

AT THE COUNSELING SERVICE

RAY LARSON

Alice first reached us by phone. Her friend Jane had spotted an advertisement in the newspaper, and it sounded like we were the right place for help. Right now, Alice was in Seattle staying with Jane. Actually, Alice lived in Everett with her husband and nine children, but Jane had driven up and gotten her when she broke down on the phone three days before. The pressure had been building through the summer, and even though she felt no closer to a solution, at least there was some relief in being out of the home environment. But she felt like a runaway — she couldn't stay away long, but she realized that she'd have to get some help or she was going to come apart.

Although the problem was strange and overwhelming to her, it was not the first time that we at the Seattle Counseling Service for Homosexuals had encountered it. Married "happily" for fifteen years and the mother of nine children, ages nine months to fourteen years, Alice had fallen in love with a woman. She was confused and overwhelmed by the strength of her feelings, which had never been this strong toward her husband. The dreaded word "homosexual" gnawed at the edge of her fragile composure—that was the label one was supposed to apply to this type of situation, wasn't it? But how could it apply to her? She'd always thought of herself as "normal." How could she be a freak when she didn't feel like one?

Now, a year later, Alice's head is really in a happier place. She's still in love with Mary, and she still has a husband and nine kids. The dilemmas are still there, but she doesn't feel like a freak. She's not ashamed of where her heart is.

In the twelve months that have passed, Alice has taken a long hard look at her relationship with Mary, at her relationship with her husband, but most of all at her relationship with herself.

Most of this work took place in the first three months of counseling. Since then she has come in about once a month for follow-up, check-up, brush-up, call it what you will, the kind of support one needs when settling in for the long haul of working out solutions.

To people who've been in Alice's situation, a year would seem like an incredibly short time in which to come to terms with oneself and to find some sense of self-acceptance. In discussing what it was like to accept being gay, some often talk in terms of seven, eight, or even nine years.

So that's one of the reasons why we're here—to shorten the hassle for people like Alice. We also provide help for people with other problems, like the kid who was being released from an institution when he turned eighteen and who needed a place to live, hopefully a place that wouldn't kick him out if it were discovered that he was gay. Or the man who lost his lover and his job the same week. Or the woman who discovered her husband was a "homosexual" and wanted to know what to do. Or the fellow who had felt like a woman for as long as he could remember but still masqueraded as a man because he didn't know what else to do.

So why the Seattle Counseling Service for Homosexuals? In the two years we've existed, approximately five hundred people have come here for personal counseling; many more have contacted us by phone.

Why didn't they go to their friendly neighborhood mental health clinic instead? Who knows? But things I've run into have given me some hunches:

A girl went to an emergency room because she was coming apart at the seams over the breakup of a relationship. The doc was pretty cool. After he heard her out, he commented "Sounds pretty much like anyone would be going through . . ." He gave her a few tranquilizers and referred her to the hospital's mental health clinic; there things were different—if she'd just get straight, things would work out.

A social worker contacted us because gay clients at her agency were dropping out of groups. One told her, "I came here for help, not to have to educate all the people in the group on what it's like to be gay."

A psychologist from a mental health clinic at one of the private universities said he carried a fair number of gay males in counseling and commented that one

problem he experienced was that the guys often became attracted to him. Somewhat puzzled, I commented that attraction/attachment was a pretty common thing in counseling and that I always thought of it as one of the things a counselor could and should work with. He laughed and said with a smile that he was used to it with female clients, but males were a different story.

So we're here, and we're going to try to stay here until we're not needed any longer—until a person who happens to be a member of a sexual minority can go into a counselor's office and start working on whatever problem brought him there without first having to argue or educate or wade through a tangle of superstitions or fear.

If we can help you, give us a call. The business phone is EA 9-8737; the number for counseling is EA 9-8707. The Seattle Counseling Service is located on Capitol Hill in Seattle, at 318 Malden Avenue East.

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