Serena Patterson

"This is So You Know You Have Options"

Lesbian Grandmothers and the Mixed Legacies of Nonconformity

Lesbian grandmothers in Canada represent a unique cohort in terms of their place in lesbian history. Forced to either hide their identity or adopt very unconventional family patterns and roles in the mid- to late-twentieth century, they now find themselves with a considerable degree of acceptance, assimilating into mainstream society and active as grandparents. Lesbian grandmothers explore the mixed legacies o nonconformance and of assimilation, along with their hopes that grandchildren will enjoy the benefits of a more diverse society.

I am greeted with surprise when I say that I am studying lesbian grandmothers. As far as the mainstream media knew, the "gay-by boom" began in the late 1980s, and lesbian culture just a few years before that. We are certain that women loving women have always existed, under many names and guises.[1] Yet for lesbians who came of age between 1950 and 1985, there were no celebrity role models, no legal protections, and few words to even name what it was to love women and to also desire children. The path of becoming one of today's lesbian grandmothers has required creativity, courage and risk. As one lesbian grandmother, Nancy, wrote to me,

> *Most of us came of age during a time when being a lesbian was considered sick, perverted and quite dangerous. Even though some women (young and old) still choose to be closeted, my age-group and those older have had some incredible journeys which are still evolving.*

My purpose in this paper is to explore some of the legacies of these "incredible journeys," the losses, the gifts, and the hopes that lesbian grandmothers hold out toward their children and grandchildren.

Methodology

In the spring of 2004, I sent to lesbian friends and list serves a request for participants in a study on Canadian lesbian grandmothers. Through forwards and referrals, I received 14 completed questionnaires, mostly from Vancouver Island, Vancouver, and the greater Toronto area. In early August, 2005 I met with six lesbian grandmothers, all living within the Comox Valley area of Vancouver Island, for in-depth discussions of some of the issues raised by the questionnaire study (Patterson, 2005), and to gather reactions to Bill C-38.[2] One couple met me alone; the other four, all of whom knew one another, met in a group for informal discussion. Two of these six women had participated in the questionnaire study.

The 18 study participants ranged in age from 41 to 73, with most between the ages of 55 and 65. Fourteen were grandmothers through their biological children; four became step-grandmothers through the children of a lesbian partner. Twelve were in committed lesbian relationships, and of these, all but two shared the grandparent role with their partners. Ten wished to be named as sources; eight chose to be anonymous. I have referred to all participants by either actual or fictional first names, and have listed the named sources in my acknowledgements.

Compulsory heterosexuality

None of these women grew up in a time or place where claiming a lesbian identity would have been supported. Girls were channeled into heterosexual marriage through a life-long training process, the absence of visible alternatives, and messages about dire consequences (poverty, social exclusion, loss of children, violence) that awaited those who refused to conform (Rich, 1983). While 1970s gay liberation and feminist movements may have carved out places of lesbian culture and community, these were far removed from most of the women in my study. Lack of custody rights (Arnup, 1995), negative social stigma (King & Black, 1999), economic challenges, fear of alienating one's children, love for husbands, and internalized homophobia created fierce barriers to coming out during their child-rearing years.

By far the most common way of coping with these pressures was to marry. Twelve of the 14 biological mothers had their children within traditional heterosexual marriages, and most of these women did not identify as lesbians until the mid-1980's or later, when their children were teenagers or adults. Although some of these women identified as having "always been a rebel", or even as having been closeted lesbians, the dominant strategy was to blend in. For most (but not all) of these women, coming out in middle or late adulthood was experienced as both an accomplishment of authenticity and a liberation from ill-fitting roles.

A second, less common response to the pressure of heterosexual conformity was to resist marriage and motherhood. The three step-grandmothers (those who came to the grandmother role through their partner's children) had

not expected to be mothers, but relished the grandmother role with their partner's children. Even years after breaking up with the biological grandmother one lesbian step-grandmother stated that "being a grandmother is as central to me as being a lesbian or a feminist."

One biological mother did not raise her child, but arranged a semi-open adoption within her extended family. I do not know how common it is for this cohort of older lesbian women to have birthed and given up children for adoption. Given an aversion to heterosexual marriage, and the difficulty of obtaining an abortion in Canada through the 1970s, I suspect that many lesbians over 50 paid for their freedom by surrendering children for adoption. Of these, some have found and re-constructed a relationship with their biological children, which then allows them to be grandmothers to the third generation.

The third, and probably least common strategy was to live more or less openly as a lesbian mother within a supportive counter-cultural community. Jane accomplished this within a rural land collective. Hers was the only child within the study who grew up with two women whom he knew equally as mothers, and who knew from childhood that his mother was a lesbian. "Oh, we were pioneers, all right!" she exclaims with obvious pride and some amusement. Her early identification as a lesbian was supported by the cooperation of her child's biological father, as well as others within her immediate surroundings.

Creating families "outside the box"

Since their identification as lesbians, each of the women have become, like Jane, pioneers in constructing nontraditional families. Some of their families look conventional at first glance, but for the fact that they are headed by two women. Others continue to be pioneers in many aspects of their lives, including spirituality and political activism. The creation and nurturing of families and of communities are themes that run through the narratives of these women; connection is very important.

But the freedom to create family and community on one's own terms often came at a heavy price. Ties, even to one's own children, were tested and sometimes broken by the coming out process. The majority of participants spoke or wrote of times when they were estranged or on very strained terms with one or more children. Since it was not uncommon for these women to leave their heterosexual marriages in order to be with a woman lover, the mothers' coming out and the breakup of the first families were simultaneous events in the eyes of many of the children, and therefore doubly resented. Betty describes her childrens' reaction to her leaving to be with Diane:

> *My youngest daughter realized even before I left that Diane was a threat. She raged at Diane on the phone and in person. She believed that Diane had taken away her mother, and wrecked the marriage, which [she] thought had been perfect. We had just had our twenty-fifth wedding anniversary, and*

[all of the children] had taken pictures and made a video. I hadn't known that things were not okay, so how would they have known?

Diane had been clearer about the need to end a marriage that was stagnant and unhappy. Her coming out was separate from her leaving the marriage, but that did not stop the children from feeling defensive toward their mother's emerging lesbian identity.

The children had a second round of backlash when I came out.... Leaving [their] dad because he was an SOB was fine, but to leave because I "cheated" (Diane motions with quotation marks in the air) was bad. They were angry because I had "hidden" something from them, even though I had only known for six weeks! I think my kids would have cheered if I had left "properly" with a man.

For Betty and Diane, who between them have several grown children and stepchildren, the reunions have come gradually and one at a time. In a series of rich anecdotes, they took me on a tour of more than a dozen close family relationships, each with its own unique story of temporary disconnection and reunion.

In some cases, the relationships are now much stronger for the experience. Many of Diane's family members have acknowledged that Diane's coming out and her relationship to Betty have enriched them. In a family that has suffered from generations of alcoholism, Diane and Betty are held up to the young as models of "being true to oneself," and of the possibilities of healthy relationships. Recently, Diane's brother thanked her, in the presence of over 100 relatives at a family reunion, for "what you [two] bring to this family".

But not all the family ties were strengthened. Diane has a daughter-in-law who is "very homophobic," and who forbids all except the most superficial contact between Diane and the children. Betty's children are individually supportive of the relationship, but her immigration to Canada to be with Diane cost them the hub of their connection with one another. Geographically close, they had nonetheless thoroughly depended upon Betty's skill to bring them together for gatherings, to monitor family news and to provide child-care and parenting support. Since Betty's native country does not recognize same-sex relationships as a basis for immigration, the two settled in Canada. Both Betty and her children mourn this loss. And while she does not regret the changes in her life, she also acknowledges the losses that those changes have brought. She reflects:

Is the prize worth the price? For Diane, it's clearly a yes. Everybody ultimately won, including her kids, grandkids, and extended family. Even the cranky husband ended up better off.... But for me, well, it's a shift in my life, and a shift in the kids' lives. There is still a lot of loss around it. I miss

> *a lot of what I had with my kids and grandkids; the little community that we had.*

For Elinor, the re-creation of family with a son that she didn't raise is a work in progress. As the child was raised by relatives, he was not told that he was adopted and that Elinor was his biological mother until his cousins "spilled the beans" when he was twelve. The adoptive parents disapproved of Elinor's lifestyle, and tried to keep contact "very restricted". At the age of 16, the son came to stay with Elinor and her partner for a few weeks, and the reunion was far from smooth. In his early 20s, he is now living with the mother of his two children, the firstborn of which is being raised by the people who raised him. Elinor is optimistic that his determination to raise the second child, a daughter, will help him to "settle down" and also provide a stronger basis of connection between her and the young family. Ironically, Elinor and her son's common status as family outsiders may be helping to draw them together.

> *[At 16, my son] was very violent, aggressive, misogynist, and full of the crap he was carrying; it was very difficult.... I think my being a lesbian witch has helped me to be able to have a relationship with him, past all his aggressive stuff.... It's been unbelievably hard.... When I would see him as a kid, I always gave him an extra big smile and hug, because he was the identified problem child since birth. So he loves me because he needs someone who accepts him.*

Still, Elinor recognizes that her being a lesbian has also, indirectly, made it difficult in the past to see and connect to her son. Like Betty, Elinor expresses some loss along with the positive aspects of identifying as a lesbian.

> *I took the feelings of the people raising my son into account, and weighed that above my son's needs [to know me]. I backed off, and deprived him of something that he needed, and I will never forgive myself for that.*

Many of the women see their struggles as the normal struggles of parenting teenagers, or of parenting in the aftermath of divorce. They recognize that children often reject step-parents, choose sides with fathers, or simply declare their mothers to be hopelessly embarrassing. It is not, they insist, mainly homophobia on the part of the children that comes between them in the post-coming out years. But the context of societal homophobia can sometimes give an acceptable or sympathy-inducing cover to the more common experience of wanting to push one's mother away. Other family members, too, sometimes have their own reasons for using a kind of opportunistic homophobia to justify or to create distance.

While the socially sanctioned freedom of family members to reject or exclude lesbians creates some level of insecurity, it is also true that the freedom

to chose one's connections cuts both ways. Lesbians may also choose or reject family members, depending upon how they are treated and what possibilities they see for healthy connection. Elinor spoke of the flexibility to choose one's ties as a strength:

> *Because I don't have a very defined role, I can choose whether to be in or out [of my son's family]. I choose to be in.*

Jane cautioned that not all lesbians are bravely nonconforming, and not all heterosexuals are conformists living within the safety of defined family roles. Still, she reflected that a "particularly wide variety of family configurations" is part of the lesbian or queer subculture, and that this proliferation of family forms and relationships enriches society in subversive ways. At this point in the conversation, participants rushed to complete one another's sentences

> Jane: *If there is something about lesbian families, it is that the family configuration is more complex—*
>
> Elinor: *and the commonality of that in the lesbian culture; I love that. "Family" doesn't mean what it used to—*
>
> Martha: *but it's still family. My father put [Christina's daughter] in his will the other day, saying, "well, she's my grandchild....*
>
> Jane: *we have all these questions that we have to answer consciously, like, "when we change partners, are we still parents to that partner's children?" We have to decide ...*
>
> Martha: ... *but this makes those bonds insecure; if just one person doesn't agree that we have that relationship, then we may lose that tie. The least invested person calls the shots....*
>
> Jane: ... *but it also makes for creativity...*
>
> Martha: ... *For me, it's not just my choice. Me, Christina, Matti (Christina's daughter) and the kids; if any of us choose for me not to be a grandmother, then I can't be. It really depends upon a whole network agreeing that this is my role and that I belong here ....*

All of the women actively work at this network. Betty repeatedly presents herself to a reluctant step-son-in-law with the command, "I'm your mother-in-law; hug me." On both sides of their large clan, Betty and Diane have stories of how, through charm, persistence, generosity, and the pressure of more accepting family members taking leadership roles, they have won the some-

times grudging acceptance, even admiration, of one another's children. Jane became closer to her partner's children during the partner's three-year losing battle with cancer. Still, Jane's place in the life of her partner's children has become clear only with the passage of time after her partner's death. She has recently been invited to sit at the "family table" at the wedding of her partner's son. "I'm thrilled", she says, "But I didn't take for granted that it would be this way." Christina insisted that she and Martha host the wedding anniversary party for her parents, reasoning that "it was the only way that I could be certain that Martha would be invited." A place in the family of one's partner, in particular, is more earned than given among these women, and many of them count that place as a noteworthy achievement.

Language sometimes fails these women when it comes to describing or labeling family ties. Jane—whose son describes himself as "an only child with 16 siblings!"—says,

> *I was with Tamara from the time my son was five, and we never differentiated who was the mom. He didn't know who was the mom until one of the kids told him. We didn't call ourselves mom; we were Jane and Tamara.... Then with Kim's (her deceased partner's) children, it is more comfortable for me to say "this is my partner's child" than "this is my step-child"; it's more exact. If I say he's my step-child, they will think that I'm her ex-husband's wife.*
>
> *Buying a sheepskin, I was asked, "is this your first grandchild?" and I said, "no, but it is my first biological grandchild." Then he said, "what does that mean?" and I thought, I don't want to go into this; it could take an hour!*

Martha says, "I get jealous of Christina because it is so easy for her to talk about her grandchildren in any context, without having to come out as a lesbian."

Gifts and burdens

Other than through the denial of contact, none of the women in the study indicated that they believed that their grandchildren would be harmed or disadvantaged by having a lesbian grandmother. The feeling was unanimous that, to the degree that they were allowed to be grandmothers, they had much to offer the children.

To some degree, this is perceived to be the gift of all involved grandmothers. As more than one respondent wrote, "a grandmother is a grandmother"; being a lesbian does not necessarily make them extra special. This reasoning was particularly strong among the women who had not revealed their lesbianism to their grandchildren. These women gave the parents of their grandchildren total control over whether or when the grandchildren would know about their grandmothers being lesbian, and they did not worry out loud about the

cost of this silence to the richness of their connection.[3] Some were grateful to have any connection at all with grandchildren whose parents were openly homophobic, and took particular pains to be discreet in order to avoid offense.

Still, a majority of participants (14 of 18) believed that having a lesbian grandmother included some special gifts. This came through most clearly in the in-depth group interview, where the women invited and encouraged one another to reflect upon themselves as role models. The clear consensus was one of pride over having modeled self-acceptance and self-direction, and presented to their children a picture of successful non-conformity. Elinor says, "I strive to be a bad example in all of the best ways. I think that is my job." Martha agrees enthusiastically.

> *I totally think that [choice] is the benefit of having a lesbian grandmother. When Jake was born I took him in my arms in the hospital, and I said, 'This is so you know that there are options. You have more choices than what it looks like.' I am so glad that there are queers in the world.*

Several participants expressed faith that their grandchildren would not have the same struggles with prejudice and homophobia that had marked the grandmothers' early lives. For example, Linda writes:

> *Joey is being raised by a very open minded woman, and having a lesbian grandmother will open that door sooner. It will be easier for her to learn about homosexuality and how natural it is without having to face the barrage of homophobia before she is old enough to make her own decisions.*

More common was the belief that the grandchildren would have an advantage when it came to developing compassion and acceptance toward all of human diversity, and that this would make life easier or richer for them in a globalized society. Arlene writes:

> *In a global world that is becoming more diverse locally, helping young people to accept gender choices as well as mixtures of all kinds seems important to me.... We socialize around holidays and special events with all the other grandmas and grandpas [and cousins], many of whom are multi-racial adoptees. So we're pretty much just a part of a polyglot mixture, it seems, for these grandkids!*

A number of women commented upon how their own compassion, understanding, acceptance or horizons had grown as a result of having come out. Diane, whose grandchildren knew her both before and after coming out, says:

> *We went to my granddaughter's graduation, and she was just beaming to*

> *everybody, "this is my grandma!" They get a kick out of it. And also I'm nicer, more relaxed, better than I used to be. I don't have a chip on my shoulder any more, and they see that. I'm more sure of myself. I'm a real and whole person to them; much more of a person. That didn't happen until I was "gay".*

Comments on Bill C-38

Bill C-38 is a landmark for these women, who faced extreme homophobic prejudice during the years when they were raising families. Yet, because they experienced this prejudice as both a hardship and an impetus toward personal creativity and achievement, it is hardly surprising that they greet Bill C-38 with somewhat mixed feelings.

The lesbian and gay rights movement in Canada has long held conflicting goals of assimilation and acceptance by mainstream society on the one hand, and goals of challenging and changing that society on the other. On the surface, Bill C-38 appears to be an assimilationist victory. It guarantees lesbians the right to form marriages, just like heterosexuals can do. To lesbians who have defined relationships on their own terms, and who rejected the traditional view of marriage as patriarchal or limiting, Bill C-38 appears to offer a right that they don't want, in exchange for a renewed expectation that they should, after all, get married and be "normal"—something that they rejected long ago.

On the other hand, even women who did not want to marry expressed an appreciation for the increased social acceptance of lesbian relationships. There is hope that as lesbians and gay men marry (or don't marry), they will challenge, expand, and perhaps improve options for all people, gay and straight alike.

Betty and Diane were married in the wake of the BC Supreme Court decision legalizing same sex-marriage in 2003. Both women value family bonds strongly, and have been highly identified as mothers and kin-keepers for all of their adult lives. Both take pride in voting and participating in the country's formal political processes. They are unambiguously thrilled over Bill C-38. Being married allows them both to feel more secure with one another, and to proudly claim their relationship in terms that the broader society, and their extended families, understand.

Martha and Christina, on the other hand, have never wanted to marry, despite being intensely committed to one another and to shared family life. Their political activism has been largely outside of the formal system of political parties and parliaments; they have joined peace and environmental demonstrations, and are more at home in the counter-cultural circles of Wiccan spirituality than in the more conventional (although they might say equally important) halls of the United Church or the Liberal Party. But they, too, have found themselves welcoming Bill C-38, because it has marked a change in the way they perceive themselves to be treated and welcomed, in their families and communities.

When I asked Martha, Christina, Jane and Elinor about the impact of Bill

C-38, the conversation again quickened and they completed one another's thoughts.

> Martha: *Christina and I don't want to get married; never wanted to. I spent some time wondering whether I wanted to sign the petition [for Bill C-38]. But I have found that something has changed in the way we are treated. We are more accepted. We're Canadians. We're legal.*
>
> Christina: *The same people who did not invite me to Martha's parents' fiftieth [anniversary party] have now found out that all of their close friends have gay people in their families—children or grandchildren. And they are much more comfortable now.*
>
> Martha: *I think it's that old thing, "if you had a gay child, too, then it must not have been something that I did wrong." There is healing in [acknowledging gay family members]. For all kinds of people.*
>
> Jane: *The loss about Bill C-38 is the loss of creativity; we are being fit into a box that we didn't create.... We are glad for the acceptance, but not to be put in the box. We want to expand heterosexuality, create more diversity within that model, but we don't want to come into it. I don't want to appear like we think we are better than straight culture, but I want to be who I am.*
>
> Elinor: *It's like, maybe this will help us to have more access to our grandchildren; make our ties more secure because they are publicly recognized. But part of the reason why that is important is because of what we stand for, outside of the box. So, we don't want to give up the best thing we have to offer, for the right to offer it.*
>
> Martha: *But we do want to be there. And this makes that easier.*
>
> Jane: *As long as we don't forget who we are.*

All in all, these are women who look to the future with unusual optimism. They are amused and envious of younger lesbians, whom they see flaunting what had to be hidden just a short generation ago. Diane says:

> *These new kids have the world by the tail; they are so lucky. For them, well that could have been us ... I would have had a career, a family, and a woman. I think I knew at 15 but I pushed it away. But if it had been like it is now, no shit, I'd have been out like k. d. lang.*

The author gratefully acknowledges the contributions of study participants: Donna Edwards, Nancy Emkin, Jill Hampson, Arlene Trustham, Judith Evans, Liz

Turner, Sharon Haave, B. Braude, Diane Howell, Betty Howell and eight others. Also, many thanks to Monika Grünberg for her assistance.

[1]See, for example, Lillian Faderman's classic *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America* (1991).
[2]Canada's Same Sex Marriage law, passed July 19, 2005.
[3]Perhaps they would have revealed more in a face to face interview; the questionnaire did not necessarily elicit deep relationship dynamics. On the other hand, a minority of the women seem to have continued to hold quite conventional, formal roles within their families. For these women, coming out to grandchildren was seen as not necessary and perhaps not appropriate to the grandmother-grandchild relationship.

References

Arnup, Katherine. 1995. "Living in the Margins: Lesbian Families and the Law." *Lesbian Parenting: Living with Pride and Prejudice.* Katherine Arnup, ed. Charlottetown, PEI: Gynergy Books: 378-398.

Faderman, Lillian. 1991. *Odd Girls and Twilight Lovers: A History of Lesbian Life in Twentieth Century America.* New York: Columbia University Press.

King, Beverly and Black, Katherine. 1999. "Extent of Relational Stigmatization of Lesbians and their Children by Heterosexual College Students." *Journal of Homosexuality.* 37 (2): 65-81.

Patterson, Serena, 2005. "Better One's Own Path: The Experience of Lesbian Grandmothers in Canada." *Canadian Woman Studies/les cahiers de la femme* 24 (2,3): 118-122.

Rich, Adrienne. 1983. "Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence." *Powers of Desire.* Ann Snitow, ed. New York: Monthly Review Press: 177-205.