

Suicide

It is known that a high percentage of Aboriginal youth commit suicide. Aboriginal youth suicide rates are 4.5 times the national average and between the years of 1989 and 1993, the ratio for Aboriginal girl between the ages of 0 – 24 was 35 / 100 000 when the national average for girls is 5 / 100 000 (Health Canada). And the suicide rate is getting higher. It is also known that a high percentage of gay, lesbian, bisexual and trans youth commit suicide (CHRC 3). LGBTTQ youth contemplate or attempt suicide 32%, compared to 7% of all youth. It is not being gay that makes them kill themselves, it is the “stigma and discrimination they face in the heterosexual world.” (Cross Currents). As there is often a sense of hopelessness among Aboriginal youth in Native communities in general, having to deal with homophobia on top of that can be overwhelming for youth and adults.



A friend of mine attended a funeral in NorthWestern Ontario of an Oji-Cree youth who killed herself. She was a trans woman in a community that did not believe or follow Aboriginal cultural traditions. The community was very strong in Pentecostal Christian beliefs, which left no place for her to identify herself in a healthy and proud manner. She experienced both homophobia and transphobia. The moment that struck my friend the most was when another youth went to the casket with an eagle feather and prayed over the body in tears. No one stopped him. One wonders whether the community recognized the loss of life was not hers alone, but the entire community who lost what she had to offer by living among them.

~ Mary

“When faced with this unrelenting storm on a daily basis, youth leave because it is an alternative to suicide – an escape from hopeless situations” (O’Brien-Teengs and Travers 21). We are only going to heal as whole communities when people don’t have to leave in whatever manner they choose to survive or be happy. For those that don’t want to end their lives, they leave their community.

Friends and Allies

We do not live in isolation in communities of only Two Spirit women. It is important to take a note and thank our friends and allies in our lives. For us, without our friends at some point, we would not be here. We are lucky if we can count our family members as our allies. For those who are not supported because of homophobia, they find that their friends become their families and often share all of their holidays and special occasions with them.



When I came out, my primary supports were my friends... it took me about a year to tell my family... and telling them was a gradual thing. I had an advantage of coming out in University in that many of the friends I had made there were either gay or gay-positive.

~Sharp



I remember thinking that I was falling into complete darkness and I didn't know how I was going to get out of it or be, and my best friend was so worried for me. Finally, we talked and I told her, well, I let her guess, because she knew, she figured it out, that I was in love with a woman. And once I told her and I was still there and she still loved me, I felt this huge release of pent up everything and I was like an ocean that couldn't be held back anymore. I owe her my life and my sanity.

~Mary

Oh, I think probably, all of my life. In myself I've been out, but out on the streets, I've just been out. My mother was, well, you're old enough to do what you want, you're old enough to think what you want, and if that was my choice, that was fine with her. I mean, she was really open about me being out as a prostitute when she found out about that, so I figured all systems are go with her.

~Night Butterfly Woman



Meegwetch! Niā:wen! Hai hai! Lim limt! Hu naq naq nay nay! Hiswke! Thank You!

Conclusion

We are precious to the world and our communities. We are growing stronger in our own understanding of our lives and our place in our communities and Nations. Living our lives in our own way is the best teacher for everyone who does not know about the history of Two Spirit women and our present lives. We have been and will always be part of this Earth Mother.



I think what it means to me, certainly, it doesn't mean my sexuality only, it means my spirituality, it means what engages me mentally, it means responsibility and accountability to the community, and the roles that I'm supposed to perform, it's not like, I'm cool, it's...when you are given those gifts, we do have a lot of gifts, and we are given a lot of gifts, you have a responsibility to use them properly...I also think we are supposed to be in our communities. Not all lumped together in urban centres, 'cus I think that's where all the gossiping and crap comes from. I think we should be in our communities using our gifts there to help the community...we also want those young people to know that it comes from something that is remarkable. And not evil and not bad and not something that was created out of residential schools, which is what people are starting to think. Something...the Creator made us, you know.

~Elaine

Two Spirit Women Speak More

I don't know much about the term, I never actually used myself. I never heard it before. Not until I came to the organization, and even now, I just...I do say to myself, I'm a two spirited person, but never actually got into what it means, and where it actually came from...For me that's just like, that defines that I'm comfortable with my sexuality and my culture.

~Tobi

Coming Out

Sixteen, seventeen...I always knew. I mean, I had an idea that I was always attracted to women, I didn't really have boyfriends...and it was a gay male friend that I was in school with that sort of geared me towards the idea that, oh yeah, you can see women, too. Because I was in high school, I had no idea, because everyone was so straight. I suppose the different thing with me is that, I didn't know of my Aboriginal background because of my adoption. Initially, I was just, you know, this chick coming out. I didn't have any, there was no ethnicity attached to it, or you know, I didn't know I was two spirited. I just, oh, I'm a lesbian, I suppose. My identity, my background, didn't come out about until I was twenty-five.

~Kimberly

I was 26. I told a few of my friends first. And then I knew I had to tell my mother first, before anyone else in the family. We went to this little cabin to spend the night. We listened to her Solitudes Cd with loons in the background. And we had a long talk, and it was hard to start, but I did it. She is very Catholic and said that she would pray for me, not to change or anything like that, but because she thought that I might get hurt by other people. And then she said that she kind of hoped she would have more grandchildren. I said that could still happen, I still have a womb! She laughed, but she didn't believe me at the time. Before we went to sleep that night she had three cigarettes before sleep instead of two. I hugged her for reassurance and said, I love you, mom. And she said, I love you, too. You are my creation. I was so relieved. And she is now, too, I think, because I now have two children and she has her grandchildren.

~Mary

I came out a few times. I was 21, I moved to Toronto and got involved in the gay community – all gay men and me, so I was out within that group of people. And then about ten years later, I was on some City of Toronto committees and I was really out there, so I was out in the gay community, and I was out in the larger non-Aboriginal community. And then by about '86, I was outed in the Toronto Star as a lesbian, so I guess I was about 30 by the time I came completely out of the closet.

~Elaine

Fifteen...I don't know. I just knew I was different. Because I liked playing with the boys. I didn't like having girl friends. It wasn't until I got til probably grade seven that I started like associating with girls and letting them be my friends. When I was younger, just the thought of them being my friends, it was gross, you know. I don't know why. It just was. Like, I liked looking at them, but I just didn't want anything to do with them. Because the idea of playing with barbies and any braiding of the hair, that was of no interest to me. You know, I liked playing with my G.I. Joe and legos.

~Tobi

Twenty-four...It kind of happened smoothly, that is just...I had always said, that it wasn't because of my partner's sexuality that I fell in love with her, it is just who she is. So that transition, because I fell in love with her had nothing to do with whether or not she was a woman or a man. I fell in love. So, it just seemed natural, it kind of just flowed. And I guess the awkward part is to verbalize it, to say things out loud...because it just happens so naturally. So, heterosexuals don't walk around saying, I'm heterosexual, you know, so it just seems so out of place to...

~Angel

Searching for Lesbian Two Spirit Community

I like being in the city because there are other lesbians, there are other activities... and if we go up north that's not going to happen. It's going to be very much more secluded, sort of thing... We enjoyed the idea that that day was just for women... To be in the company of other two spirited women, to not have to explain ourselves or anything, right?

~Angel

...like I tried the lesbian stuff, but it's like lesbian.com to me and I tried getting in touch with other Natives on the computer, I can't find the knack...like they're in there, but I can't get them out...I don't know anybody else coming out, but myself coming out towards them (Church/Wellesley crowd), it's like beating myself every time I go out...(when it comes to Native two spirited women) I don't know where they are. Do you think they are out in some sort of Reserve? I went all over, last summer, to different pow wows and I haven't seen any action, there were no two spirited. I mean, there was the odd one running around, but I don't meet a lot of two spirited women wherever I go...I'm just wondering, have they all gone straight?

~Night Butterfly Woman

I just wish there were more women here, especially younger women, because I find that women that do come here, they're older...I would like to meet somebody else that is around my age. But it is not for selfish reasons – I have a partner – it's just something that I could maybe get in touch with.

~Tobi

I still kind of feel estranged from both communities in a sense because, I don't know, my own personal issues. I didn't grow up in a Native community, but I never been around other two spirited people, like you know, I've only actually started kind of getting more involved in the two spirited people when I came to Toronto, which was back in 2003. There was the odd gay man here and there, you know...that's why when I first came out I dressed as a woman because I didn't want to fall into those stereotypes, of being that bull dyke and what not, but it's inevitable, whatever, I've always been like that, and it's good for me to accept that, I'm a handsome woman, I'm not a pretty woman.

~Jen

Family

Well, generally, I can say that I have never had an overwhelmingly bad reaction to my coming out at any point. My mother took some time to come to terms and actual acceptance as opposed to tolerance. My sisters were all great and my friends' reactions varied from – “that is not an issue” to “we always knew”.

~Sharp

I said I was a lesbian and he flipped out and my aunt didn't say anything, she was kind of okay with it, and didn't say anything about it. But when we got to the Pas, back home, and we did the wedding and everything, after we had the ceremony, like the gathering...I didn't like the crowd outside because everyone was drinking, so I went back inside and I kinda got nominated to be the door person....and my aunt, who is supposedly a Mormon, she got wasted and she came in the house and started talking to me...I didn't want to talk to her. All of a sudden she screamed out that I have no right to be here and all of a sudden a coffee pot came flying towards my face and I just flipped out and asked her why I didn't have the right to be here. She was like, your kind, you shouldn't be here. She came up to me and pushed me up against the wall, so I gave her a back hand to the face and I pushed her away from me, and I called outside and called for someone to come help me. That whole weekend was just terrible because my mom was trying to figure out who told and we think that my aunt that lives in Toronto told everybody... we had to stay with my mom's uncle, so basically I just stayed in the house for the rest of the weekend. I didn't go outside. Nobody came in and visited me. My mom and sister went to my grandmother's to go see everybody else...After we left the Pas, we came back to Winnipeg. I told my Dad. I said your family is your family, and it's not mine, and I kind of abandoned everybody...I told my Dad I didn't want anything to do with him anymore.

~Tobi

My family was really good. They were just amazing. They are still amazing. I get my support from them. They treat us like we are any other couple, you know...So, right across the board, they have been really good. Even in my home community, my reserve. Since coming out, I've worked on the reserve. No one's ever said anything. I don't put myself in situations...I'll go to a dance, and I'll stay for the early part, but when they're all drunk, I know not to stay there, because in my home community, drinking brings out a lot of nasty things in people, so I just don't stay for that part. But I'll go for the earlier part of the dance, and everybody is welcoming to me...they know my partner. It's a little strange because I come from a little town and the reserve is side by side, and everyone has just been, that's the way it is...I think part of that is because my family has been so, no big deal.

Our Two Spirit Lives

The very term two spirit is a positive affirmation of our inner lives, not just a label for sexual orientation. It is an affirmation of our historical roles as negotiators, warriors, medicine people...and tricksters. The loss of oral culture means a loss of the sacred, funny, mother earth –oriented teachings about two spirit people that must have existed at one time. We therefore have to create our own teachings today, as poets like Beth Brant and Chrystos and so many other expressive and eloquent women do.

~Ariel

We spend so much time trying to find our differences. We focus so much on our differences that we overlook the similarities, and the common ground where we can all meet each other. And I think it is incredibly important that we do that. That we spend more energy finding what we have in common than what we don't have in common. You know, so if people could change their focus, move their energy a bit towards unification.

~Kimberly

I dance at pow wow with the veterans as a men's traditional dancer. I just danced out my regalia this year. I would never have been able to do that without the support of my community who have helped me to create my regalia and eased some of my fears. Finally it feels right, what I am wearing and how I am dancing at pow wow. Just recently I was at a small traditional pow wow and they announced that a men's Sneak-Up was to be done... so I decided that in this friendly place, I would give it a try. With some fear I walked to the Eastern door... I said to the three men who were there... I want to do this, but have never danced this before but I am going to give it a try. One of the men, a young man, said to me... you just watch me and follow my lead – I will make your mocasins smoke! So I went out and I danced, watching all three of them... it was great! They all shook my hand after and said... Good Dancing! Can't wait 'til the next one!

~Sharp

I am so happy to be two-spirited. I have a good job, and I have love in my life with my partner and children. I am so lucky in my life. I wouldn't have it any other way.

~Mary