and unsafe. What kind of a choice is that?

There are probably millions of people out there who have chosen to hide their orientation and I'm sad for them and I'm angry that we make this choice necessary for so many people.

6. What causes homophobia?

Like all institutionalized oppressions, it's caused by fear for the livelihood of our WASP patriarchy. We're resistant to anything that threatens the white-man-in-power model of society. If women don't need men for personal fulfillment, then they probably don't need them for anything. And if men are in relationships with women, then who's going to be controlling the women? It's a world gone topsy-turvy! We can't let this be!

Mind you, I don't think that this is in the consciousness of every individual homophobic. What I think has happened is that because of this patriarchy, we have come to adopt extremely rigid definitions of what a "real" man is and what a "real" woman is. Anyone who steps outside those definitions is a problem, abnormal, or at the very least, weird. From the moment we're born, we're told that men shouldn't cry or women shouldn't show anger. When I *really* stop and think about how restrictions are put on us for something so basic as how we express our emotions, I am completely astounded. It blows me away. It's then that I realize how sexism hurts men as well as women. It's then that my anger turns more towards sadness.

In such a world, how would it be possible for men to love men or women to love women without being scorned, ridiculed and oppressed? They step way outside our neat definitions.

7. Are gay people easily identified?

No. If I asked all my male and female friends to gather in a room and then asked a stranger to identify which were gay and which were straight, I'm certain they couldn't do it.

Still, I make assumptions. When I meet a man with a softness about him, I don't necessarily assume that he's gay, but the question arises in my mind. I don't automatically think, "he must be gay," but I will think, "I wonder if he's gay?" On the other hand, when I meet an assertive, all-about-business type of man, I never wonder, "I wonder if he's

heterosexual?” The question of his sexual orientation simply doesn’t enter into my mind.

It works the exact same way with women who are typically “masculine” by society’s standards, and those who are not.

I’m not proud of the fact that I do this☹it’s me sopping up all these dangerous stereotypes and definitions we create for people ☹but I do it. I have also found myself in conversation with people about the sexual orientation of another person, speculating on whether or not he’s gay or she’s a lesbian. I wonder why we care. Why is this such a compelling question to so many of us? I see myself as completely open-minded about sexual orientation, but I wonder... if am as open-minded as all that, why am I curious about whether certain people are gay or not? It’s a sort of weird fascination with it.

8. Is homosexuality natural?

This question comes from a way of thinking that suggests that gays, lesbians and bisexuals are heterosexuals gone astray. It is based on the assumption that heterosexuals are normal.

Who’s to say that we’re all supposed to be heterosexuals? A lot of people argue that heterosexuality must be normal because it’s procreative. Let me say first of all, that as a childless woman, I am tired of that argument. I simply don’t buy the argument that procreation is the “purpose” of sex. If it were, then I don’t think that sex would be such a complex thing, or that it would have such high pleasure potential. I just don’t believe in a god that would hand us this gift only to see if we could abstain from enjoying it.

Besides, when we’re looking at relationships, why does it necessarily make sense that we would choose someone of the opposite gender to spend our lives with? With all the differences that have been socialized in men and women, one could argue that a man and a woman make a truly odd combination.

9. Is homosexuality moral?

Talk about morality is subjective. Each person has his or her own set of morals. Most of

us agree that things that cause harm to another person (murder, rape, abuse, child molestation, etc.) are inherently wrong and have no place in our society. But beyond that, we have to decide for ourselves what’s right and what’s wrong. I personally don’t see how a loving, honest relationship could be wrong. I do believe that it’s wrong to oppress people who are different from us. My morals come mainly from Jesus, who preached the message of universal love. Interestingly, I have to admit that it’s hard for me to love those people who say that Jesus condemns gays. I’m kind of a hypocrite that way. But I keep trying.

10. Is homosexual love the same as heterosexual love?

It’s hard for me to say what love is like for anyone else. We all speak of common things when we speak about what it means to love someone☹but how do I know that my best friend’s love for her spouse is the “same” as my love for my spouse? Even where we’re both in heterosexual relationships, I can’t determine this. This question confuses me.

Perhaps the question being asked is, “Is it possible for people in same-gender relationships to love as deeply as those in opposite-gender ones?” In this case, I would say of course. Love has no bounds; there are no rules. You come to know a person and you share your true selves with each other and you grow together and you carry one another in your hearts. It has no bounds.

Sometimes I wonder if gay and lesbian couples actually have a better chance of coming to truly know and understand each other. The culturally-imposed differences between men and women can often make communicating difficult, and make us feel like we’re two different species. There are things, for instance, that I tell my spouse with the assumption that, as a man, he won’t understand. So even though I’m telling him, absolute and true communication is difficult because this big assumption is sitting there in the middle of it all, making things murky.

11. Does homosexuality threaten the family or civilization?

No. Overpopulation is a serious concern. We can't afford for every person on this earth to create a child. The earth isn't big enough; and there are too many children without families for us to be worrying about some people "not doing their share" to keep the human race alive. I am astounded by such notions.

But let's just say, for the fun of it, that we all woke up as gays and lesbians one day. Those of us who want or have children now would still want them then. Doesn't it follow that we'd still have them? A joyful heterosexual romp isn't the only way to do it. As a species, we're pretty smart. I have no doubt that we'd come up with a nice, neat system for creating babies.

As far as the family goes, I think it's fair to say that the notion of a family as a mom, a dad and 2.3 kids has gone the way of the bouffant hairdo. Look at all the single-parent families, for instance, or blended families, or those where elderly parents move in to be cared for by their adult children. There is no model for what a family should look like. It is different for everybody.

12. Do gay people molest or recruit children?

No. By far, the majority of sex crimes against children are committed by heterosexual men. Gays, lesbians and bisexuals are not sexual deviants or perverts. Of all the different aspects of homophobia, I think it is the fear for children that is the most sad for me. A lot of these kids are gay themselves. How must it be for them to constantly get the message that people like them are dangerous or deviant? Being a kid is hard enough. In ninth grade, I sank into a deep depression because kids in my gym class made fun of me because I couldn't hit a volleyball. Things like that matter to kids. But to be a kid who's gay in a homophobic society now *that's* pain like I can't even imagine. My heart goes out to them. They have it tough.

Kids need role models, people who show them that it's okay to be gay. Gay *and* straight kids need these role models. When Ellen

DeGeneres came out on "Ellen," she said she did it mainly for the kids. We need more of that.

I guess in a sense, it's recruiting. But it's not recruiting kids to be gay—it's recruiting them to a place of acceptance.

I don't remember thinking much about homosexuality or bisexuality when I was in high school. I don't remember having an opinion about it. We never talked about it—certainly not in sex ed—I don't think we even speculated about who might be gay, which surprises me somewhat in retrospect. But I lived in a conservative community, where it was probably assumed that "homosexuality doesn't happen here." I think that if I'd been gay in that school, I would've felt so alone. I would've assumed that I was the only one. I hope things have changed over the past 15 years.

13. Can lesbians or gay men be good parents?

To me, this question is like asking if people born in April can be good parents, or people who live in Arizona, or those who like blue. These things have as much bearing on good parenting as does sexual orientation.

Having said that, I would also add that I've observed that most of the children of gay or lesbian parents that I know seem particularly well-adjusted and comfortable with themselves. I suppose it comes from having certain values instilled in them early—that it's okay to be different from "the norm," that you should be true to yourself.

I think gays and lesbians have a tougher job parenting than do heterosexuals. On top of everything else, they have to prepare their kids for the hateful comments they'll hear from their peers and the rest of society. From the time these kids enter pre-school, they'll get the message that they're different and weird. They have to be prepared for this.

14. Does society discriminate against gay people?

Absolutely. They are denied custody of their children and fired from jobs for no other reason except that they are gay. If they're open

about it, they're not allowed to defend their country. They cannot marry the person they love and are thus denied all the privileges and rights that go along with it.

As unfair as these things are, however, I think that a much greater problem is the more insipid forms of homophobia. All the forms of discrimination I've listed above can be changed by laws, and I actually believe that these things will eventually change. But what's even more important is that we change our way of thinking. We need to stop thinking inside our heterosexual box. I get phone calls all the time from telemarketers who, when I say "No, Ms. Amery is not here," (as I do when I receive one of these calls), respond, "Well if she's married, I can speak with her husband," or, "Then is there a Mr. Amery?" It makes me cringe every time. I'll bet I experience a dozen similar assumptions every day.

Even we well-intentioned heterosexuals feed into society's homophobia by being pretty clear that we don't want to be mistaken for gay. The button that reads "Straight But Not Narrow" is a perfect illustration of this. Before anything else, this button shouts out "Hey, I'm Not Gay!" On the one hand, I guess it's essential to have people who are clearly heterosexuals to be saying that they're supportive of gays, lesbians and bisexuals. But on the other hand, the emphasis so much of the time seems to be "... but just know that I'm not!"

When I was in college, it was very important to me not to be mistaken for a lesbian. I remember once walking under an umbrella with a friend who I figured was a lesbian (based on my assumption that masculine women were gay). She put her arm around me and I thought, "God! People are going to think we're lovers!" And then I thought that *she* must think I'm a lesbian, and if a lesbian thinks that, then it must be true (I'd heard that gays and lesbians had a sense about these things). It made me question the way that I had defined myself and wonder if maybe I was a lesbian and didn't know it. I had a very short haircut at the time and I grew it out. Even if I was a lesbian, I didn't want people to think I was.

Things like that don't bother me anymore, and in fact, I do things like refer to my husband as my spouse so that people don't immediately know that I'm heterosexual, or walk down the street with my arm around a female friend. But it's safe for me to do that because I always have the fact of my marriage to "prove" that I'm heterosexual. Perhaps if I were single, making my heterosexuality clear to the general public would be more important to me. I like to think that it still wouldn't matter much, but who knows.

15. Should gay men and lesbians be barred from certain jobs?

No. To suggest this is to imply that gays and lesbians are more sexual than the rest of us. People assume that they're always thinking about sex and that their relationships are all about sex. We've turned gays and lesbians, and particularly bisexuals, into one-dimensional characters.

We've been socialized to immediately think of sex when we hear the words "gay," "lesbian," or "bisexual." I think about growing up and hearing jokes about gays and how they were always portrayed as being perverts. I think about movies, television, books ☹ how there's *always* a sexual element brought into it when there's a gay character. I guess maybe it's changing, very slowly, but you never find rich, complex characters who also happen to be gay. Somehow, their sexuality has to figure into the story.

Of course, this bears no resemblance to who my gay and lesbian friends are ☺ real, genuine, honest-to-goodness people of whom sexuality is just one element. Mind you, I do know a few promiscuous gays and lesbians. But I know many more promiscuous heterosexuals.

16. Should there be laws governing private sexual behavior between consenting adults?

The very idea of this disgusts me. No government should *ever* be allowed into the private sex life of consenting adults. I don't think

I can say much more about this because to me it's such an utterly unarguable issue.

17. How does the lesbian and gay movement relate to other social movements?

It relates directly to the women's movement and the civil rights movement—all of which have challenged laws that enforced oppression but all of which still face the very real and perhaps even more problematic issue of deep-seeded prejudices and assumptions individuals carry.

I'm not talking about dealing with bigots or hate-mongers. I'm talking about ordinary people like myself who cherish the fact that we have a diversity of people in our lives, who love our friends of different colors and genders and ages and sexual orientations and cultures and who appreciate their complexities as individuals, but who still struggle to keep from thinking in stereotypes about people we don't know. We try. We're not bad people. It's what we've been raised with.

When I think about the task ahead of us, I feel overwhelmed. And I get confused. Do we topple the white-man-in-power model of society first, and then our limited view of the world will be broadened? Or do we first broaden our view of the world and there follows a societal restructuring? How do we get to the point where a person is just a person?

18. Do gay people have special insights about the human condition?

I think struggling deepens one's insight; that pain brings strength. And coming to terms with one's gayness in a homophobic world must surely be a struggle. Possible estrangement from one's family must bring extraordinary pain. Living in a world where one has to constantly determine if it's safe to bring one's complete self to a particular setting must be emotionally exhausting. Individuals vary, of course, but I would think that living through this would give one particular insights.

Gays, lesbians and bisexuals who choose to come out obviously come to a place where they understand that being true to oneself and

following one's heart is more important than conforming to other people's ideas of what is "normal." This takes a great deal of inner strength.

19. Should homosexuality be publicly discussed?

Yes, if for no other reason than to make life easier for gay, lesbian and bisexual adolescents. It's crucial that we alleviate their pain. Their suicide rate is too high for us not to.

The first memory I have of someone speaking publicly about gays and lesbians is Anita Bryant. I was aware of what homosexuality was at the time, but I hadn't a clue as to what it had to do with this nice lady who sold orange juice. I remember hearing jokes that to me implied that Anita Bryant was herself a lesbian, and this completely confused me (being about 10, I didn't really understand irony). Did she hate them? Or was she one of them? I searched for different meaning in her words. Maybe I was completely misunderstanding what she was saying, or maybe she was speaking in some kind of code.

It was confusing, but it was something. It got me thinking about some basic issues. It made me more aware that there were deeper issues than the fact that gays and lesbians were the butt of jokes, which had been my only experience up until then. It made me aware of the fact that there were people who thought gays and lesbians were more than just weird, that they were sick and a threat to society. I hadn't really realized these things before.

Still, it took me a couple of years to realize that homosexuality had nothing whatsoever to do with orange juice.

20. Should gay people come out?

It's completely up to the individual. I can't say whether other people should come out or not. I don't even know what it feels like to try to make that decision. In an ideal world, of course, it wouldn't be an excruciating decision for anyone. In an ideal world, being gay would be a subjective fact about a person, not something about which the rest of us make judgements.

The term “coming out” wouldn’t even exist in this sense. People would just be gay and there would be no need for making announcements about it.

I have a gay friend who is out to everyone but his parents. His parents’ religion says that homosexuality is wrong and he doesn’t want to risk losing them. They live in another state, so it’s not like he has to worry about “getting caught” or anything like that. He can live a normal life each day, pretty much, but still it’s not a good situation. He doesn’t spend any holidays with his partner because he spends them with his parents. I’m sad for both of them, but I would never suggest to him that he tell them. Perhaps it really is better this way for him. Perhaps peace in his family is what’s most important to him. And that’s okay. I think it’s very easy for the rest of us to say, “But you’d feel so much better if you were honest with them.” Well, sometimes that isn’t necessarily the case.

I remember looking at my sister’s college yearbook when I was in middle school. There was a photo of the Lesbian Alliance, but it was out of focus. You couldn’t make out the faces of the forty or so women. It was creepy. That’s the first time I remember having an awareness that people don’t always feel able to be open about their sexual orientation. That’s the first time I realized that this is a secret a lot of people carry inside. I remember I looked at that photo for a long time, and it made me feel very uneasy.