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## When Gay Comes Home

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I have a friend who has sterling liberal credentials. She supports choice; she hates guns; she embraces all; she goes door-to-door for Democrats.

She has just learned her son is gay.

It wasn't one of those heartfelt "mom-dad I have something to tell you" moments. He outed himself on his Facebook page with a photo of himself and a friend that left no room for interpretation.

As she struggled between swallows of chardonnay for the right words to describe how she feels about this news, it occurred to me that behind the big issues are small stories.

For many parents, it is the realization that this child - loved and accepted though he or she might be - is somebody, at least in one big aspect of their life, different from who those parents thought they were. For many children, it is a test of whether the love and respect of their parents withstands the news, or now carries an asterisk.

What happens from that moment on says a lot about families, the times and the tricky personal navigation between opinion and belief; between what we say and what we feel.

Over past months, we've witness some fascinating examples of that navigation, as a spate of rabid all-gays-go-to-hell conservatives are dealing with the coming-out of gay children.

Unlike the legions of conservative families who embrace their gay and lesbian children; these have reacted with public and angry dismay. They represent an interesting collision between belief in family and forgiveness and the certainty that homosexuality is not only biblically banned, it is a choice: "you are electing to be something I abhor because you think it's fun." Alan Keyes, the bible-waving conservative activist who moved to Illinois to run against Barack Obama for the Senate has a gay daughter, Maya. She reports he threw her out of the house and cut off her education funding. He denies that, but has repeatedly called her "a selfish hedonist."

Anti-abortion and anti-gay crusader Randall Terry has a gay son, Jamiel. Terry said his son is "bringing great sadness to our home and embarrassment to our family" and "He is no longer welcome in my home."

Vice President Dick Cheney, by contrast, has been applauded for support of his gay daughter and gay unions, saying: "I think people ought to be free to enter into any kind of union they wish - any kind of arrangement they wish." He dances past the issue of Federal protection by saying it's

up to the states. But it's still quite a show of acceptance from the guy who never appeared uncomfortable with the nickname: Darth Vader.

Still, in that same statement of support, I was struck by his choice of words. "As many of you know," he said, "one of my daughters is gay, and it is something we have been living with for a long time in our family" - much, it seems to me, like you would describe a family member with an autoimmune disease.

Some studies show, however, there can also be trauma on the other side of the socio-political spectrum. In a *Details* magazine article on parental acceptance of gay kids, Dr. Edgardo Menvielle, who heads the Gender and Sexuality Development Psychosocial Programs at Children's National Medical Center in Washington D.C., reports seeing pre-school age children whose parents worry that their son likes Barbies better than Transformers, or their rough and tumble daughters seem to go beyond tomboy.

He said these parents work very hard to be relaxed about gender issues. "But deep down," he added, "they are not acknowledging what they want, which is their kids to be so called 'normal' members of society."

For those who are fine with the children of friends, neighbors and relatives being gay, things may get complicated when sexuality hits home. No surprise.

The reason parents brag about their kids is because they reflect something the parents value - hard work, strength, athleticism, smarts, beauty, humor. Being gay precludes none of that. But chances are that being gay is also not high on the parental wish list.

Even the lesbian mothers I interviewed in the research for my book, *Raising Boys Without Men*, said they would not choose for their children to be gay. As one told me: "Life throws enough at you. I would obviously be fine with my son being gay if that is what he is. We still live in a world where being gay has complications you just don't have to deal with when you're straight. It's why we're still fighting for the simple right to marry the person we love."

Things will get even more complicated.

We are at the dawn of an age when we can see, and soon change the genetic components of disease. If you accept that homosexuality is at least partially genetic, and you assume that science will eventually give us the tools to manipulate our make-up in ways that change outcomes, what then? Suppose an in utero splash of some hormonal connection can adjust a fetus to so-called "sexual preference normal?" How many gay and lesbian children will be allowed to develop in the direction nature points them? Take that to an even darker - but possible - conclusion: suppose we see the direction before we have the ability to change it?

Back to my friend who is still working out her feelings, and her husband who can't talk about it because he starts crying. A gay child is natural, acceptable, inevitable and - like all children - beautiful. They will work through their surprise and initial concerns. They love their son. That won't change. Neither will the fact that he is a great kid.

But given the choice, would she have had things turn out some other way? Some day I'd like to ask that question. But not right now.