



INSTITUTE FOR
PERSONAL
GROWTH

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Reflections of a Queer Shrink

I turned fifty this year and I keep pulling The Crone when I throw the Tarot for myself, so I figure I've entered a new age group - oops, a new life cycle phase. And I think one of the things I'm supposed to do here is become wise, which means slowing down and becoming more contemplative and less impulsive - all character traits which do not come naturally to me. But I am finding that, without trying to at all, I keep placing life events in a two to three decade perspective. I've developed a historical world view, as contrasted with my previous hysterical one. I find, for example, that I think a lot in terms of "pre- and post-AIDS", meaning, really, before and after we all lost our innocence. And I'm frequently struck, when I see gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered clients, by how much things have changed. I actually find myself becoming an optimist, seeing promise and progress and evolution of the human soul.

I came out as a lesbian psychologist in 1977, in the context of the Women's Resource and Survival Center, a program I helped start that received the first Federal grant to conduct feminist peer counseling, including "affirmative lesbian counseling." In 1979 I started a private practice of mostly lesbian clients because no community mental health center would hire me as an "out" lesbian. They all told me they didn't get enough gay clients to fill the caseload of even one openly gay therapist. By 1983 the Institute for Personal Growth was formed because the demand was so great that it has taken many, many les/bi/gay therapists to meet it.

My vivid memories of my first, dear, lesbian clients are of brave survivors. They were mostly working class, butch or femme gay women who had come out during the fifties and sixties. They told me stories of involuntary mental hospitalization, of forced electric shock aversive therapy, of being disinherited and disavowed by family, religion, and friends, of being beaten and raped in bar raids. I heard tales of courageous people beating insurmountable odds. My clients had lived to tell these stories but bore lifelong scars and disabilities from the brutality directed against them. I was witness to their pain and struggle and still feel honored by their trust in me.

I contrast this to my own ability to raise a child born of a lesbian marriage, to own a business that caters to the gay community, to be "out" with my neighbors, family, friends, and spiritual community. I compare these first clients to the average client of the Institute for Personal Growth in 1997, who comes to us to talk about mostly the same things that a straight client comes for. It sounds really corny (and my, do I hate to be corny) but I feel filled with gratitude at how we have evolved (and yes, I know there is still far to go), and respect and admiration for the queer activists who got us here.