Coming Home to Self, Going Home to Parents: Lesbian Identity Disclosure

Lennie Kleinberg, Ed.D.
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Lennie Kleinberg, Ed.D.

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Abstract
Lesbian women are an invisible and misunderstood minority who are stigmatized as people with moral failings. Hence, women who identify themselves as lesbian must face the dilemma of whether or not to disclose their lesbian identity, especially to their parents. Disclosure is an ongoing process that forces a woman to struggle to balance her needs in developing her lesbian identity with the needs of the other people for whom she cares. If she keeps her lesbian identity secret to preserve a relationship, she will dilute intimacy and put a barrier between herself and the other person. If she discloses her lesbian identity, she may cause conflict with others. In fact, among lesbian women who choose to come out to their parents, the foremost reason is a desire to share their lives and their identity with their parents and hence to feel better connected to them. These women demonstrate most prominently the process of integrating the responsibility to self and to others. In the disclosure process, women can show great care for their parents, while remaining true to their authentic lesbian identity.

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I’d like to begin by reading to you a poem by Minnie Bruce Pratt.

My Mother Loves Women
Minnie Bruce Pratt

My mother loves women.
She sent me gold and silver earrings for Valentine’s.
She sent a dozen red roses to Ruby Lemley
when she was sick and took her eight quarts
of purplehull peas, shelled and ready to cook.
She walks every evening down our hill and around
with Margaret Hallman. They pick up loose hub caps
and talk
about hysterectomies and cataracts.
At the slippery spots they go arm in arm.

She has three sisters, Lethean, Evie, and Ora Gilder.
When they aggravate her she wants to pinch
their habits off like potatobugs off the leaf.
But she meets them each weekend for cards and jokes
while months go by without her speaking to her
brother
who plays dominoes at the bus stop with the men.
I don’t think she’s known a man except this brother
and my father who for the last twenty years has been
waiting
for death in his rocking chair in front of the TV set.

During that time my mother was seeing women
every day at work in her office. She knit them
intricate afghans and told me proudly
that Anne Fenton could not go to sleep without hers.

My mother loves women but she’s afraid
to ask about my life. She thinks that
I might love women too.
For lesbian women the process of coming out to self and parents is one of the most critical events of their lives. In disclosing, lesbian women are proclaiming their lesbian identity and developing an authentic sense of self. Simultaneously, they are seeking to reaffirm their relationships and care for their parents. Disclosure is laden both with the risk of loss and with potential conflict. This presentation seeks to illustrate two salient themes. First, the act of disclosure of sexual identity is a rite of passage into adulthood for lesbian women. In this process, these women are proclaiming and reclaiming their authentic sense of self. Heterosexual women do not go through this rite of passage because they don’t need to differentiate themselves in this way. Second, in the process of disclosure, lesbian women are balancing their needs of attending to themselves and to others.

Factors affecting disclosure

Before discussing the disclosure of lesbian identity in depth, I would like to comment on several factors that may affect both the woman’s decision to disclose and others’ reactions to her disclosure. It’s important to note that these factors are not necessarily the same for lesbian women as they are for gay men. Gender differences that exist in a heterosexual population do not disappear in homosexual populations. Therefore, literature that attempts to model the development of lesbian women upon that of gay men fails in the same way that psychological models based solely upon studies of men have failed accurately to describe female development.

One factor that affects disclosure is that the population of lesbian women is largely invisible. Yet at least 10% of women are lesbians, according to conservative and often inadequate estimates. These approximately 11.5 million lesbians are a stigmatized minority whose lesbianism, or discredited identity, cannot be seen. Lesbian women and gay men are therefore not stigmatized for physical features, but are seen as people with “moral failings.” Like many stigmatized groups, lesbians are considered a menace to the status quo. As Rich (1980) writes:

Not surprisingly, lesbians are seen as a direct threat to the institution of compulsory heterosexuality. Lesbian women are women who, in their selection of other women as lovers, partners or companions, make a clear statement of resistance to economic, emotional and sexual dependence on men. The price of this resistance to compulsory heterosexuality has been enormous. Lesbians have been burned as witches, sentenced to prisons and concentration camps, and more recently, kidnapped and depogrammed by gang rape. Lesbianism has been called sinful, evil, perverted, deviant and antisocial. It has also been defined as a psychiatric illness requiring treatment and institutionalization, drugs and sometimes lobotomy. Documents such as letters, poetry, books and journals written by lesbians have been destroyed or reinterpreted heterosexually.

Thus, in order to survive, lesbians have often chosen to remain invisible, that is, to avoid disclosing their lesbian identity. Even today, lesbians must fight for custody of their own children and for the right to be foster parents, as well as for other civil rights such as job security and fair housing.

Another barrier to disclosure is the widespread misconception that lesbianism is primarily a matter of sexuality. This belief contributes to the notion that lesbians suffer from “moral failings” and further complicates a woman’s decision about whether to disclose her lesbian identity to others. But lesbianism is not simply a matter of sexuality. It is at heart a matter of emotional and spiritual connectedness and bonding. For most lesbians, sexual commitment and closeness follow emotional closeness. I cannot stress this point strongly enough, because this misunderstanding of lesbianism is one of the many factors that make disclosure such a potentially risk-laden process.

Yet despite the problems of invisibility, stigma, and misunderstanding, lesbian women do choose to disclose. For as Pone (1976) notes, keeping one’s lesbian identity hidden is a double-edged sword; while “secrecy maintenance avoids the problem of stigma and discredibility, it simultaneously, however, prevents truly intimate interactions with those unaware of the passer’s secret.”

Disclosure to self

No discussion of lesbian identity would be complete without considering the process of self-disclosure or “coming out” to oneself. This process, like that of disclosure to others, takes place over time. A woman does not get up one morning, look in the mirror and say, “OK, today I’m a lesbian woman.” It just doesn’t work that way. And yet I often see women who wish coming out were that quick and neat because it can be hard to struggle with their emerging identity almost every day.

What does the coming out process involve? Researchers have posited both linear and nonlinear
models for it. Theorists such as Monteflores and Schultz (1978), Nemeyer (1980) and Richardson (1981) propose that the process of lesbian identity development includes certain milestones, such as awareness of same sex attraction, same sexual experience, coming out to friends, family and colleagues, and finally coming out more publicly. During the coming out process, a woman experiences a series of cognitive and affective transformations as well as changes in behaviors and attitudes. Further, these researchers demonstrate that society’s response to a woman’s lesbian identity inevitably affects her actions and process.

“Cognitive transformation”

Three concepts can help us to understand this coming out process for the lesbian woman. Cognitive transformation is critical in order for the lesbian woman to make a positive change from a heterosexual to a lesbian identity (Monteflores and Schultz, 1978). Unlike members of other minority groups in which there are role models to support their heritage, lesbian women rarely grow up feeling good about themselves. Instead they tend to internalize negative views of themselves. Hence, women who are beginning to experience sexual feelings for other women often try to disidentify themselves as lesbians. Nemeyer (1980) powerfully argues that women who come out must cope with their own homophobia. To make the necessary cognitive transformation, lesbian women must turn around negative stereotypes and come to believe that lesbianism is positive. How women make this transformation will necessarily affect how they deal with their parents’ homophobia when they disclose their identities.

“Recasting the past”

Monteflores’ and Schultz’ (1978) concept of “recasting the past” also is critical to the coming out process. Recasting the past is itself a process in which a woman reconstructs her personal history. In so doing, she reowns in a new form feelings and behaviors that she has either forgotten or abandoned because they are attached to her lesbian identity. For example, a woman who is beginning to connect with her lesbian identity may recall a close relationship she had with a female friend or a crush on a female teacher and suddenly understand her old feelings in a new light. While such experiences are frequent for all women, I have often heard a lesbian woman exclaim in therapy, “Now I understand what those feelings were all about!” With this understanding comes acknowledgment of the many losses she will encounter. These include the loss of heterosexual privilege, the possible loss of jobs or homes and, most difficult of all, the potential loss of friends, family and children. Yet in the process of recasting her past, a woman may transform the anger and anguish previously experienced into self-understanding and self-acceptance. This reintegration of past experiences into her present self contributes to a more positive self-image.

“Self-labeling”

Finally, cognitive transformation and recasting the past lead to the process of self-labeling (Monteflores & Schultz, 1978). At this time, a woman can reclaim the lesbian label and make it her own. A label that was once marked by dissonance now becomes harmonious and synchronus with her total being — past, present and future. The lesbian woman can now recognize herself as lesbian and, accordingly, can acknowledge that her most fundamental emotional, spiritual and sexual needs are met and satisfied by other women.

Disclosure to parents

Once a woman is out to herself, she confronts the decision of whether or not to disclose her lesbian identity to others, in particular to her parents. She knows full well that if she discloses, she faces potentially negative reactions that may have tremendous consequences for her life. Her family is especially important. Ponse (1976, 1978) writes that “few audiences rival the place of the family in terms of intimacy and importance of the individual. The typical intimacy of family relations creates its own pressures toward disclosure.”

Facing the dilemma of disclosure, a woman feels the tension between wanting to be herself, a lesbian woman who claims and proclaims a lesbian identity, and fearing the consequences of relinquishing her false self, an assumed heterosexual identity. On the one hand, hiding a piece of oneself potentially dilutes intimacy and places a barrier between oneself and others. On the other hand, disclosing one’s lesbian identity may create disharmony and conflict with others and may hurt them. Ironically, a woman may therefore choose to hide her lesbian identity and a very important part of her authentic self in order to preserve a relationship only to find that the relationship suffers precisely because the secrecy wards off true intimacy.
To tell or not to tell

The stories of two women who struggled with the decision of whether or not to disclose their lesbian identities to their parents illustrate this dilemma. For reasons of confidentiality it’s important to note that I saw these women outside Wellesley College and neither they nor the other five women whose stories I discuss were from this College.

One young woman, whom I will call Pat, came to therapy to talk about an impending six-week separation between her and her lover. Five weeks earlier they had begun an impassioned and intimate relationship. Over the semester break Pat was going to visit her aged parents who were unaware of her lesbian partnership. Her lover, Carolyn, was going to attend an art management internship at a small museum on the West coast. Pat felt extremely sad, lonely and depressed, knowing that at home she would have to hide a very important and affirming piece of her life. She adamantly refused to tell her parents because she felt they were too old to understand, and because she was certain that her father would have a heart attack. Hence the risks of disclosure were too great. Like Pat, lesbian women often voice the fear that if they become who they are, they will kill someone else. But in choosing not to disclose her secret, Pat sacrificed this opportunity to confirm her emerging identity.

When lesbian women struggle with the issues of coming out, they take a great deal of care and responsibility for the process. One of the issues Pat wrestled with was the age of her parents, because she was concerned that they did not have the time to deal with her disclosure. This concern reflect their wish to take care of both herself and her parents.

A second vignette speaks to some of the same conflicts. Betty was a self-defined lesbian who came to therapy during the first part of her senior year of college because of continuous stress, depression and feelings of isolation. She was a very talented painter, which pleased her mother, and she received constant praise from her professors. Although Betty had transferred to her present school two years earlier, she had formed no close relationships with the heterosexual or lesbian communities. In the course of treatment she revealed that she and her sisters (she was the middle one) had close relationships with each other and with their mother. Betty said that her mother had been extremely disappointed when Betty chose to go to a college other than the one that her mother had always wanted to attend when she was Betty’s age. Betty understood that she and her mother had strong mutual identifications and that she could disappoint and hurt her mother by developing other values and talents.

While working on her honors project, Betty came out to her major advisor who was very supportive. At the same time, the art department Student Affairs Committee invited Betty to submit three of her best paintings to the annual art show. Photographs of the works exhibited would be published in the alumnae magazine, which is sent to all alumnae and parents. Betty decided to submit her three most important pieces, all having to do with women bonding and loving. Meanwhile, in treatment she began to discuss the issues and conflicts of coming out to her parents. Betty decided to tell her mother in person about her lesbian identity rather than to have her mother discover it in the alumnae magazine.

After several sessions, Betty went home. She chose a moment when she and her mother were alone together and told her. Betty’s mother was horrified and begged her not to tell her father, saying that it would kill him. After returning to college Betty received letters from her mother warning her not to tell anyone else because she would never get a job anywhere and she would be “put on a list.” In fact, Betty received offers of several teaching positions and the highest award from the art department for her excellent work. The student committee, however, rejected her work for the art show because they felt it was too pornographic and too lesbian. Betty confronted these students, expressed outrage at their decision and insisted on the validity of her work and its rightful inclusion in the show. Unfortunately, the committee refused to change its decision. But by expressing her anger Betty made her identity public, thereby demonstrating a new level of self-acceptance. Her anger and depression lifted. By the year’s end she had developed some very important lesbian and straight friendships. In addition, she kept in constant contact with her family, assuring them of her increased social and academic success.

Each of these vignettes illustrates the crisis implicit in choosing whether or not to disclose one’s lesbian identity to parents. To disclose means potentially to hurt others, to cause disequilibrium within essential relationships, and to be judged as selfish. Despite this, Pat and Betty both assumed care and responsibility in their decision-making processes. And ironically their care for others and their yearning to be reconnected to their families caused much of the conflict for these two women.
Dilemma of disclosure

In the remainder of this paper, I will look carefully at the stories of five lesbian women who generously and courageously agreed to talk to me about their personal decisions to disclose their lesbian identities to their parents. First, I will look at the actual process of disclosure for these women, then at their motivations for disclosure. I have included their own words from conversations with me and from letters written to their families as part of disclosure.

For obvious reasons I have disguised the identities of these five women; I will call them Laurie, Rebecca, Sarah, Ellen and Pamela. Sarah is in her late twenties; the others are in their thirties. All are basically healthy and well-adjusted women. Each woman chose to come out to her parents. In each of these cases the parents showed some degree of acceptance of their daughter’s lesbian identity. Although these women’s stories reveal similarities in the processes and motivations that are common among lesbian women, other women have had quite different experiences. For example, after disclosure some parents have refused to communicate with their daughters, and in extreme cases have even mourned their daughters as if they were dead.

The five women with whom I spoke chose to come out to their parents. Many other lesbian women never do so. Although some people disagree, I believe that a lesbian woman who chooses to keep her identity secret from her parents may not necessarily be stunted in solidifying her identity. It is imperative, however, that she come out to people who are very important in her life, people who will be accepting and who will nurture her evolving sense of self. She must also recognize the impact this choice has on her relationship with her parents, and to work with that because of the barriers created by nondisclosure.

Preparation for disclosure

Like other lesbian women, each of these women found the act of disclosure for them and their parents was not a single act, but an ongoing process that was social, cultural and familial in nature. Moreover, this process was carefully thought out and took much preparation.

One part of the preparation involved dealing with the fears about disclosure. When women feel tension between their responsibility to others and their responsibility to their own self-development, conflict develops says Gilligan (1982). These women faced such conflict in disclosing their lesbian identities. When I asked them what fears they had about disclosing, they named causing pain to and disappointing parents, rejection, loss of love and approval, being seen as sick, and causing conflict and disharmony with parents. As mentioned earlier, they even feared causing a parent’s death. Some women were afraid that their fathers would interpret their movement toward women as a movement away from them and would experience it as a rejection of men, and therefore of them. Other women worried that their mothers would experience their lesbian identity as a rejection of a more positive identification with them and with the lives they had chosen. All the women were clearly afraid of a loss of connection and a disruption of their relationships with their parents.

These women addressed their fears and continued their preparation by talking about the coming out process with friends who had already come out. In addition, some of these women disclosed their lesbian identities to other significant people, such as friends, siblings or a therapist before actually coming out to their parents. All five women were in therapy. In some cases their therapist was the first person to bear witness to “their secret” and hence an important influence on how they came to feel about themselves and about their decisions to come out. It is common for a woman’s therapist to play such a role. Disclosure meant saying, “This is who I am, all of the pieces; I am a lesbian woman.” Therapy was instrumental in helping them to integrate their lesbian identities into their total selves.

These women also prepared for disclosure to parents by developing affiliations within women’s and lesbian communities. In fact, community was essential to them. The women’s movement and the gay and lesbian liberation movement gave them a sense of pride and affiliation with other women as well as more public validity. They sought community through friendships, group houses and bars, as well as through political work. As Miller (1976, 1984) has pointed out, for women, affiliation and ties to others are essential to their lives and to the formation of their sense of self. But for lesbian women, disclosing their true selves may threaten existing relationships and hence other aspects of their identities. Although these five women did not lose their relationships with their parents, many women do. An important buffer to such loss is a transfer of attachment, building up new affiliations and relationships.

Another step in preparing for disclosure was the process of “testing the waters” with their parents. These women used several common strategies. For example, they discussed with their parents other
subjects such as nontraditional lifestyles and occupations, childbearing without marriage, minority rights and oppression and the women’s movement to gauge how ready their parents might be to hear about their lesbian identity. Some raised the subject of homosexuality or lesbianism in the context of someone else’s children. To see how their parents would react some left books, articles or music by and about lesbian women where their parents might find them. Another strategy a woman might adopt was to bring her lover home to integrate her into the family as a special friend; in this way she hoped that the family would get to know and like this friend, and hence be more likely to accept her as their daughter’s lover. Thus the process of disclosure for these women was complex, continual and began long before they actually decided to come out to their parents. It is a critical event in a lesbian woman’s life, one that is remembered forever and which is perhaps analogous to a rite of passage such as marriage in the heterosexual community.

**Motivations for disclosure**

When I asked these women why they decided to disclose their lesbian identity to their parents, they gave certain reasons again and again, reasons that I have also found in my clinical work. The most important was the desire to share their lives, particularly a hidden aspect of their identity, with their parents. By doing so they hoped to reconnect to their parents and to reaffirm the positive aspects of their relationships with their families. At the same time, disclosure also provided a way for some of these women to differentiate themselves from their parents. Coming out was a way of saying that they were independent adults who chose to live their lives differently from the way their parents had lived theirs. And, finally, disclosure was an act of love.

**Desire to share more of their lives with parents**

By coming out to their parents, these women broke through the barriers that secrecy had erected in their relationships with their parents. As Sarah stated, “I made the choice because of who they are and the history of my relationship with them, and if I wanted to find a way to stay connected with them then I was going to have to come out. I felt I needed to come out to them because it didn’t mean anything to me to be connected if they weren’t seeing me whole.” Such reconnection is necessary because of the distance that has been created by the previous presentation of a false self and the realization of the psychological cost to the self of nondisclosure.

Rebecca wrote to her parents about the effect the secret had on her relationship with them: “Perhaps even more important, I am pained by how my secret has put a wedge between us. I love you very much and feel lucky to have a family that is healthy and happy and loving. These last couple of years I’ve come to almost dread all contact with you for fear that you will ask me questions that will put me on the spot.” Rebecca described to me further the uneasiness and stress she experienced in keeping information about herself from her parents. “What became terribly wearing was that I felt like I didn’t know what to say to them on the phone, and I couldn’t be spontaneous with them. They are also the kind of parents who always ask me what I’m doing, what’s up. I got to completely dread their calls and I wouldn’t be home a lot. They would end up speaking to my roommates and started to pump my roommates about who I was with and where I was when I wasn’t able to come to the phone. I couldn’t figure out whether they were suspecting and every time I got a phone call, every time I thought about calling them, or any time I had to go home I was filled with terror. When I spent time with them I thought any minute they were going to ask me, and I was very pained by that. Also, because I like them, I hated feeling estranged from them.”

All of these women spoke about the need to break the silence. They described the pain and distance that living a lie had caused for them as well as for their relationships with their families. Pamela, a black lesbian woman, expressed these feelings in a letter to her father: “Remember how awful and shameful and wrong (passing as white) was to black people who knew they weren’t white? They were trying to seem like something they weren’t so they could seem better somehow than other black people. I remember how people would talk about them and other folks who were doing the same thing, and how some folks would whisper and almost hiss at that word ‘passing.’ Well that is what it is like for me. I’ve been trying to pass for something I’m not. I’ve been trying to pass for straight. I’ve been trying to pass for straight. I’ve been trying to seem different than I really am. I’ve been afraid people would find out the truth. It’s wearing me out, Dad. I can’t keep trying to hide it. It’s hard enough as it is. It’s hard enough for me to get the things for myself that I need. Being lesbian is not always easy for me, but it is nothing I can change, and it’s nothing I want to change.”

For these five women, coming out to their parents represented a means of coming back into and
preserving these relationships where previous secrecy had diluted intimacy. For example, Laurie said to her mother in a letter, “I’ve needed to feel close to you, and on some level I always do feel close to you. But I feel distance between us as time goes on and I reveal less about myself. I find myself in the role of listener when we talk, and I don’t like that. I know people who don’t come out to their parents ever because they are not that close to begin with. I don’t feel that way about you. Our relationship is very important to me and I don’t want there to be an unspoken silence between us.”

Ellen shared with me similar feelings about her parents: “I think from the time that I started becoming involved with women I got more and more distant from my mother and father because I couldn’t be close to them and let them know what was going on. I didn’t think I could. And so in some ways the best thing for me was to tell them what was going on so I could feel close to them again. I felt distance — so much distance.”

Jean Baker Miller (1976, 1984) has stated that the development of one’s self does not exclude others, but in fact encompasses relationships with others. Thus, for these women the motivation for disclosure centered on the desire to be themselves, not to the exclusion of others but in a way that could include others. They wanted to go beyond simply informing their parents of their lesbian identity; they wanted to find a way to include them in their secret lives and in their partnerships.

Sarah, for example, felt constrained in talking with her parents about her relationship: “Susan’s and my relationship began to feel more and more solid and stable, and I really felt myself choosing a lifestyle and choosing who I am and coming to know who I am. It was important to me to share that with them. I’d go home and there was a sense of real limits as to how much I could talk about my life.”

Like Sarah, Laurie wanted to share her life and to let her mother know she was happy: “I am writing you this letter because in thinking of visiting over Christmas I’ve decided there was something very important that I wanted to share with you before then. For the past eight months I’ve been involved in a relationship with a woman named Paula. This relationship gives me much pleasure and happiness and it’s hard not being able to share it with you.”

These women found that part of the disclosure process was affirming their relationship with their parents. Often in their written or verbal disclosure to their parents women said something like the following: “Because you have given me this chance, because you have made me who I am, I am able to tell you about this very private part of myself.” They thus affirmed what their parents had given them by telling their parents about who they are.

Although they wanted to share more of their lives with their parents, all five women sought to preserve their integrity. A salient question for these women was, “How can I maintain my relationship with my parents without giving up my sense of self?” In an effort to do this, Rebecca wrote to her parents that she respected their choices and asked that they respect hers: “As I have said, I don’t know whether Judy and I will stay together, nor what my life will look like in the next five or ten years, but I do know that my commitment to my own truths and to myself means that my life will never be a replica of yours. I deeply respect the choices and compromises you have made, but I have to find my own way. While I am always interested in your opinions, I hope you can understand that my issues in dealing with this relationship will always be different from your issues in dealing with it. Please try to respect that difference.”

Thus, for some of these women, disclosure represented an attempt to differentiate from parents as well as to connect to them. Disclosure is a statement about a relationship between the person disclosing and the person to whom she is disclosing, and a statement of one’s lesbian identity is a statement of differentiation that heterosexuals do not have to make. Also, proclaiming their lesbian identity to their parents helped these women to achieve adult status.

Rebecca realized that coming out to her parents meant giving up the child in her in relation to her parents. She struggled with whether that was a way to become separate or connected to them, asking, “If I am who I am, will and can I still be connected to them?” Her resolution was, “I knew that I wanted to separate from them, whatever that means. I was trying to separate from my parents and I couldn’t decide, and I consulted many, many people — the whole process was very verbal and conscious and thought out and carefully done. I would ask friends that I respected, “Is telling them a way to separate from them or a way to get closer to them, and which do I want? Maybe I really didn’t want to separate. Maybe I was missing them and wanted to get closer and wanted them to just accept it and then I could be under their bosom again. So I guess the synthesis is I wanted to separate from them as their baby, but wanted to become closer to them as their grown offspring.”
Rebecca knew that in declaring her differentiated self she would have to go through a mourning process. “At some point I was really conscious of letting them go as my protectors in a very emotional way, sort of like losing them, and I had to give them up somehow. I’m beginning to understand that it wasn’t they who were holding on to me, but me who was holding on to them, and it hit me very deeply — the loss of them, of being their little girl.”

Finally, for all these women the act of disclosure was an act of love. Laurie expressed her love and care for her mother in a letter: “I know this is not easy to hear. The reason I have to tell you is because I love you so much.” Sidney Jourard (1964) has written about disclosure, and I have taken the liberty of changing his pronouns for the moment: “Research I have conducted shows that a person will permit herself to be known when she believes her audience is a person of good will. Self-disclosure follows an attitude of love and trust. If I love someone, not only do I strive to know her, I also display my love by letting her know me. At the same time, by doing so I permit her to love me.”

Conflict as a means toward growth
The process of disclosure touches on lesbian women’s deepest issues and concerns, not only in terms of their lesbian identity, but also in terms of the fundamental struggle to balance the needs of self and other. It is characterized by conflict, both for the women disclosing and for those to whom they are coming out. Women struggle between their desire to maintain affiliation and connection and their fears of generating conflict that may lead to severence of ties.

These lesbian women and many others, whether they disclose or not, courageously face the possibility of conflict and their responsibility to themselves. I believe, however, that such conflict has a positive potential; responsibility to oneself does not necessarily mean lack of responsibility to others.

It may be possible to wage good conflict says Jean Baker Miller (1976). She argues that in order to make changes and movement one must initiate conflict. This conflict can be both good and successful in bringing about real interaction between people. Clearly the five women discussed here have struggled with what it means to seize personal power, to move toward their authenticity, and to present the true self at the risk of losing relationships with others. They have faced the possibility of familial conflict when they chose to break a pattern of silence and to tell what, in some cases, parents already knew but were afraid to ask. Like the poet in “My Mother Loves Women,” some of these women learned that they could be in conflict but still remain connected, a lesson many of us may need to be taught. These women were willing to face conflict, unsure where it would lead them. As Miller (1976) points out, “It is not an easy or straightforward path; meanings change along the way and are influenced by the course of conflict, itself. Who can clearly and directly know her own needs at all times? More often they emerge unclearly, especially if they are important. They may be highly charged with emotion and difficult to discern. To undertake such conflict in the first place requires courage. The hope for success lies in the respectful engagement with other people.”

The women with whom I spoke risked conflict and hoped that even stronger and deeper affiliation and connection would come out of it. They struggled to be and to express themselves while at the same time loving and caring for their parents. As they moved toward personal integrity, they experienced the conflict of having to mediate between hurt and care. Gilligan (1982) argues that women can, indeed, allow themselves to be honest and to be responsible for themselves, and at the same time be responsible to and caring of others: “In separating the voice of the self and the voices of others, the woman asks if it is possible to be responsible to herself as well as to others, and thus to reconcile the disparity between hurt and care.”

According to Gilligan (1982) the ideal of care is the activity of relationships. This was heard clearly in the voices of these women and their commitment to the relationship with their parents in spite of the pain their disclosure may have caused. These and many other women were able to maintain their relationships with their parents because of their own level of maturity, their own internal sense of self and the degree of their integration of a lesbian identity. How well their parents dealt with the disclosure process was also critical, and was demonstrated by their parents’ caretaking. All these women expressed the need to take care of themselves and of their relationships to their parents. By expressing gratitude, empathy and understanding to their parents, attempting to eliminate guilt, committing to the process with their parents, providing resources and help, and educating their parents about their lesbian identity development, these women sought to preserve their relationships with their parents and simultaneously to remain authentic to their lesbian identity.
I believe that coming out to self and then to parents is one of the most emotionally deep experiences and critical events in a lesbian woman’s life. Talking to these women and to the women I see in therapy confirmed this perception. Each woman’s voice reverberates with power as well as with sadness at the loss of the child in herself and the suffering she felt at the potential loss of her parents’ love in her quest for self-hood and authenticity. Their stories revealed to me that a lesbian woman’s attempt to be both true to herself and to feel meaningfully connected to her parents is never-ending.

Yet all the women in this study have taken an important step in disclosing their sexual identity to their families. In the process of disclosure these women have undergone a rite of passage; they have moved into adulthood and reclaimed their authentic lesbian identity. And they have done so with compassion and courage, attending to others yet preserving their authentic sense of self.

Discussion summary

After each colloquium lecture, a discussion is held. Selected portions are summarized here. In this session, Dr. Susan Curtiss, Bonnie Engelhardt, M.S.W., A.C.S.W. and Dr. Laura Nemeyer joined Dr. Kleinberg in leading the discussion.

**Question:** If a woman has a lesbian experience at a young age, will she solidify this identity as she becomes older?

**Nemeyer:** For some women this may be true, for others it may not. Often late adolescence and early adulthood is a time when women come to understand their own needs for intimacy. I have heard from several women that they knew they were lesbian at a very young age and steadily moved towards solidifying this identity as they grew older. But other women have told me that they had a lesbian relationship when they were young and did not solidify this identity in their later years. Finally, there are women who do not come out as lesbians until they are in their thirties, forties, fifties or even older. We need to study this group of older women to understand the effects of changing their identities when their lives are more formed.

**Question:** Is there a pattern of disclosure? For example, do most lesbian women come out first to their mothers and then to their fathers? Do these women disclose their lesbian identity to other family members, such as siblings, before parents?

**Kleinberg & Engelhardt:** On the basis of readings and clinical experience, I would say that most lesbian women who come out to their parents tell their mothers before their fathers. There are many possible reasons for this. Studies of disclosure in general find that most people choose to reveal personal information about themselves to women. Also, in most families, the mother has traditionally been the sounding board, the person to whom all the members of the family talk. The way a woman discloses her lesbian identity to parents may reflect the family’s patterns of communications and relationships. If a woman is closer to one of her parents, she may choose to come out to that parent first. She may hope that this parent can help with the disclosure process either by telling the other parent or by supporting her when she does. On the other hand, she may wish to avoid telling the parent she is closer to for fear of potentially dissolving the relationship because of her disclosure. As noted earlier, some women fear that their mothers will perceive their lesbian identity as a rejection of what they’ve been taught (to be heterosexually married), of the way they’ve lived and of themselves. Other women fear that their fathers may see their lesbian identity as a way of rejecting men and hence rejecting them.

Among the women who do not choose to tell their mothers first, many choose to disclose their lesbian identity to their parents at the same time. A woman who cares for her parents may not want to put one in a position of keeping a secret from the other. Some women feel that if both parents knew, they might support each other through the process. And telling both parents at once saves a woman from having to do through the disclosure process twice with her parents.

If a woman is uncertain of how her parents would react to disclosure, she may come out to a sibling or another close relative before telling her parents. The reaction of the other family member may help a woman guage how her parents may respond. On the other hand, some women come out to a sibling or another close relative and never come out to their parents.

**Question:** Do you think that a parent’s ethnic, racial, class or cultural background would affect her or his responses?

**Curtiss:** I would say that our lives are shaped by a number of factors and the influences you mentioned account for differences among us. At the same time, however, each parent has a unique experience influenced by many factors. I believe that there may be some common themes in parental responses just as
there are common themes for women in the process of coming out. It would be interesting to look more closely at the responses of a particular group of parents and identify the similarities and differences.

**Question:** It seems that all the women you spoke about had somewhat positive experiences in disclosing their lesbian identity. Would you comment on other possible reactions and how women deal with more negative responses from their parents?

**Kleinberg:** I would like to begin this answer by briefly making some general points about parents’ reactions. Parents’ responses to their daughter’s lesbian identity vary from totally rejecting her and acting as if she had died, to fully accepting her and her partner if she is in a relationship. When parents learn of their daughter’s lesbian identity, they begin a process of their own — a process I call “coming to” — analogous to the process of “coming out.” Both processes involve certain milestones, including a series of cognitive and affective transformations in attitudes and behaviors. For example, it is very common for parents to see their daughter’s lesbian identity as a stage she will simply outgrow. The reaction is a form of denial if the daughter’s lesbian identity is not a stage. As time passes, parents may come to accept that their daughter’s lesbian identity is not a stage, but a positive aspect of her total identity. In doing so, parents undergo a cognitive and affective transformation in their behavior. Unfortunately, not all parents can work with their daughter to reshape their relationship. For example, when some parents are told of their daughter’s lesbian identity, they act as though nothing was ever said. To avoid both further conflict and the possibility of losing the relationship, some women collude in this silence and never again raise the subject of their lesbian identity. Other women may tell their parents of their lesbian identity even before they are actually in a relationship with another woman and then have to come out again once they are in a partnership. Women who face negative reactions from their parents may build a “family” of accepting friends, often other lesbians. This process of creating a community for themselves is extremely important for lesbian women in forming positive self-images.

**Comment:** Several women have referred to their mothers and there seems to be a great deal of fear and anguish about what coming out will do to their mothers and to the mother-daughter relationship. I’d like to respond as a mother. When my daughter came out to her father and me, it was in love and not in anger. For me there was a feeling of tremendous loss, the loss of a dream I had cherished for her. I found my pain was reminiscent of the Kubler-Ross stages of loss we’ve all heard about — the stages of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. I’ve experienced all these things. Even now — five years later — the pain still surfaces, but without the intensity and depth. Yet now there is also a new optimism, and a new dream. The love my daughter and I and her father have for one another is stronger than ever.

**References**


