



Why are older gays and lesbians treated like pariahs?



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Gay, and she has just completed a futuristic novel about gay and lesbian life in the 21st century.

I was once asked if I had ever been discriminated against for being a Jew. Actually, I'd never had a direct experience of such discrimination. Later, I was asked if I'd ever suffered discrimination for being a lesbian. Not counting the pervasive homophobia that we all live with every day, I've never personally been the target of serious gay bashing, either verbal or physical.

Well, I seem to have turned a corner. I now have a different answer waiting if I'm asked the question "Have you ever been discriminated against because of your age?"

Maybe I was due this one having escaped the others, but I sure didn't expect it would come from a supposedly enlightened person well-known in the gay and lesbian community.

As it happens, I have written my autobiography. My agent called this well-known person to say that he'd like to submit the manuscript to this well-known person's gay publishing house. The answer went something like "Oh, don't bother even sending it. Only old lesbians would be interested in her book."

As we all know, the subspecies "old lesbian" is hardly worth putting out a book for. That aside, my book is only partly about being gay at all. My life has been about many things, hardly noticeable among them being an "old lesbian."

Fortunately, the nongay publishers of my earlier book, *Permanent Partners*, didn't say, "Oh, she's just an old lesbian. What would she know about male relationships or young couples?" They took the book on its merits, and it is now in its fifth printing, having spent two full years on the gay and lesbian best-seller list, thank you.

I would not be bothered if this were an isolated incident, but it isn't. I see examples of younger gay people dismissing older gay people all the time as if nothing of any value could come from someone over 50 or, Lord help us, over 60, as I am. At the 1991 OutWrite conference for lesbian and gay writers, I sat in front of a young lesbian couple who dismissed the remarks of two-time Pulitzer prize winner Edward Albee with "Oh, pay no attention to him. He's just an old man."

Well, I have a message for that young couple (and I hope the little twerp publisher is listening too): When it is your turn to pass over into the no-persons-land of over 50, I hope you are living among gays and lesbians who have acquired a little more class and a lot more

moxie about the value of living in an intergenerational community.

Am I angry? You're damn right I am. I'm angry on behalf of all those gay and lesbian elders who still live in the shadows because that's what they learned they had to do to survive. And who, really, has gone to the trouble of helping our seniors be part of this brave new gay and lesbian world we now live in? There are, indeed, a few programs scattered about the country for older gays and lesbians, but let's face it, most people in our community don't even give these folks a thought. Older gay men and women are like ghosts among us, prisoners of their own conditioning and lost to amnesty because there's no one who cares to tell them the jailhouse door has been open for years now.

All right, so older gays don't get invited to the party. I wish it made more of them angry. By passively accepting a segregated status, the elders give permission to the youngsters to continue stereotyping and segregating them. It's the same dynamic that keeps so many gays and lesbians in the closet. The heterosexual society has conspired for years to keep us invisible, and you know what? We gay and lesbian people are coconspirators.

Gabriel Rotello, the former editor of the now-defunct lesbian and gay magazine *OutWeek*, told me once that he thought our community encouraged people to stay in the closet. I thought he was off-the-wall when he said that, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized he was right. In a major way we are operating on the same ethic that keeps our elders hidden from view. Of course, there are many more venues now in which to be gay, but that only enables people to be gay in selected parts of their lives. By not being willing to be openly gay in massive numbers, we reinforce the worldview that gays should be kept hidden.

Well, I am not about to cooperate with society's directive that I should be invisible. I have been as visibly gay as I could be for 20 years now. And I am certainly not going to cooperate with the twerpist notion that because I am a mature lesbian, I have something to say only to other mature lesbians. Not by a long shot. I'm not going to do that, and I strongly suggest no one else reading this ever allow anyone—gay or straight, young or old—to put them into that kind of box.

I understand the fear of aging that runs like an earthquake fault under the lives of gay and lesbian people caught up in the cult of youth. But dismissing people who have aged is no way to buy a stay of execution from aging yourself. It should be working in just the opposite way. Integrating older gay people into your life could well be a counterphobic move. You conquer the fear of losing the youth that feels so essential by giving yourself the opportunity to find out that aging is one of nature's most valuable rewards.

Too many among us will never experience that reward. That should awaken everybody to just how precious a gift it is to achieve senior status these days.

So when do we start addressing ageism in the gay and lesbian community? I guess it will be when the elders get angry enough to speak up—What does it take to make you angry?—and the youngsters realize they have something to gain by listening. Probably you can do something about it in your own life. How about today? ▼